



UNDERSTANDING LINGUISTIC CREATION: AN EXPLORATION OF THE 'CONLANGING' COMMUNITY AND THEIR INVENTED LANGUAGES

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ABSTRACT

A 'conlang', or constructed language, is a language that has been intentionally created rather than naturally developed. The phenomenon of language invention has historical precedent and a growing place within linguistics. Scholarly efforts in conlanging have largely been centered on the study of international auxiliary languages or, more recently, the application of conlanging in linguistics pedagogy. Research is still lacking, however, when it comes to understanding conlanging as it is currently happening in circles on the internet. The aim of this study is to act as a first step into the exploration of modern conlanging. To achieve this, questionnaire responses from 212 conlangers were examined in tandem with data from three interviews. Results suggest that conlanging is a deeply personal activity, with some commonalities and some variances among conlangers. These findings serve as a proof of concept for the potential for more extensive research in this area to investigate the psychological and linguistic attributes of conlangers, the sociolinguistic attributes of the conlanging community, and the cognitive and linguistic processes behind conlanging itself.

Keywords: conlangs, constructed languages, conlanging, language invention, internet-mediated research, online communities, exploratory research

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CHAPTER 1 — INTRODUCTION

A ‘conlang’, or constructed language, is a language that has been intentionally created rather than naturally developed (Language Creation Society, n.d.). Recorded instances of such ‘made-up’ languages go as far back as the 12th century with Hildegard of Bingen’s *Lingua Ignota* which may have served her as a personal mystical language (Schnapp, 1991) or a creative and intellectual endeavor (Higley, 2007). Conlangs that aim to connect speakers of different languages, like Esperanto, still attract learners and scholars to this day (Blanke, 2015; Charters, 2015). Conlangs even have a growing presence in pop-culture — as authors strive for realism in their fantasy, they invent languages for their worlds, and now you would be hard-pressed to find someone who hasn’t at least *heard* of Dothraki or Klingon, even if they’ve never read *Game of Thrones* or seen *Star Trek*. While such high-profile conlangs have gained widespread recognition, my own experience with inventing languages led me to believe that this is only a fraction of what exists of the extensive linguistic creation landscape.

1.1 — AIMS OF THE STUDY

Existing conlang research falls into two main categories:

1. *Interlinguistics*, a subfield of linguistics which primarily concerns itself with the study of language planning, including the history, development, and use of international planned languages, such as Esperanto (Schubert, 1989).
2. *Linguistics pedagogy*, in which conlangs are used as educational tools in linguistics classrooms. Recent developments in this area have seen potential conlanging applications include sparking student interest, fostering creativity, and enhancing understanding of linguistic concepts through the process of language creation (Punske et al., 2020).

However, the potential for conlang research extends beyond its immediate linguistic applications. Conlangs provide a unique lens through which to examine language invention as a creative process, influenced by diverse motivations, philosophies, and ideologies. This avenue of inquiry may contribute significantly to cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics, potentially illuminating individual differences in language processing. Furthermore, investigations into the conlanging community may inform sociological and sociolinguistic research on group-specific language interactions and usage patterns. This study aims to document and analyze the broader spectrum of conlanging, focusing on the hitherto undocumented motivations, practices, and outputs of the conlanging community. By expanding the scope of language creation research beyond the evaluation of international auxiliary languages or pedagogical applications, this investigation opens new avenues for research in applied linguistics and related fields.

1.2 — OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation comprises eight chapters. Chapter I introduces the study’s aims and outline. Chapter II overviews constructed languages literature, including history, modern internet proliferation, pop-cultural presence, and linguistic academia. Chapter III explains the methodological approaches, procedures, ethical considerations, and areas for improvement. Chapter IV presents the survey and interview findings, and Chapter V discusses the themes that arose from them. Chapter VI concludes with reflections on the study’s findings, implications, and limitations as well as discusses future research

pathways in language invention. Chapter VII contains the dissertation’s references, and Chapter VIII includes the appendices.

1.3 — KEY TERMS

Conlanging has a great deal of terminology specific to its practice. Before moving further, it is crucial to clarify key terms that are utilized throughout this dissertation.

A ‘conlang’—short for constructed language, though also called an ‘invented’ or ‘artificial’ language—is defined in this research as an intentionally created linguistic system, usually developed by an individual. That individual is called a ‘conlanger’ and the act of creating a language is called ‘conlanging’. The conlangs of interest to this research are distinct from coding languages as well as artificial languages used in other applied linguistics and psychological research. Conlangs are also contrasted from natlangs, or *natural languages*, which are languages that the layman might describe as ‘real’ languages. English, Xhosa, Cantonese—these are natural languages. Some conlangs might be described as *naturalistic*, which means that they, in some way, aim to emulate the appearance or characteristics of natural languages.

Conlangs are often further categorized in order to quickly communicate their main purpose. The following terms define these specific intentions in greater detail:

1. Auxiliary languages (*auxlangs*): Intended for international or interlingual communication; sometimes also called IALs (international auxiliary languages) (LCS, n.d.)
2. Engineered languages (*engelangs*): Designed to explore logical, philosophical, or linguistic concepts; geared towards having a specific, objective purpose (LCS, n.d.)
3. Artistic languages (*artlangs*): Created for various artistic purposes, often serving as a catch-all category for conlangs that do not fit neatly into the other classifications (Peterson, 2015).

These three terms arose from the early online community of conlangers who populated an emailing list called the ‘Conlang Listserv’ in the 1990s and early 2000s (Brown, 2022). These categories of conlangs are sometimes visualized using the Gnoli Triangle, as shown in Figure 1.

For example, Esperanto, a language designed for international communication, is an ‘auxlang’; languages like Dothraki and Klingon are ‘artlangs’, serving fictional settings and contributing to the artistic integrity of their respective media; a language designed to be exceptionally regular and logical, such as Lojban (which will be discussed later) is a good example of an ‘engelang’. It is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive, and that individual conlangs may exhibit characteristics from multiple classifications. The Gnoli Triangle allows for this with the nuanced positioning of conlangs based on their primary features and intended functions.

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CHAPTER 2 — LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 — OVERVIEW

This chapter provides an overview of the existing scholarship and community knowledge around conlanging. Three approaches to conlangs are discussed: lessons from and related to ‘interlinguistics’, a subfield of linguistics which primarily concerns itself with the study of language planning; the use of conlanging as a pedagogical tool in modern linguistics classrooms; and its role as a broader phenomenon in mainstream pop culture as well as more specifically online ‘nerdy’ communities. The chapter concludes with a summary, an assessment of gaps in the literature, and the research questions of interest to the study.

2.2 — INTERLINGUISTICS

2.2.1 — AUXLANGS

Languages designed, planned, or otherwise adapted for the purpose of communication across linguistic groups—known as ‘auxlangs’—constitute the most studied conlangs. Interlinguistics primarily concerns itself with the study of language for the express purpose of establishing norms for creating auxlangs (Jespersen, 1931). Within this field, ‘interlanguages’ refer to linguistic systems facilitating communication between different language groups. It must be noted that this usage differs from Selinker’s (1972) definition in second language acquisition. In interlinguistics, interlanguages encompass both naturally occurring systems (e.g., pidgins that develop from cross-language contact) and intentionally created languages (e.g., ‘auxlangs’ such as Esperanto).

Some of the earliest conlangs with sufficient extant documentation emerge from attempts to create a ‘universal language.’ Attempts like this include Wilkins’s universal language (Wilkins, 1668), and other similar attempts at the time (see Okrent, 2009 for a more comprehensive review). Continued attempts at universal modes of communication include Sudre’s Solresol, a musical conlang (Gajewski, 1902; Sudre, 1866) and Charles Bliss’s Blissymbolics (Blissymbolics Communication International, n.d), which serves as one example of many universal writing systems created to facilitate written communication between speakers of different languages, called pasigraphies. These attempts will be re-examined in the following section, on ‘englang’.

More prototypical examples of auxlangs are decidedly less philosophical. Volapük (see Sprague, 1888), invented around 1880 by a German Catholic priest, drew heavily from English, German, and French, in an attempt to create a new language for international use (Brittanica, 1998). Aerie de Jong’s 1931 revision rekindled interest in the language and its associated movement (Robertson, 1995) but its nearly unrecognizable roots and notably complex grammar, especially for an international auxiliary language (IAL), led to it ultimately being overshadowed by its vastly more successful counterpart, Esperanto.

Developed by Polish ophthalmologist L. L. Zamenhof in the late 19th century, Esperanto derives most of its vocabulary from Romance languages, as well as inclusions from Germanic and Slavic languages (Parkvall, 2010). Since the publication of *Unua Libro* (Zamenhof, 1887/1889), Esperanto has established and sustained a significant following. Conservative estimates based on membership statistics suggest approximately 200,000 Esperanto speakers (Wandel, 2015), with more generous estimates based on calculations

from social media sites pointing to upwards of 2 million. (Wandel, 2015), with somewhere around 2000 of those being native speakers (Corsetti et al., 2004). The popular language learning platform Duolingo reports hosting over 1 million Esperanto learners (Duolingo, 2018). Interlinguistics is even home to an entire sub-field dedicated exclusively to the study and use of Esperanto, aptly called Esperantology (for a comprehensive review of Esperanto literature, see Blanke, 2015). A growing speaker-base of 2 million is undoubtedly small, but relative to the prevalence of other auxlangs, it has nevertheless found success and maintained its foothold as the default auxlang recognized by conlangers, whether they are personal fans of it or not.

Despite its success relative to other auxlangs, Esperanto receives the common auxlang criticism of being too Eurocentric. A typological study of Esperanto found that it shared nearly 70% of its features with languages such as Russian and English, which supports this claim (Parkvall, 2010). This same study also found, however, that “any given language has between one third and two thirds of its structure in common with Esperanto” (Parkvall, 2010, p. 65). While Esperanto is indeed European in origin, those features which make it appear Eurocentric do not mean that it is irrelevant to non-European languages.

On a more focused scale, some auxlangs may only attempt to bridge the gaps between speakers of certain languages, as is the case with Medžuslovjansky—Interslavic. With the objective of “build[ing] a universal language tool that Slavic people can understand without any or with very minimal prior learning.” (Interslavic Language, 2017). Interslavic serves as an example of perhaps a more grounded venture into conlanging, as a project based in a shared linguistic history (e.g., Proto-Slavic and Old Church Slavonic), improvised language forms that have arisen from inter-Slavic contact, and linguistic analysis (Interslavic Language, 2017). *Interlingua* serves a similar function, drawing primarily from Romance languages to facilitate mutual intelligibility among their speakers.

Numerous other auxlangs have been developed, either with minimal speaker-bases or ones that have been left behind altogether, though the scope of this dissertation precludes a comprehensive review of their rises and falls throughout history. What is important to note from this section is the existence of a scholarly presence associated with auxlangs, through the field of interlinguistics.

Another important, related area of conlanging revisits the ideas of Wilkins, reevaluating the premise of a universal language to push the very boundaries of what language can be, through linguistic experimentation or engineering. Conlangs resulting from this process are known as ‘engelang’s, which will be the subject of the following section.

2.2.2 – ENGELANGS

Strict definitions of interlinguistics will not include the study and construction of engelang’s within them; in Jespersen’s (1931) coining of the field, he states an explicit focus on the study of language in order to support the creation and propagation of specifically IALs. However, as the field has evolved, the spirit of interlinguistics certainly takes a special interest in the role of language in exploring human psychology and language use. It is, then, a fundamentally interdisciplinary field, which might combine aspects of linguistics, psychology, philosophy, and other related fields (Gobbo, 2015). From a purely linguistic perspective, interlinguistics offers a “set of case studies... where

theoretical questions [about language] can be posed in a controlled way” (Gobbo, 2015, slide 3). Engelang, if taken to be planned languages, do exactly that: they exist to explore language, thought, and expression in a specifically engineered way.

Under this expanded definition, such previously mentioned ‘philosophical languages’ like Wilkins’s attempted universal language may then fit more comfortably under the category of engelang, instead of auxlang. His universal language, along with the musical conlang Solresol, exemplify intellectual exercises in the way we organize thoughts into language (in Wilkins’s case, whose language involved the creation of a detailed hierarchical taxonomy of all things) or the expression and reception of language (in Sudre’s case, since his language is musically inspired (see Sudre, 1866; Gajewski, 1902). Just like auxlangs, though, this type of conlanging has evolved, and conlangers continue to create engelang with diverse structures and functions. To give three examples (which will be briefly outlined below), some, like Lojban, are logically oriented; some, like Toki Pona, seek to simplify language and thought; while others, like Láadan, are engineered with a particular social or psychological perspective in mind.

Lojban typifies a subcategory of engelang that prioritize logic in their construction. It is, as described on the homepage of their website, “a carefully constructed spoken language” (Lojban, n.d.). The language’s engineered approach aims for regularity, logic, and unambiguity (Lojban, n.d.). It is actually a successor to a previous engelang project, Loglan which was created to examine the effect of language on cognition in the vein of linguistic relativity and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Ottenheimer, 2009). This focus on logic, of course, ends up making difficulties in its use. When discussing both Wilkins’s language as well as Lojban, Okrent (2009) notes that ambiguity is intrinsic to language and thought, and part of the joy, too.

Toki Pona was originally developed by Canadian linguist Sonja Lang to explore the concept of simplifying one’s language and, thereby, simplifying one’s thoughts. Or, as she puts it on her website, it was her “attempt to understand the meaning of life in 120 words” (Lang, 2024). It is classified as a mini-lang, another subcategory of engelang, created to be intentionally minimalist (c.f. Toki Ma, a fan-made, expanded take on Toki Pona more geared towards auxlang applications). It has since developed a fairly popular presence online, with an unexpectedly large community focused on learning it, speaking it, and translating the media they love into it. In contrast to Lojban, Toki Pona embraces ambiguity as an inherent characteristic. The name of the language itself is usually translated as ‘the language of good,’ though it could just as easily be interpreted as ‘good talk,’ or ‘simple language.’ As Toki Pona has evolved from a personal project to something more owned by the community, its vocabulary has expanded, with up to 137 words being counted in its dictionary, depending on the speaker (Lang, 2024).

Láadan, created by linguist and author Suzette Haden Elgin, features prominently in her science fiction series *Native Tongue*. The language, in the fiction of the novel, was created by a group of female linguists as a form of feminist rebellion. From Elgin’s perspective, the language functions partly to test if natural languages, especially Western ones, prohibit women from fully expressing themselves (Elgin, 1988). If this was true, that women had a fundamentally different perspective that could not be expressed in any existing language, then Láadan would be the start of a language that *could* express their

perspectives (Elgin, 1988). This, too, was an exploration into Whorfian ideas about perception and language.

It is important to recognize that these three engelang (Lojban, Toki Pona, and Láadan) occupy different places in the Gnoli Triangle: they all exhibit characteristics typical of engelang, but Toki Pona also is recognized by the community as a potential auxlang, and Láadan's central inclusion in *Native Tongue* also makes it somewhat of an artistic language, or 'artlang'. These conlangs exemplify the interdisciplinary nature of conlanging and illustrate the diverse landscape of constructed languages beyond the traditional auxlang-oriented perspectives in interlinguistics. Conlangers are already experimenting with language to ask and answer questions about the world, which also may be useful for further passing on that knowledge through teaching.

2.3 — CONLANGS IN THE CLASSROOM

Beyond interlinguistics and the close-knit community of auxlang enthusiasts, conlanging has had limited visibility in linguistics. While some applications of Esperantology propose using Esperanto as a tool for teaching language acquisition skills (Charters, 2015), conlanging has often been dismissed as a frivolous pursuit or inefficient use of academic resources (Punske et al, 2020). The academic value of studying conlangs has been questioned in traditional linguistic circles; after all, what even *is* there to study?

Unfortunately, the field of linguistics can struggle with public perception, being viewed as neither particularly engaging nor exciting; it frequently evokes the image of pedantic scholars fixated on esoteric aspects of language that hold little interest for the general public (Okrent, 2020). This perception prompts scholars to consider strategies for attracting and retaining students in the field. In response, pedagogical conlanging has emerged as a potentially engaging and creative tool with varied practical applications. Interest in this application is growing, and while many questions and applications are still evolving, the recent publication of *Language Invention in Linguistics Pedagogy* (Punske et al., 2020) has further stimulated interest in this area.

Individuals with a passion for language do not always pursue linguistics academically. The stereotype of a prospective linguist often depicts a particular type of student with an "analytical bent toward the machinery of language and away from the layers of meaning, the stories, [and] the allusions" (Okrent, 2020, p.30). However, when nurtured, this inclination can evolve once more into "its own form of creativity, one that puts the magic back [into language] in a different way" (Okrent, 2020, p. 30), potentially fostering the development of both a conlanger *and* a linguist. For those pursuing a linguistics degree, conlangs can be utilized to teach important principles in an engaging manner. Peterson draws a parallel between taking a conlanging class as part of a linguistics degree and taking a creative writing course as an English major (Peterson, 2020). Conlanging can be employed to teach linguistic typology, enhancing students' understanding of the phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of natural languages through guided language creation exercises (Pearson, 2020). This approach has continued to grow in popularity from a rather limited scale, having been implemented in some classrooms since at least the 1990s (Pearson, 2020), although many of these classes were initially taught by linguists rather than conlangers (Peterson, 2020).

Language Invention in Linguistics Pedagogy (Punske et al., 2020) explores numerous additional applications, including conlanging's utility in historical linguistics and language reconstruction (Byrd & Byrd, 2020), as well as interdisciplinary ventures in biology, physics, and anthropology (Sanders & Schreyer). There are also numerous applications in more theoretical realms (Coon, 2020; Wells-Jensen & Spallinger, 2020). Results from university classroom settings indicate positive responses from both linguistics students and non-linguistics students to the use of conlangs in the classroom (Anderson et al., 2020).

The application of conlanging as a pedagogical tool represents an innovative approach in linguistics and linguistics education, although limited research has been conducted on its effectiveness (Anderson et al., 2020; Merlo et al., 2022). While this overview is not exhaustive, it demonstrates that conlanging has established yet another foothold in linguistics, extending beyond the use and propagation of auxlangs and the thought experiments of engelang.

2.4 — SO, WHAT ABOUT DOTHRAKI?

2.4.1 — ARTLANGS IN POP CULTURE

While conlanging remains a niche subject, its influence expands beyond dusty manuscripts proposing a new international language, Whorfian thought experiments, or undergraduate linguistics curricula. Conlanging, in reality, is all around us. Science fiction and fantasy literature and media have long incorporated invented words and phrases. Consumers of science fiction and fantasy media are very likely to encounter conlangs: Tolkien's Elvish languages of Middle Earth (Quenya and Sindarin); Klingon from *Star Trek*; Na'vi from the *Avatar* series; the iconic Dothraki and High Valyrian featured in *Game of Thrones*. These represent only the most salient examples, as the prevalence of conlangs in recent television and film is too extensive to list comprehensively here.

While the average viewer may not consciously register the alien phonology of a conlang spoken on screen, the very fact that these languages do not present as distracting gibberish is a significant achievement. These constructed languages sound authentic because they are, in fact, systematically designed linguistic systems. Creating foreign or alien-sounding utterances is relatively simple, but crafting a convincing language is far more challenging; that challenge or process is what makes language invention an art (Peterson, 2015), hence the moniker for the category of 'artlang'. However, these media-facing conlangs represent only a fraction of the broader modern conlanging phenomenon.

In 1931, Tolkien delivered a lecture at Pembroke College, Oxford. This lecture was his "unveiling in public of a secret vice" (Tolkien, 1913/1983, p.198, original emphasis)—his passion for language invention. Later published as an essay, this talk recounted personal anecdotes, including an instance where Tolkien overheard a fellow soldier contemplating his own invented language (Tolkien, 1913/1983). Tolkien also outlined his criteria for 'good' artlangs, emphasizing the importance of accompanying worldbuilding to imbue the language with life (Tolkien, 1913/1983). It is noteworthy that Tolkien's engagement with conlanging preceded his success as the renowned author of *The Lord of the Rings*, and that his fictional works served, in part, as a vehicle for the languages he had created

(Adams, 2011). In pop culture, conlangs often appear as integral components of their associated properties, gaining public recognition because a conlanger was given a platform with which to express themselves.

Consider the soldier from Tolkien's anecdote, who was "composing a language, a personal system and symphony that no-one else was to study or to hear" (Tolkien, 1913/1983, p. 200). Tolkien recognized, even then, that he "was not the only one of his kind" (Tolkien, 1913/1983, p.200) who indulged in this 'secret vice'. His unique position, like the positions of the inventors of Klingon, Na'vi, and Dothraki, simply allowed him to bring his practice into the public eye. One might wonder that had Tolkien had access to the internet, he might not have perceived his interest as such an uncommon, solitary activity.

2.4.2 – NERDS AND WORDS ON THE INTERNET

The sociological concept of nerdism is multifaceted. This dissertation does not explore the nuanced differences between 'nerds', 'geeks,' and 'fans,' and so these terms are used interchangeably herein. Some scholars characterize the 'nerd' identity as an intersection of traits such as social ineptitude, intelligence, and intense interest in specific subjects, particularly media (Woo, 2018). Alternative models of nerdism and fan culture emphasize the social value placed on acquiring niche skills and knowledge, or engagement in what Stebbins (1992) terms "serious leisure." In this context, nerds "use media consumption as an occasion for creative expression and self-cultivation" (Woo, 2018, p. 18).

For conlangers, the 'media' in question may be language itself. However, this pursuit often leads to their marginalization within linguistic spaces, as the broader community of linguists and the general public do not perceive conlanging as a valuable form of serious leisure (Higley, 2000). The creation of languages primarily for the self, which Schnapp (1991) calls *uglossia*, or 'no-language' (see Higley ,2000 for more), has sometimes been viewed as borderline madness (Eco, 1995/1997; Yaguello, 1985/1991). Consequently, conlangers find themselves on the very outskirts of nerdism itself. In Tolkien's time, this isolation might have led conlangers to keep their 'vice' secret indeed. The digital age, however, has provided new avenues for these individuals to connect and share interests.

According to Peterson (2020), "a [conlanging] community, in the sense of a group of individuals with a common interest who interact semi-frequently, didn't exist until the founding of the Conlang Listserv in the early 1990s" (p. 251). This listserv, an email discussion group dedicated to the discussion of all things conlang, is still in operation today. Since 1991, the community has experienced significant growth, primarily through online social media platforms. Online platforms such as Reddit facilitate community formation through topic-specific forums called 'subreddits'. The r/conlangs subreddit boasts over 98,000 members (Reddit, n.d.). Tumblr, a blogging platform that allows users to follow specific 'tags', reports approximately 2,700 users following the #conlang tag (Tumblr, n.d.). Various YouTube channels have gained popularity for their conlanging content, addressing different aspects of the field, such as integration with worldbuilding (Artefexian, n.d.; who has approximately 259,000 subscribers), in-depth conlang case studies (Biblaridion, n.d.; who has approximately 137,000 subscribers), and more lighthearted approaches to language invention (Agma Schwa, n.d.; who has approximately 15,500 subscribers). The Language Creation Society, established in 2007,

organizes an annual conference and maintains a website with an extensive directory of conlanging resources (see LCS, n.d.). The society also publishes its own informal journal, *Fiat Lingua*. The journal accepts a wide range of submissions, including “essays, reviews, analyses, short stories, poems, novels, plays, conlang descriptions, journal pages, scans of physical documents, conlang-related art pieces, conscript descriptions, conlanger biographies” and any other material that in some way utilizes, analyzes, or discusses conlangs or conlangers (Fiat Lingua, n.d., para. 1).

This overview has merely scratched the surface of what the conlanging community has to offer. This dissertation has referenced 18 distinct conlangs by name, yet these represent only a fraction of the more famous conlangs within the community. Evidently, the interest in and creation of conlangs extends far beyond this limited sample. The proliferation of niche, nerdy communities on the internet provides unprecedented insight into the world of these conlangers, an area that has remained, so far, largely unexplored.

2.5 — SUMMARY

Conlanging, despite its relative obscurity outside specialized circles, is a phenomenon with a rich history and tradition in linguistic, creative, and internet subcultures. The formal study of conlangs has historically been confined to interlinguistics, the study of the development and use of interlanguages, including constructed ‘auxiliary languages’ or ‘auxlangs’—that is, languages designed to promote communication between speakers of different languages. Early documented conlangs, such as Wilkins’s universal language and Sudre’s Solresol, aimed to create universal languages. More practical auxlangs like Volapük and Esperanto emerged later, with Esperanto gaining a substantial speaker base and recognition, and even its own area of study within interlinguistics, Esperantology. Other auxlangs like Interslavic and Interlingua target specific linguistic groups, facilitating mutual understanding within those communities, with varying degrees of success.

Engineered languages or ‘engelangs’ represent another category of conlang with some scholarship surrounding them. These languages explore linguistic theory and cognition, with notable examples including Lojban, Toki Pona, and Láadan. Lojban focuses on logical structure, Toki Pona on minimalism, and Láadan on feminist expression. These languages highlight the interdisciplinary nature of conlanging, integrating concepts from linguistics, psychology, philosophy, and other fields.

Conlanging has also recently attracted attention from formal linguistic circles as a potential pedagogical tool in linguistics education, making theoretical concepts more engaging and accessible. The recent publication *Language Invention in Linguistics Pedagogy* (2015) underscores this growing interest.

However, the majority of conlanging activity appears to occur outside of academic spheres, particularly in science fiction and fantasy media, with artistic languages, or ‘artlangs’, such as Elvish, Klingon, and Dothraki. Tolkien’s early conlanging work, which preceded his literary fame, illustrates the long-standing yet niche interest in hobbyist language invention. Rejection from traditional linguistic communities has possibly led conlangers to form their own circles on the outskirts of nerdism, taking advantage of the internet to allow fellow language geeks to share and develop their creations. Online social

media platforms and organizations like the Language Creation Society support and connect conlangers worldwide. This thriving online community remains largely unexplored, however, in the literature.

2.6 — ASSESSMENT OF GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

It appears that the most conlanging activity occurs within online artlang communities. Despite this, there is a notable lack of scholarship exploring who these online conlangers are, what motivates them, and what the languages they create actually look like. A Scopus database review by Gonzalez (2022) revealed that the vast majority of academically oriented research in conlanging is devoted to Esperanto, with publications centered around the 1970s and 1980s. Growing areas of research are in experimental linguistics and psychology, especially relating to how artificial languages are used to carry out research with infants (Gonzalez, 2022).

This calls for research that investigates conlanging in its own right, not as it was happening in 1668, not as it was happening in 1960—but as it is happening *now*. Higley (2000) calls for research into the online conlanging community specifically, asking “if one is not Tolkien or a linguist supported by the fans of *Star Trek*, how does one justify the worthwhile nature of one’s art?” (para. 15). Punske et al. (2020) notes that “how and why a conlanger chooses to include or exclude any particular linguistic feature when constructing a language open clear academic and pedagogical avenues” (p.2). Conlanging as a serious academic topic has evolved beyond interlinguistics’ interest in auxlangs to include inquiries into engelangs and pedagogical conlanging. Now, new conversations are needed to understand conlanging and the individuals who practice it. Ultimately, the existence of constructed languages may have something to say about the nature of human cognition, emotion, and social relations; understanding conlanging could lead to new research directions in linguistics, psychology, sociology, and beyond.

2.7 — RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As a result of these gaps in the literature and the themes discussed in this chapter, the following research questions were investigated in this study:

1. Who is engaged in conlanging?
2. Why are they engaging in conlanging?
3. What is the nature of these conlangs?

CHAPTER 3 — METHODOLOGY

3.1 — PROCEDURE

Data collection took place over a period of two months. Quantitative and qualitative data about conlangers' linguistic backgrounds and language creation habits were gathered through two related Microsoft Forms questionnaires, referred to here as Part 1 and Part 2. At the end of Part 1, participants were provided space to leave their email address if they wished to take part in future related research as well as if they were willing to be interviewed. The link to Part 2 of the questionnaire was provided once participants completed Part 1, but was also available separately in most advertisements of the study.

The selection process for interviews began in early June. First, participants who had elected to be considered for the interview were evaluated for the quality of their questionnaire responses. Bernard (2002) emphasizes that participants selected in such a manner for qualitative research ought to be willing to participate and able to express their experiences as well as engage in thoughtful reflection on them. This rationale led participants who only left minimal amounts of information in the questionnaire to be removed from consideration for the interview. Participants that shared more detailed information were then sorted into groups based on how many languages they had created, the level of naturalism present in their conlangs, the purposes of their conlangs, and how participants had been introduced to conlanging. Participants were compared against one another and the ten most varied participants were selected from the group. Three candidates from this pool were chosen randomly. One was unable to take part, and so another random candidate from the participant pool was contacted. Once all three participants had confirmed their interest, they received an information sheet and written consent form. The semi-structured interviews were one-on-one, conducted online via Microsoft Teams and lasted between 40 minutes to an hour each. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using built-in Teams recording and transcription tools. Once the transcription was checked for accuracy and any mistakes made by the software corrected, these recordings were deleted.

3.2 — PARTICIPANTS

3.2.1 — QUESTIONNAIRE PARTICIPANTS

In April 2024, I advertised a set of two questionnaires to the conlanging community via posts in multiple online social platforms, namely Discord servers (which consist of persistent chat rooms and voice channels which can be accessed via invite links) and on the blogging platform Tumblr. Through snowball sampling, the survey was cross-posted by interested individuals to other social media sites, including Reddit, which hosts a variety of conlanging sub-communities. I collected 212 responses to Part 1 of the questionnaire and 160 responses to Part 2 between 24 April 2024 and 23 June 2024. Two responses from Part 1 were excluded in the final analyses due to incorrectly filling out the form and six responses were excluded from Part 2 for being untraceable to their Part 1 responses (how data was linked between surveys is explained in further detail in Section 3.5 — Ethics). Participants were all 18 years of age or older and had created at least one language. Participants who did not take part in the interviews are referred to using numerical codes (e.g., P088).

Table 1

Participant age demographics

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mode</i>
Age in years	24.5	23	6.5	18

Table 2

Participant gender demographics

	<i>Man</i>	<i>Woman</i>	<i>Non-binary, and other identities¹</i>	<i>Prefer not to say</i>
<i>n</i>	79	37	78	16
Percent (%)	37.6	17.6	37.1	7.6

3.2.2 – INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Participants were considered for an interview from a pool of 113 questionnaire respondents that volunteered to provide their email address. Participants were selected for interview based on a purposive scheme that attempted to maximize the differences between interviewees. Sampling schemes such as this are used in qualitative research in order to document variations and patterns that emerge from a heterogeneous sample (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2002). This was done to provide the most opportunity for comparison between participants in order to highlight the diversity of conlangers as well as provide the most opportunity for insights that might compliment or explain the results seen from the questionnaires. It is recommended that, when employing a purposive sampling methodology, this is paired in some way with random sampling to compensate for the lack of generalizability that comes from purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015). In the end, three interview participants were selected (see Table 3) and interviews took place between 18th and 22nd of June. Participants who took part in the interviews are referred to using pseudonyms based on their respective conlangs or a conlang of my own.

Table 3

Interviewee profiles

<i>Name²</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Linguistics education</i>	<i>Language proficiencies</i>	<i>Start of conlanging</i>	<i>Number of conlangs</i>
Karhan	22	Man	Several foreign languages	Icelandic; English; Swedish; German; French	Early adolescence	2
Si Sikwa	30	Non-binary	No formal training	English; Yiddish	Childhood; dormant until early adulthood	Approx. 17; or 4 with significant development

¹ Responses that fall under this category included the option to choose 'non-binary', though many respondents also elected to describe their gender identity in more nuanced ways. For this research, those nuanced gender identities have been grouped together.

² All names provided are pseudonyms.

Falynn	24	Non-binary	Some undergraduate classes	English	Childhood; dormant until adulthood	2
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3.3 – MATERIALS

3.3.1 – THE QUESTIONNAIRE(S)

The research questionnaire, developed specifically for this dissertation, drew inspiration from informal conlang ‘census’ surveys sometimes conducted in the community (Agma Schwa, 2022a). Initially designed to collect demographic data, language proficiencies, and conlanging habits, it was subsequently expanded to include queries about conlang features, which more than doubled the length of the questionnaire. To mitigate potential participant drop-off associated with lengthy internet mediated surveys, (Hoerger, 2010), the questionnaire was split into two parts. While I anticipated that respondents would be more resilient in this study, due to the fact that the content of the questionnaire and the topic of study is something that is presumably of great interest to those taking part, this bifurcation appeared to be a sensible precaution. Part 1 of the questionnaire focused on ‘core’ questions of interest to this study, while Part 2 acted as an ‘expanded’ addition to that foundation, allowing participants to provide more details about their conlangs. This structure aimed to maximize response rates for essential data while allowing for more comprehensive input from motivated participants, analogous to the combined use of core and extension tasks in mixed-skill classrooms or to more generally provide further opportunities for students to explore certain topics (British Council, n.d).

The questionnaire underwent pilot testing with three representative participants, whose responses were excluded from the final dataset. These participants, personal contacts with levels of conlanging experience varying from beginner to intermediate, provided feedback that led to terminology clarification and the development of examples for more complex questions. No substantial content modifications resulted from this piloting process.

At the time of its release, Part 1 of the questionnaire consisted of up to 30 questions: four questions on participants’ linguistic background, three of which were repeated based on how many languages a participant knew; four on participants’ conlanging background; four about one language that they have created; and an additional two on other demographics. If participants had created more than one language, as was often the case, they were invited to choose just one conlang to focus on for the questionnaire.

Part 2 of the questionnaire consisted of up to 34 questions: five about the purpose and development of their conlang; seven on its phonology; up to 10 on its lexis and morphology, depending on the extent of relevant features present in their conlang; six on its syntax; up to four on its orthography; and one ‘linking’ question that respondents used to tie their Part 1 responses to their more detailed Part 2 responses and a final ‘other features’ question for participants to mention anything of note about their conlang that they had not yet had the chance to share.

3.3.2 – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Seven interview questions explored participants' personal journeys with conlanging and the reasoning behind choices made in the development of the language they chose to share in the questionnaires. Galleta (2016) suggests that semi-structured interviews begin open-ended and increase in specificity as they progress, to provide the participant both with the chance to express their lived experiences and provide the researcher with the chance to connect those experiences back to their theoretical framework and research questions (Galleta, 2016). Following that recommendation, questions in the interviews I conducted moved from broad and open-ended to specifically addressing choices made in the development of their conlangs. The specific length of seven questions was chosen as it allowed appropriate space for follow-up questions to be addressed, as determined through a pilot interview conducted with a participant from the pilot questionnaire testing. As recommended by Duff (2018), the interviews focused on expanding "the repertoire of possible interpretations of human experience," (p. 16) in this case, the human experience with language, instead of looking for a single, 'correct' answer to how people create language.

3.4 — ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

Analysis of the data in this study focuses mainly on qualitative analysis of data collected in the questionnaires, but especially the interviews. The quantitative analysis conducted exists primarily to support the possible generalizability of the interview findings as well as paint a broader picture of the conlanging community. Qualitative methods, such as the semi-structured interviews conducted in this study, are appropriate for exploring uncharted areas of research and answering 'why' questions while surveys are able to reach wider audiences and gather broad, more generalizable data (Dörnyei, 2007). This approach combines the strengths of both, allowing for deeper explorations of surface-level topics brought up in the questionnaires while also providing the generalizability and accessibility of a survey.

3.4.1 — QUESTIONNAIRE ANALYSIS

Quantitative data drawn from the questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS v29. The primary focus of this analysis was to produce descriptive statistics that paint a rough picture of the conlanging community. Data from Part 2 were analyzed in order to conduct a typological comparison of the conlangs described in the questionnaire against the natural languages of the world, with data provided by the World Atlas of Language Structures (WALS; Dryer & Haspelmath, 2013). This dissertation only provides descriptive statistics for these comparisons, and no correlations or between-group tests were conducted, though future research may benefit from conducting such tests.

3.4.2 — INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

Interview transcriptions were automatically generated using Teams live transcription tool and were then uploaded to NVivo v14, checked for accuracy, and anonymized. Thematic analysis was conducted on the transcripts and an inductive, bottom-up approach to coding was taken, since an established framework of themes for this topic does not exist. Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend using bottom-up coding when conducting exploratory research or when investigating an under-researched topic.

The central themes that emerged from the data were: 1) The Individual, 2) The Community, 3) Natural Languages, and 4) The Conlanging Process (see appendix for full coding framework. These themes were built from a bottom-up, open coding approach,

with overlapping individual codes being collated into hierarchical coding schemes, which when put into their simplest forms become these central themes. An open coding approach was taken in order to remain close to the data and avoid missing the nuances that were present due to the richness and complexity of the data (Holton, 2007).

Interrater reliability was checked to ensure not only the reliability of the application of codes, but the appropriateness of the codes themselves; assessing reliability is a crucial step in the analysis of qualitative data (Mikhaylov et al., 2012). A colleague coded one of my interviews using the coding scheme I provided. She identified 46 codes in a sample where I had identified 55 codes; 44 of her codes aligned with my own coding. This approximate 80% interrater match between our codes meets the benchmark for reliability as described by Mikhaylov et al. (2012).

3.5 — ETHICS

The study was reviewed by the university's ethics committee and approved. Informed consent was collected from all participants prior to their participation in the survey and (if applicable) the interview. Before proceeding with either part of the online survey, participants read an information sheet (see appendix) and had to confirm that they were 18 years of age or older before being able to agree to take part.

Data was collected securely through Microsoft Forms and Teams. All records were kept securely and confidentially on my password-protected laptop and the university's password-protected OneDrive. Data was only accessible to myself and my supervisor. Questionnaire participants were automatically anonymous unless they had elected to share their email address for future research. Once data collection and analysis were complete, all email addresses were extracted from the questionnaire data and stored separately in a file in the university's password-protected OneDrive. From that point forward, questionnaire participants were anonymous and are only identified in this study through their participant ID number. Interview participants were anonymized through the use of pseudonyms. Data links between Part 1 and Part 2 of the questionnaire are made through the use of participants' conlang names. This is also how interview participants were linked to their questionnaire responses. Once analyses were complete, all data pertaining to the project was deleted from my computer but will remain in the university's secure OneDrive for three years, as is university policy.

The subject of this study is not sensitive in nature and participation in the study posed little to no risk to participants. In fact, the overwhelmingly positive response to the survey and the enthusiasm of those participants interviewed may suggest that providing conlangers with the chance to discuss their projects could have been very beneficial. Especially as this study sheds light on an otherwise overlooked linguistic phenomenon and a community often relegated to the 'outskirts of nerdism', participants in this study stood to gain more than they did risk anything.

CHAPTER 4 — FINDINGS

4.1 — OVERVIEW

This chapter presents the study's findings, structured according to the three research questions and three interview participants. The first section summarizes the questionnaire results, while the subsequent three sections offer detailed exploration of each interview participant, their motivations for conlanging, and their selected conlang. Due to the extensive data collected, this dissertation focuses on key results most pertinent to addressing the research questions. Additional data and potential avenues for future research are discussed in Section 6.4.

4.2 — QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

4.2.1 — RQ 1 - WHO IS CONLANGING?

General demographics

We will revisit the general demographic information (age and gender) from Section 3.1.1. Conlangers surveyed ($n=210$) had a mean age of 24.5 ($SD=6.5$), though the most frequently reported age was 18, with 28 (13.3%) respondents reporting that age.

Figure 2 depicts the gender breakdown of conlangers surveyed. Approximately 37.6% of respondents were men and 17.6% women. Additionally, 37.1% of respondents reported a queer gender identity, such as non-binary or genderqueer. The remaining 7.6% of respondents elected not to share this information.

Table 1.1

Participant age demographics

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mode</i>
Age in years	24.5	23	6.5	18

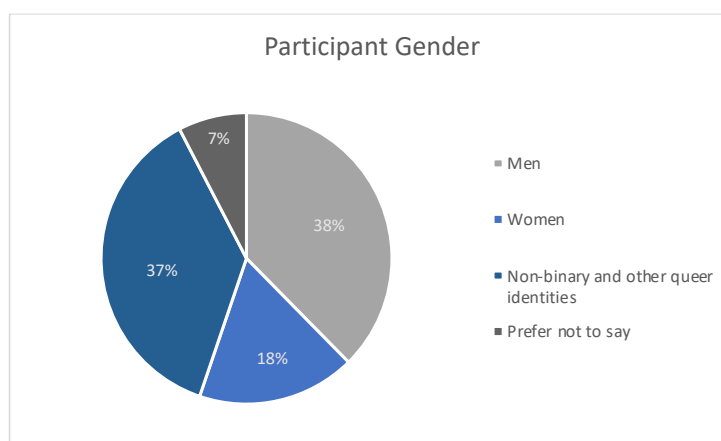


Figure 2: Pie chart of participant gender

Linguistics profiles

Regarding language proficiency, 74% of conlangers reported English as their most proficient language. In terms of multilingualism, 18.5% of conlangers reported proficiency in only one language, 28.5% in two languages, 26.2% in three languages. Moreover, 26.7% of conlangers reported proficiency in four or more languages.

Concerning formal linguistics education, 64.6% of conlangers ($n=209$) report to not have any formal linguistics education, while 28.2% have or are pursuing a degree or career in linguistics. The remaining 7.2% of conlangers reported having some linguistics education, such as having “taken some linguistics courses on an otherwise unrelated undergraduate degree” (P026).

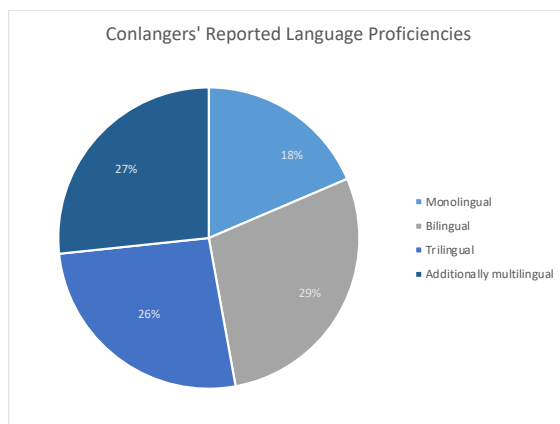


Figure 3: Pie chart of conlanger language proficiencies

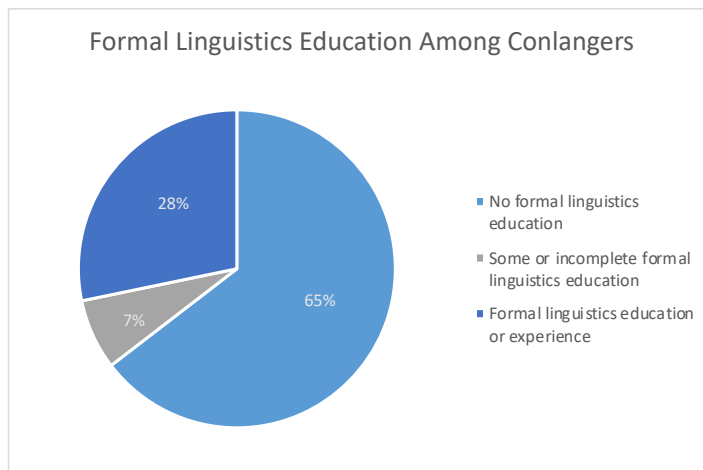


Figure 4: Pie chart of linguistics education attainment for conlangers

Conlanging profiles

Regarding the onset of conlanging activities, 56% of conlangers report having started making languages during some point in their adolescence. Additionally, 18.6% reported beginning after the age of 18, 17.6% reported beginning in their middle childhood, and 7.14% reported beginning before the age of eight. One respondent did not remember when they started making languages.

The questionnaire asked respondents to estimate how many languages they had created. Responses to this question were varied, as respondents sometimes struggled to determine what ‘counted’ as a full conlang, or whether to classify previous iterations of the same project as a different conlang. Due to this, many respondents provided ranges or estimates. For the purposes of this dissertation, I took a conservative approach to counting these, using the lower value when a range was provided. Table 4 details these descriptive statistics. The median number of languages respondents ($n=209$) report having created is five, however the most common response was two (reported by 31.6% of participants). Two respondents report having created over 150 languages.

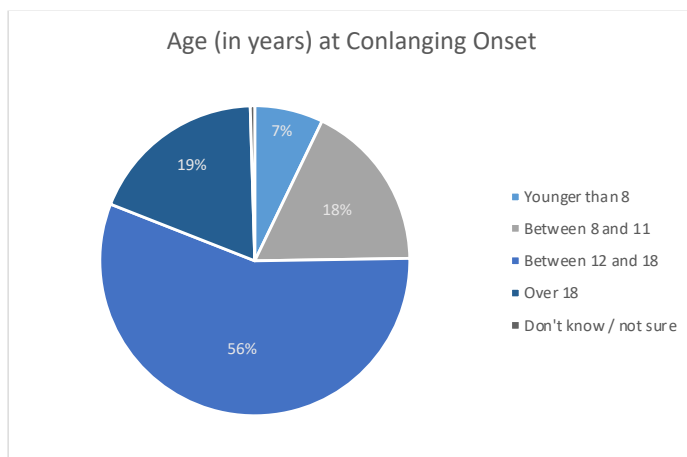


Figure 5: Age in years of participants when they began conlanging

Table 4
Number of conlangs created by participants

	Mean	Median	SD	Mode	Range
Number of conlangs	11	5	20	2	149

4.2.2 – RQ 2 - WHY ARE THEY CONLANGING?

While conlangers’ motivations will be explored more thoroughly in the interview sections, the questionnaire provides valuable insights as well. This research question explores how participants began conlanging, the primary purpose of their conlang, their language’s category within the Gnoli Triangle, the priority given to emulating natural languages, and their involvement with the conlanging community.

The two most common entry-points for conlanging, according to respondents, were either as a spontaneous activity (36.2%) or through the internet (39%). Additionally,

17.1% of conlangers got started through books or other independent reading. Figure 6 shows a full breakdown of these entry points.

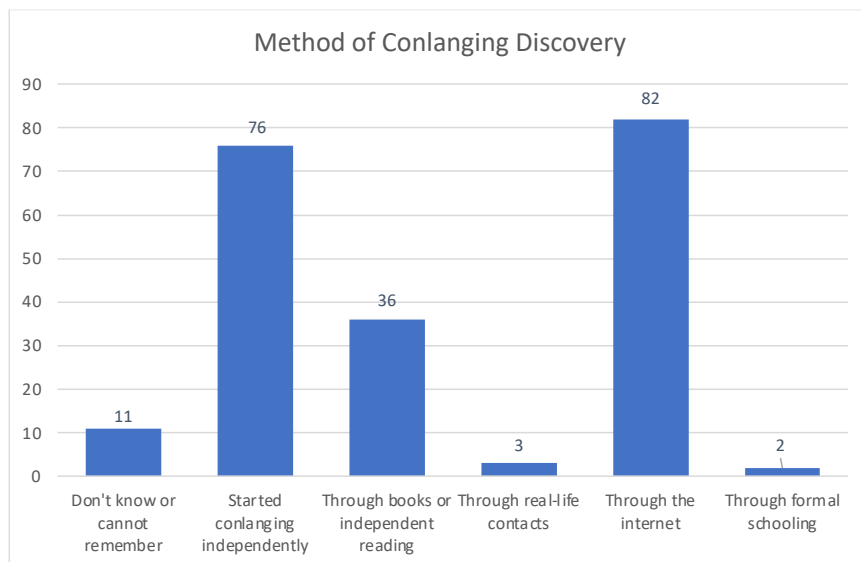


Figure 6: Frequency of type of conlanging discovery

Participants reported diverse purposes for their conlangs. Figure 7 illustrates eight distinct purposes, which can be simplified into four main categories of motivation, as shown in Figure 8: personal or undefined purposes (23.6%); worldbuilding (47.2%); exploratory practices in language or thought (24.8%); and a general 'other' category (4.4%). Within the worldbuilding group, 58.6% are standalone worldbuilding projects not inherently tied to another property, such as a novel or game.

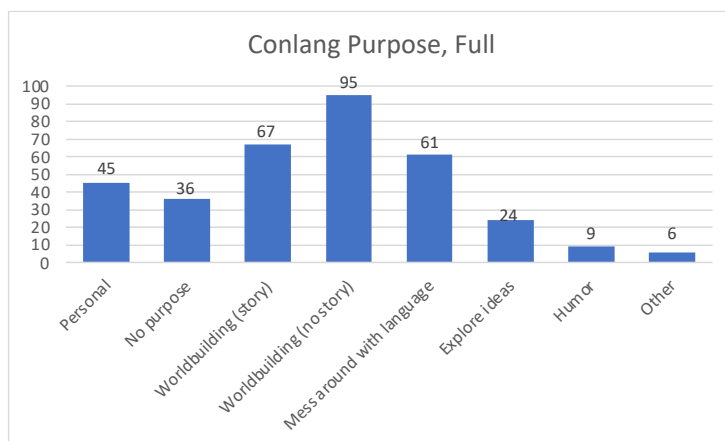


Figure 7: Frequency of type of conlanging purpose

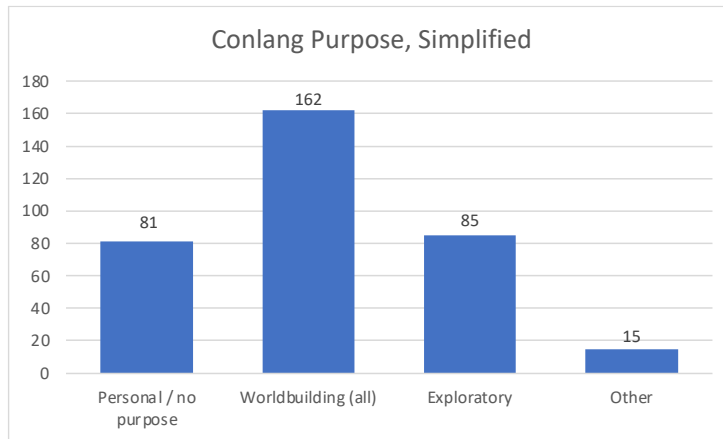


Figure 8: Frequency of type of conlanging purpose, grouped by more general type

Respondents ($n=153$) provided varied answers regarding their conlang’s category within the Gnoli Triangle. While the majority provided single-category answers, 7% provided mixed-category responses. ‘Artlang’ was the most popular single response and the most frequent category present in combinations. I have simplified responses to show the overall frequency of each category, regardless of co-occurrences. Overall, artlangs represent 87.2% of responses, engelang 7.3%, and auxlang 3.7%. Two respondents categorized their language as a ‘joke-lang’, and one was unsure of their language’s category. Another respondent noted uncertainty about whether conlangs aiming to emulate natural languages fit within the Gnoli Triangle at all (P142). Figure 9 illustrates the frequency of each category.

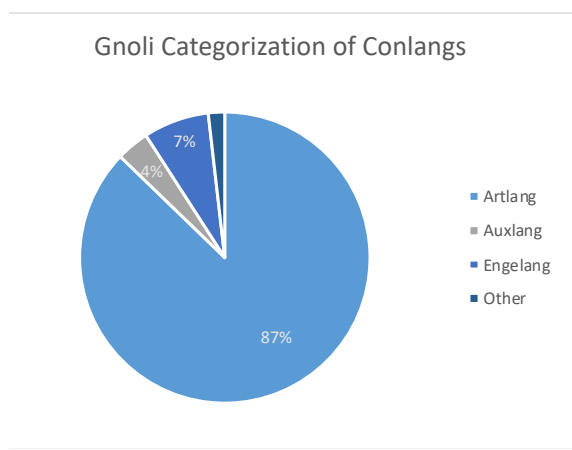


Figure 9: Pie chart of Gnoli categorizations for conlangs

Regarding naturalism, 46.5% of respondents ($n=155$) indicated that it was ‘very much so’ a matter of importance for the conlang that they shared. An additional 32.3% indicated

that it was ‘somewhat’ of a concern. An additional two respondents explained that they “try” (P036) or that they “do [their] best ok” (P009).

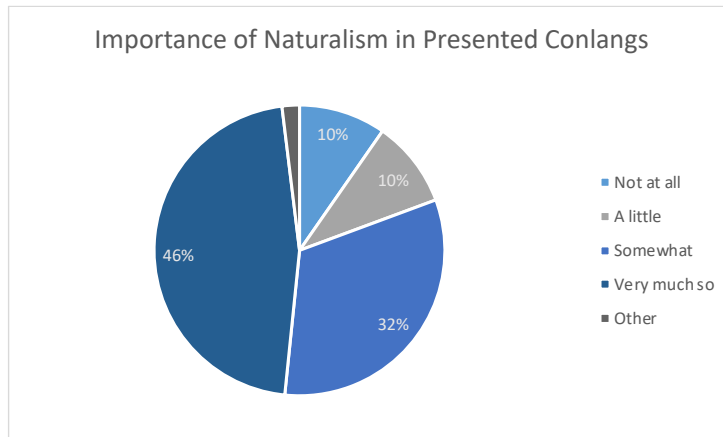


Figure 10: Pie chart of responses to importance of naturalism in presented conlangs

Conlangers’ relationships with the broader community are also complex. Responses ranged from no interaction with other conlangers, to consuming online content without participating, to sharing languages both online and offline, and with variations thereupon. For this research, I categorized participants as either sharing or not sharing their languages with others. As illustrated in Figure 11, 69% percent of participants reported sharing their conlangs. One participant indicated that they “likely will in the future” (P082) and another reporting past but not current sharing (P111).

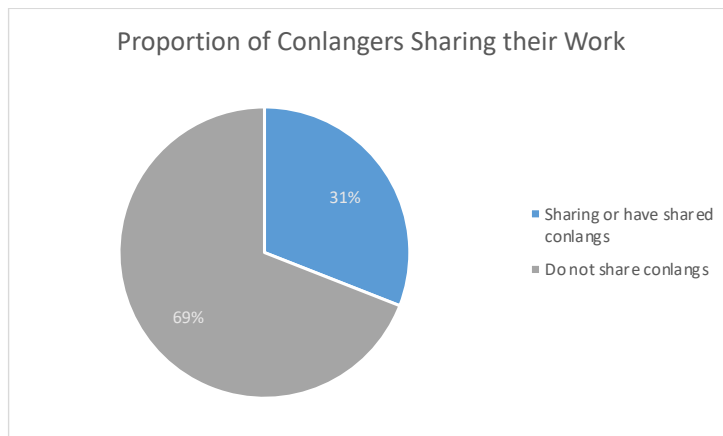


Figure 11: Pie chart of proportion of conlangers sharing their languages with others

4.2.3 – RQ 3 - WHAT DO THEIR LANGUAGES LOOK LIKE?

This section explores some of the features of respondents’ conlangs as collected in the questionnaire. While the questionnaire gathered data on numerous additional features, I

have chosen to highlight the following three: order of subject, object, and verb; use of the definite article; and noun-adjective relationships. Data from the World Atlas of Language Structures (WALS) (Dryer & Haspelmath, 2013). is also provided as a reference point, though statistical comparisons were beyond the scope of this dissertation. This section also presents an overview of the writing systems of surveyed conlangs, for which WALS unfortunately does not provide sufficient comparative data.

Order of subject, object, and verb (n=155)

Table 5 shows the typological distribution of dominant word order for surveyed conlangs. Subject-initial orders (SOV and SVO) are the most prominent, being present in 30.3% and 31.6% of surveyed conlangs respectively. The least common dominant order was VOS, present in 1.9% of conlangs. Object-initial orders are similarly rare, with OVS representing 3.2% of responses and OSV representing 3.9%.

Table 6 contains data from WALS for reference. WALS reports that the typologically most prominent word order for world languages is SOV, with SVO being the second most common (Dryer, 2013a). The rarest word order is OSV, found in only 0.3% of languages in their sample (Dryer, 2013a).

Table 5
Ordering of Object, Subject, and Verb in Surveyed Conlangs

	<i>n</i>	<i>Percent (%)</i>
SOV	47	30.2
SVO	49	31.6
VSO	28	18.1
VOS	3	1.9
OVS	5	3.2
OSV	6	3.9
Free Word Order	14	9.0
Undecided or unknown	3	1.9

Table 6
Ordering of Object, Subject, and Verb in Natural Languages

	<i>n</i>	<i>Percent (%)</i>
SOV	564	30.2
SVO	488	31.6
VSO	95	18.1
VOS	25	1.9
OVS	11	3.2
OSV	4	3.9
Lacking dominant	189	9.0

Use of definite articles (n=153)

Table 7 shows the typological distribution for the use of definite articles in surveyed conlangs. Lack of both definite and indefinite articles represents the largest proportion of responses at 42%. Additionally, 20.9% of conlangs use a definite affix rather than a separate article. The lack of a definite article but the inclusion of an indefinite article is present in 2.6% of conlangers surveyed. Four responses did not fit into any category.

Table 8 contains data from WALs for reference. WALs reports approximately 46% of languages as using a definite article or demonstrative as a definite article, and almost 32% of languages lacking both a definite and an indefinite article (Dryer, 2013b). The lack of a definite article but the inclusion of an indefinite article is the least common in their sample, representing approximately 7.3% of languages (Dryer, 2013b).

Table 7

Use of Definite Articles in Surveyed Conlangs

	<i>n</i>	<i>Percent (%)</i>
Definite article distinct from demonstrative / demonstrative used as a marker of definiteness	46	30.0
Definite affix on noun	32	20.9
No definite article, but an indefinite article	4	2.6
Neither definite nor indefinite article	64	41.8
Unknown / undecided	3	2.0
Does not fit into any other category	4	2.6

Table 8

Use of Definite Articles in Natural Languages

	<i>n</i>	<i>Percent (%)</i>
Definite article distinct from demonstrative / demonstrative used as a marker of definiteness	285	46.0
Definite affix on noun	92	14.8
No definite article, but an indefinite article	45	7.3
Neither definite nor indefinite article	198	31.9

Order of adjectives and nouns (n=154)

Constructions where adjectives typically follow their nouns are present in 46.1% of conlangs. Adjectival constructions that utilize verbal phrases appeared in 2.6% of the conlangs surveyed. For example, a conlang may use relative clauses that follow the noun to describe it: A phrase such as, ‘I see the white house,’ would be expressed as ‘I see the house that is white’. Two conlangs could not fit into any category. Table 9 illustrates the full range of responses.

Table 10 presents the WALs data, which reports that adjectives follow the noun they modify in 64% of world languages (Dryer, 2013c). The relative clause construction explained above is exceedingly rare in the WALs sample, representing the adjectival constructions of just 0.37% of languages (Dryer, 2013c).

Table 9

Order of Adjectives and Nouns in Surveyed Conlangs

	<i>n</i>	<i>Percent (%)</i>
Adjective precedes its noun	48	31.2
Adjective follows its noun	71	46.1
Both orders occur, neither is dominant	24	15.6
Use of verbal phrase in place of direct adjectives	4	2.6
Unknown / undecided	5	3.2
Does not fit into any other category	2	1.3

Table 10

Order of Adjectives and Nouns in Surveyed Conlangs

	<i>n</i>	<i>Percent (%)</i>
Adjective precedes its noun	373	27.3
Adjective follows its noun	879	64.3
Both orders occur, neither is dominant	110	8.0
Adjectives occur as predicates in relative clauses	5	0.4

Conlang writing systems

Out of 155 respondents, 64.5% participants reported having created a custom script for their language, and 6.5% reported using an adapted form of an existing script (including one respondent who uses the script of another conlang). Of those custom scripts ($n=102$), the most popular type of writing system is alphabetic, seen in 39.2% of these conlangs, followed by the abugida or alphasyllabary, seen in 22.5% of conlangs. Additionally, 18.6% of these writing systems were mixed systems, such as combining elements of a logography or ideography into other writing systems, like syllabaries or abugidas. Two respondents reported creating 'reverse abugidas', in which consonants are marked as diacritics on vowel characters. These have been grouped under the 'other' category. Figure 12 illustrates the frequency of the different writing system types.

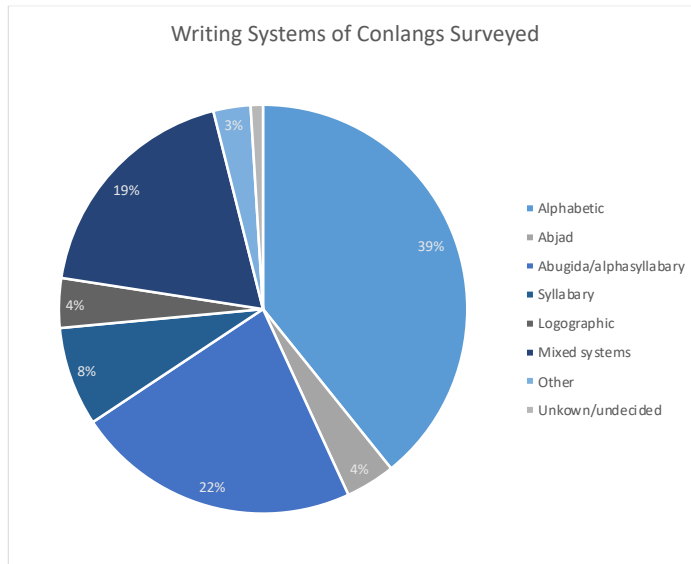


Figure 12: Pie chart of writing systems of conlangs surveyed

4.3 — KARHAN³

4.3.1 — WHO? - ‘I’VE ALWAYS BEEN A LITTLE NERD ABOUT EVERYTHING’

Karhan, a 22-year-old man from Iceland, with a recent bachelor’s degree in geography, demonstrated a strong passion for conlanging during the interview. He showcased several resources that inform his practice, including a comprehensive book on Icelandic etymology, a well-worn copy of Peterson’s *The Art of Language Invention* (2015), and a personal conlanging notebook. This notebook, adorned with stickers that include the conlanging flag, contained detailed pronoun charts and iterations of a vertical script he had developed. Karhan referred to it as a “personal grimoire,” and he was selective with what he showed me from it during our interview. In the back of this notebook, there is a glued-in picture of Tolkien.

Table 11
Karhan’s Profile

Age	Gender	Linguistics education	Language Proficiencies	Start of conlanging	Number of conlangs
22	Man	Several foreign languages	Icelandic; English; Swedish; German; French	Early adolescence	2

³ All quotations taken from Karhan are from an interview which took place on 18 June, 2024.

Karhan's interest in languages emerged during his early high school years (grades 9-10). The exact origins of his engagement with conlanging were unclear to him: "I don't really know how that kind of started, like I was just a curious kid in school and... I've always been a little nerd about everything." He did recall that his initial exposure came through online content creators such as Artefexian (n.d.) and Xidnaf (n.d.) on YouTube. This exposure led to the development of his first conlang, Nárnokhowar.

During his high school education, Karhan pursued additional credits in Danish, German, French, and Latin, though he has no formal linguistics training. He expressed interest in potentially pursuing a bachelor's degree in linguistics in the future. However, his immediate priority is getting "a stable job that [he's] actually interested in, as opposed to a pure hobby."

4.3.2 – WHY? - 'JUST TO MAKE A CONLANG, I GUESS'

Karhan's initial motivation for conlanging remains unclear, as he stated, "[I] don't really remember why I started at it... Just, kind of, like, to make a conlang, I guess." He also reported a lack of specific inspiration when he began, indicating that his continued engagement with conlanging is driven by a general, persistent interest rather than defined goals. Karhan also acknowledged challenges in certain aspects of language creation, particularly in developing verb systems. He expressed apprehension about verb complexity, stating, "verbs scare me... It's just a lot that you have to remember... I can get by but, like, to master it? That's the scary bit." He drew a parallel between this difficulty and his experience learning French in particular.

Despite these challenges, Karhan finds value in the research process inherent to conlanging. He reported deriving satisfaction from exploring linguistics resources, including Wikipedia and his book on Icelandic etymology. The vocabulary of his conlang, Nárnokhowar, reflects diverse personal influences, incorporating references to authors, politicians, former teachers, and linguistics-related humor. The language's name itself is derived from the words *gho (water) and *ti (animal), alluding to a linguistic joke about the spelling of 'fish' (see Zimmer, 2010). When asked about the personal nature of his conlang's vocabulary, the participant expressed surprise, suggesting he viewed this as a common feature of all constructed languages: "Just personal inspiration... isn't that, like, every word in a conlang?" Nárnokhowar has been in development for approximately seven years, though Karhan described it as being in its fourth or fifth iteration, having undergone several "resets" and progressing as a "slow burn." At the time of the interview, the current version of Nárnokhowar constituted just 66 official words.

4.3.3 – NÁRNOKHOWAR

Karhan's conlang, Nárnokhowar, is primarily documented in his "personal grimoire," supplemented by spreadsheets tracking vocabulary and etymological roots. The journal also contains earlier iterations of the language dating back to 2017, alongside the development of a vertical script inspired by Hangul but visually reminiscent of the Mongolian script. As Karhan flipped through the pages and explained the evolution of the script, he stated that the writing system he created is the main thing he is "really, really proud of" in regard to Nárnokhowar.

In its current form, Nárnokhowar draws structural and phonological inspiration from Finnish, though Karhan noted that he is "playing a lot with it so it doesn't really sound

like Finnish at all.” The language employs six grammatical cases, which Karhan considered to be modest compared to Finnish’s much more extensive system, which boasts more than ten grammatical cases (Iggesen, 2013). Nárnokhowar utilizes highly fusional affixes to mark nouns for case, number, and class, as well as to conjugate verbs for tense, aspect, mood, grammatical number, person, and voice. This extensive marking system allows for relatively free word order. The participant’s focus appears to have been primarily on nominal inflections and script development, with verbal systems less developed and adjectival systems largely unexplored. During the interview, Karhan was less interested in talking about the actual features of Nárnokhowar, however, and more so on the idea of conlanging itself.

Karhan had indicated in the questionnaire that Nárnokhowar’s primary purpose is personal enjoyment and humor, evident in the eclectic inspirations for vocabulary development. He emphasized the importance of capturing ideas as they occur, ensuring that he always had a way of documenting linguistic inspiration as it strikes in a note on his phone or computer.

While Nárnokhowar is situated within a broader worldbuilding project, Karhan expressed uncertainty about developing extensive narratives within this setting. Although he “took the Tolkien route” in developing a story and setting after first working on the language, he is not certain “if that will ever be a thing” for him. His current focus is on developing the language itself, allowing the imagined setting to influence its evolution as a naturalistic language. Karhan stated, “I imagine... people speak natural languages and thus, yeah, make a natural language.” Ultimately, the long-term plan for Nárnokhowar is for it to serve as a proto language from which future projects can be derived. Karhan mentioned other conlang projects in development: one inspired by case-marking systems in certain African languages and one inspired by the consonant-vowel-nasal syllable structure of Japanese.

4.4 — SI SIKWA⁴

4.4.1 — WHO? - ‘I HAVE NEVER TAKEN ANY SORT OF LINGUISTICS COURSES’
Si Sikwa, a musician and composer from the United States, is an active member of the conlanging community. Their engagement includes maintaining a blog on Tumblr to showcase their conlangs and scripts, attending the Language Creation Conference, and participating in community events. “I have started and abandoned so many projects,” Si Sikwa stated, evidenced by the folder of incomplete phonologies and abandoned languages stored on their computer.

Table 12
Si Sikwa’s Profile

<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Linguistics education</i>	<i>Language proficiencies</i>	<i>Start of conlanging</i>	<i>Number of conlangs</i>
30	Non-binary	No formal training	English; Yiddish	Childhood; dormant until early adulthood	Approx. 17; or 4 with significant development

⁴ All quotations taken from Si Sikwa are from an interview which took place on 20 June, 2024.

The participant's interest in language creation can be traced back to their childhood, inspired by reading *The Lord of the Rings*. This initial fascination manifested in the creation of ciphers and alphabets, along with maps of fictional places. However, this interest waned for an extended period before being rekindled in their freshman year of university, prompted by a collaborative language design project proposed by their older sister. When Si Sikwa's enthusiasm for the project surpassed that of their sister, they continued the project independently. This led to the creation of multiple ciphers, scripts, and language attempts, with Si Sikwa noting, "I was just starting language after language, just trying different things." They acknowledged a desire to have a "naturalistic look" in their conlangs but initially lacked the knowledge of how to do so effectively. They stated, "I have never taken any sort of Linguistics courses, like at all," relying instead on self-directed learning through online resources such as Wikipedia. Overall, they "had absolutely no idea what [they were] doing."

Si Sikwa's reintroduction to conlanging was further influenced by YouTube channels such as Biblaridion, Artefexian, and LangTime Studio. While these resources provided insights into the process of creating and evolving conlangs, they also highlighted the complexity of the task. Si Sikwa expressed a growing frustration as their knowledge expanded: "I [had] been trying, getting closer and closer to sort of the diachronic method... and it was just, like, the more that I learned, the more I realized I didn't know and it... was getting increasingly frustrating."

4.4.2 – WHY? - *'I THINK THAT'S JUST AN IMPULSE THAT I HAVE'*

Si Sikwa expressed difficulty in articulating their motivation for continuing conlanging despite experiencing frustration. They described their persistence as an inherent impulse, relating it to their passion for music:

"I think that's just an impulse that I have... I'm a musician. I'm also a composer. It is always very weird to me that the large majority of musicians don't want to write their own music, that they only ever wanna play things out there people have written... I like language. I like speaking language. I like learning languages. Why would I not also want to do this other part of it, you know? So I think, it's just sort of like, that's the thing I like to do."

Si Sikwa identified a sense of community as another motivating factor for their continued involvement in conlanging. Through the YouTube channel LangTime Studio, they have established friendships with fellow conlangers, some of whom they have even met in person. These relationships facilitate an ongoing sharing of work and mutual encouragement. Si Sikwa noted, "There was this, like, encouragement, both directly and indirectly through seeing other people do their own stuff and getting ideas from them."

Despite the challenges encountered, Si Sikwa's drive to create another language persisted. This time, however, their approach evolved, shifting away from the diachronic method in favor of creating a language they could more definitively complete. Si Sikwa explained, "If you try to make it perfect, you'll never get there," expressing a desire to have a language that "exists, even if it's not realistic or naturalistic." The creation of T'owal emerged from this internal conflict between the impulse to create and experiment with language and the frustration associated with attempting to adhere to perceived

‘correct’ methods of conlang development. This tension ultimately motivated the participant to pursue a new approach to language creation.

4.4.3 – T’OWAL

Si Sikwa’s conlang, T’owal, has been in development for approximately two years. It represents the second iteration of a project initially conceived without naturalistic language constraints. The phonology of T’owal incorporates elements from its predecessor, notably including ejective consonants, which Si Sikwa acknowledges can be challenging to produce in fluent speech. They reported no specific external inspiration for T’owal’s phonology or structure aside from personal preference, stating that their choices were based on features’ ability to create an extremely regular language with a straightforward structure.

Grammatically, T’owal is characterized by high regularity and analyticity. Nouns are inflected for case, while verbs are inflected for finiteness through a tense-lax vowel distinction. The language employs a ‘core noun’ marking for subjects and objects of finite verbs, with finite verbs receiving an identical marking. Word order (dominantly VSO) distinguishes between subject and object. Additional information is conveyed through particles, adjectives, and adverbs.

The development of T’owal is documented on Si Sikwa’s Tumblr blog, showcasing the evolution of its script and various translation efforts. During the interview, they shared a translation of a passage from Usula K Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). While the participant has produced some original prose and attempted journaling in T’owal, they reported limited recent engagement with the language, considering it “finished” and having fulfilled its purpose. Si Sikwa noted, “Sometimes I will go to translate a thing and find out I don’t have to make any new words for it, which is always exciting...it satisfi[ed] that need to have made a language.”

Indeed, Si Sikwa identified language completion as a primary challenge in their conlanging process. When they encounter a feature of a language that inspires them, they add it to their list. “At some point,” they explained, “I’m like, I wanna make a new language. So I’ll look at the list and see which of these things can go together.” However, they reported that they tend to lose enthusiasm in the projects early on, or encounter difficulties in decision-making about specific features. With T’owal, they have satisfied their desire to “finish” a language, however, they continue to have “mixed feelings” about it. They have other conlangs that make appearances on their blog, such as Sdefa, a musical conlang designed to be played on instruments, and Valya, their most recent attempt at naturalistic language development.

4.5 — FALYNN⁵

4.5.1 – WHO? - ‘SINCE I WAS VERY YOUNG, I’VE JUST BEEN REALLY CURIOUS ABOUT LANGUAGES’

Falynn, a 24-year-old prospective law student in the United States, demonstrated a deep engagement with their conlanging project during the interview. They actively interacted with their conlanging materials, identifying errors in their previous work, spontaneously

⁵ All quotations taken from Falynn are from an interview which took place on 29 June, 2024.

retranslating a line from Ursula K. Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968)⁶, and explaining the intricate politeness categories in their conlang, Fufólyeh, and how these categories reflect their desired perspective on relationships with their environment. Falynn reported that most of their conlanging activity occurs “on the clock” during downtime at their current employment, humorously acknowledging the potentially contentious nature of this practice as they realized, “It might be a problem if they knew about it, but, you know.”

Table 13
Falynn’s Profile

<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Linguistics education</i>	<i>Language proficiencies</i>	<i>Start of conlanging</i>	<i>Number of conlangs</i>
24	Non-binary	Some undergraduate classes	English	Childhood; dormant until adulthood	2

Falynn’s interest in language creation dates back to their childhood, with their first attempt at constructing a language occurring at approximately eight or nine years of age. They attributed this early interest to a general fascination with languages, stating, “Since I was very young, I’ve just been really curious about languages. It’s just been something that fascinates me.” However, this initial attempt did not progress significantly, and Falynn did not engage in another conlanging project until 2023. While the participant has some formal linguistic education from their undergraduate studies, they reported that the majority of their knowledge in this area is self-taught. Their familiarity with established conlangs was largely gained through online resources, particularly a YouTube series titled “Conlang Critic” (see Jan Mislai, n.d.). Additionally, they have engaged with literature on conlanging, including *The Art of Language Invention* (Peterson, 2015) and *The Language Construction Kit* (Rosenfelder, 2010). Falynn described this as a period of sustained interest in conlanging without active project engagement, stating they were “just sort of keeping interested in it, but without really a project to work on.” The catalyst for their return to active conlanging was obtaining the aforementioned “really boring” employment that provided sufficient downtime to pursue this interest.

4.5.2 – WHY? - ‘I WANT TO PLAY WITH THAT! I WANNA SEE WHAT THAT LOOKS LIKE’

Falynn characterized the act of conlanging as “an elaborate... mix of puzzle solving and art project,” emphasizing curiosity as a primary motivator. They expressed a keen interest in learning languages and linguistic systems, which they can then adapt and manipulate: “I keep learning about new systems and new ways that languages work and going, ‘Oh, I want to play with that! I wanna see what that looks like.’” Falynn finds satisfaction in aligning the functional requirements of a conlang with their aesthetic objectives. They further described it as a process of discovery, stating that they enjoy “playing with the systems and deciding on the rules for the thing and then seeing what

⁶ I did not ask participants to translate any specific materials for our interview; two just so happened to find inspiration in Le Guin texts.

happens when [they] execute on all of those and [they] end up with text in a made up language.”

Falynn identified their favorite aspect of conlanging as determining “the places where you do and don’t make distinctions,” particularly in developing symbolic and poetic constructions that reflect the language’s inherent perspective on its subject matter. However, they acknowledged challenges in developing more complex linguistic structures: “When getting away from the very simplest of sentence constructions into relative clauses and prepositional phrases or adpositional phrases, and all these sorts of intricacies of natural language... it becomes really difficult to figure out.” Despite these difficulties, Falynn views such challenges as “more enticing than anything else.” They embrace the research process required to determine specific structures, considering it an integral part of the conlanging “puzzle.”

4.5.3 – FUFÓLYEH

Falynn’s conlang, Fufólyeh, originated approximately one year ago. They cited two primary motivations for its creation: the need for a concrete project to engage with conlanging, and a desire to develop a language that could inform “some sense of, like, a personal, like, spiritual or like a magical practice.” However, as the project evolved, it “quickly just became a thing [they were] making because it was cool.”

The philosophical underpinnings of Fufólyeh draw inspiration from Indigenous North American practices, particularly the concept of interconnectedness between humans, other animals and their ecosystem. This perspective aligns with Falynn’s readings on ecology and environmentalism, significantly influencing Fufólyeh’s features. Falynn explained, “I don’t need to communicate, like, hierarchy or status... I just want to describe a sense of relation.”

Fufólyeh’s phonology incorporates elements from English, French, and Arabic. It employs a triconsonantal root system, inspired by Semitic languages, coupled with a robust derivational system. This structure facilitates easy word creation when needed. The language features an active-stative alignment, closely tied to its core animacy distinctions, and pragmatic word order, where pre-verbal content receives greater emphasis. The script draws inspiration from Hangul, primarily in its syllabic block structure rather than the visual appearance of the characters themselves. Falynn explained that they felt drawn to Hangul because “it was a constructed script. Somebody came up with this on purpose. Well, then, why shouldn't I?”

A central feature of Fufólyeh is its elaborate animacy and politeness marking system, comprising eight categories:

1. Inanimate objects (or ‘non-politeness’)
2. Peers (for oneself or strangers)
3. Neighbors (for acquaintances or regular interactions)
4. Household (for close family or friends)
5. Hospitality (for host-guest relationships)

6. Teachers (or for other mentors)
7. Sages or saints (for especially influential or respected individuals)
8. Divinity (and other abstract concepts with divine weight)

Falynn indicated that Fufólyeh's purposes were personal and exploratory, with naturalism being a minor concern. When deciding on the aims of their conlang, they ask themselves "Who is this for?" That answer helps to inform Falynn's goals when engaging in the conlanging process. They explained, "I find [naturalism] useful for helping keep a handle on aesthetic considerations, but since I'm not imagining this for use in, like, conversation, then it didn't really make a lot of sense to consider, like, an evolution to it." As Fufólyeh has grown in complexity, the participant has begun to develop a separate branch of the project more aligned with their original goals. They stated, "Like, I'm going to keep all the cool stuff that I've been working on for the last year, and I'm going to keep doing stuff with that, but I also want to make things that fit this original goal that I had." Their next project is simpler, but while that's in-progress, "right now what [they] have is the fun, complicated" conlang.

CHAPTER 5 — DISCUSSION

5.1 — OVERVIEW

This chapter discusses the primary themes identified from the questionnaire and interview findings, focusing on two key relationships: the connection between individual conlangers and the broader conlanging community, and the interaction between natural languages and constructed languages. The first section explores how conlanging appeals to and is shaped by the individual, as well as how conlangers relate to the community. The second section examines the influence of natural languages on constructed languages and the factors contributing to the creation of a ‘successful’ conlang and a fulfilling conlanging process. It is crucial to recognize that, while these themes are discussed separately for organizational purposes, they are all in constant conversation with one another.

5.2 — UGLOSSIA IN COMMUNITY

5.2.1 — ‘WHO IS THIS FOR?’

In her exploration of the conlanging community of the 1990s, Higley (2000) remarked on the peculiarity of creating a language that would never be spoken: “A language without an audience of other speakers is no language” (para. 9), referring to the phenomenon under the name that Schnapp (1991) gave it: ‘uglossia’. Conlangs created for use in popular media—such as Dothraki—or intended for widespread communication—such as Esperanto—are, to some degree, designed with an audience in mind. As a part of the development of their own conlang, Fufólyeh, Falynn found herself considering the question of audience as well. The question of “Who is this for?” drove their decisions throughout the creation and development process of their language, informing its aesthetic and functional goals. In the case of the conlangers that participated in this research, their primary audiences were themselves.

The concept of an ‘audience of the self’ appears to be substantiated by the deeply personal connections that conlangers forge with their languages, as well as their individual, idiosyncratic conlanging processes and habits. This phenomenon is exemplified by the case studies conducted in this research:

Karhan's conlanging practice, for instance, was inextricably intertwined with his inner world. His 'grimoire' served as a repository for both conlanging material and personal entries, while his etymology book and copy of Peterson's (2015) work were regarded with profound reverence. Karhan's conlang was replete with inside jokes and references unique to his life experiences, elements that he alone might fully comprehend. Even though Karhan did not outright describe Nárnokhowar as a particularly personal project, Karhan's relationship with conlanging as a whole makes it feel as such.

Similarly, Si Sikwa described their conlanging as an inevitable form of self-expression, analogous to their musical pursuits. This inherent drive has culminated in the creation of many conlangs, including T'owal, which was also fueled by a personal goal of completing a language project.

Falynn's case further illustrates this theme. Their conlang, Fufólyeh, was initially conceived to support a personal magical or spiritual practice, making it an intimately

personal endeavor. The very structure of the language was designed to prompt Falynn to contemplate their place in the world and their relationships with everything around them, thereby transforming the conlanging process itself into an act of personal self-reflection. Even as the conlang strays from its intended purpose, it provides enjoyment for its true audience—its creator.

Interestingly, this deeply personal connection to conlangs is not entirely reflected in the questionnaire results. The most frequently cited reason for creating a conlang was as part of a worldbuilding project. It could be that the conlangers chosen to interview simply do not reflect the conlanging community as a whole. However, worldbuilding *can* serve as a personal endeavor, especially in the case where the worldbuilding project is not necessarily intended to supplement the development of another creative project, such as a novel or game. Indeed, participants more often indicated that their worldbuilding was not necessarily tied to another project. Karhan's conlang, Nárnokhowar, exemplifies this type of worldbuilding, where the language's fictional context is developed without the explicit intention of publishing a story that exists within that context. For Karhan, any potential output aside from the conlang serves as a secondary benefit.

Yet even if their primary audiences are themselves, some conlangers, like Si Sikwa, are also sharing their creations. This raises the question: What value do *others* derive from engaging with languages designed for the pleasure of only their creator?

5.2.2 – FINDING PLACE(S)

Results from the questionnaire and interviews show a great deal of variance in how conlangers engage with the conlanging community. Si Sikwa embodies this the most out of the three interviewees, as they actively seek out community as a core part of the conlanging experience. Karhan's engagement with the community is far more receptive, engaging with what others share though not necessarily sharing to that same extent himself. For Falynn, at least for their current project, its personal nature means that sharing in a conlanging community is not exactly relevant to what they need.

The spectrum ranges from no engagement at all to being an active participant and leader in the community, with more passive participation (for instance, Si Sikwa), or participation 'from afar' falling somewhere between these two extremes (for instance, Karhan). This range can also be seen in fandom and other 'nerdy' communities (Woo, 2018).

There is undoubtedly a comparison to be made between the conlanging community and the genre of 'fandom' at large. The "serious leisure" that Stebbins describes does indeed seem to be, for conlangers, an active engagement with language itself. As serious leisure describes fan fiction and the accumulation of domain-specific knowledge in fandom circles, so too does it describe the creation of languages and the accumulation of linguistics knowledge in conlanging circles. In this sense, conlangers may act as 'fans' of language; conlanging, then, is a kind of 'fanart' or 'fanfiction,' and language is the 'media' from which conlangers draw their inspiration. In making this comparison, it becomes more obvious what benefits conlangers may receive from sharing their languages or engaging with the conlanging community. As Si Sikwa described it, there is a sense of encouragement one can feel from the exchange of inspiration one may experience by

Commented [EGW1]: inherently?

showcasing their conlangs to others and seeking out the conlangs of others. Having been rejected by traditional linguistics circles historically, conlangers form a niche within that community where their ‘secret vice’ is not seen as madness and their sharing is not laughed at, but rather celebrated.

Yet even within these communities, there are groups that explore different needs. Si Sikwa mentioned that their circle was primarily concerned with naturalism and the diachronic process, even though “that’s not really where [their] own interests are.” Other circles, such as those participating in Agma Schwa’s ‘Cursed Conlang Circus,’ celebrate the irreverent side of conlanging by challenging members to create the most convoluted conlang possible (Agma Schwa, 2022b). The conlanging community is far from homogenous; while there so far has been a common thread of the individual nature of conlanging, the variations seen in the questionnaire and interview data still suggest a diverse landscape where individuals pursue different goals and interests, which may affect how they choose to interact with the community as a whole. While the extent of this diversity requires further exploration, this research highlights the presence of a variety of perspectives beyond the public-facing image of often associated with more renowned conlangers.

5.3 — ART, PUZZLES, AND WHAT MAKES ‘GOOD’ CONLANGING

5.3.1 — NATURALISM AND THE DIACHRONIC PROCESS

Famous conlangs like Dothraki or Sindarin are deeply rooted in the diachronic process, which involves the simulation of language evolution to create a realistic conlang. Conlanging resources cited by participants, such as *The Art of Language Invention* (Peterson, 2015) and *The Language Construction Kit* (Rosenfelder, 2010), emphasize the importance of understanding these processes and having a grasp of linguistics and natural languages in order to make conlangs. According to the questionnaire data, naturalism is a significant concern for many conlangers, with 46.5% indicating that it is a major consideration and 32.3% stating it is somewhat of a consideration for their conlangs that they shared. This desire for naturalism is also reflected in the features of participants’ conlangs. Although statistical comparisons between constructed and natural languages were not within the scope of this dissertation, there were some apparent similarities between the most common expressions of a feature among conlangs and natlangs—for instance, the similarities in the order of subjects, objects, and verbs. Both Karhan and Falynn also expressed how they drew inspiration from natural languages in their conlanging practices, with Falynn enthusiastically diving into research on linguistic features and Karhan focusing on etymology and the evolution of words. According to Peterson (2020), understanding how to use natural languages in conlanging is what elevates the hobby to an art form.

Karhan especially echoed this, describing his work on Nárnokhowar as a proto language, from which he plans to develop additional projects through the diachronic process. He has dedicated seven years to this initial step of language evolution to ensure it meets his vision properly. For Si Sikwa and Falynn, however, naturalism is less relevant to their current linguistic goals. T’owal, for instance, is not concerned with naturalism because naturalism was the very obstacle that Si Sikwa faced in making progress on their conlangs. Similarly, Fufólyeh is not intended to be particularly naturalistic because, as Falynn said, it is not ‘meant’ to be spoken by other people; it serves a purpose unrelated

to naturalism. As Si Sikwa's craft has developed, they feel more prepared to tackle naturalism, though still caution against becoming overly fixated on realism, stating, "I feel like a lot of people get very focused on realism, and I think it's a little bit overrated, given the entire nature of conlanging. It's, like, kind of a ridiculous thing to begin with. Why not embrace that?"

Indeed, the interviewees' enjoyment of conlanging, as discussed above, appears to stem from their unique interests and creative processes, rather than from how closely their languages emulated natural ones or how well they employed the diachronic process. To relate it back to conlangers and their comparison to other nerdy, geek, and fan communities—fandom generates fan fiction and fan art not necessarily with the aim of perfectly emulating the properties that inspire them—rather, it is to take the elements that they find engaging about the property and be creative with it themselves. Ultimately, the personal creative process appears to be the driving force behind conlanging, with varying degrees of success depending on the individual's expectations and goals.

5.3.2 – *MELK'O BMÁN T'ON SOS BMÁN SOS*

The concept of 'goals' emerged frequently in both the interviews and questionnaire responses. Setting goals implies an ideal to emulate or a standard to achieve, and often these goals are related to natural languages or the processes that aim to imitate them, as discussed above. For example, a conlanger might aim to produce a proto language to develop a naturalistic language or to incorporate specific features that yields a particular linguistic construction. Two questionnaire participants expressed this quite directly, writing that they "try" (PO36) or "do [their] best ok" (PO09) when attempting to make an artistic language. Even in more exploratory conlanging projects, such as Fufólyeh, conlangers must balance the novel ideas they generate with their aesthetic and functional goals. Sometimes, these goals are entirely unrelated to other languages or may even reject them outright, such as Si Sikwa's simple objective of 'finishing' a language and making T'owal extremely regular in order to achieve that. In other cases, conlangers may struggle to meet their goals, or their goals may evolve during the development process. The ways in which these conlangers navigate such challenges illustrate different approaches to the conlanging process.

In his pursuit of naturalism, Karhan tends to avoid the processes that daunt him, such as developing and expanding verbal inflections. While he has the freedom to simplify verbs if they prove difficult, Karhan instead chooses to restart his conlang whenever he encounters significant obstacles, attempting to adhere to his original goals. This cycle of reaching a certain point, encountering roadblocks, and resetting demonstrates a commitment to his initial vision, albeit at the cost of repeated setbacks. Si Sikwa, on the other hand, often abandons projects when faced with difficulties, such as the complexities of the diachronic process or the inability to make a decisive choice. Frustrated by this experience, Si Sikwa chose to redefine their goals, adopting a different approach with the sole purpose of achieving a manageable objective and completing their project. "Perfect is the enemy of finished," Si Sikwa told me, later translating the phrase into T'owal: *Melk'o bmán t'on sos bmán sos*. Having built back their confidence, they now feel more empowered to tackle naturalistic projects again, though now with the understanding that they have the power to alter their goals. Falynn, in another contrast, find joy in overcoming obstacles and puzzling through the challenges they encounter. The process itself brings them fulfillment, even when Fufólyeh deviates from its original

goals. Consequently, Falynn has accepted that the original goals of Fufólyeh are no longer paramount for that particular conlang and has created a new splinter-project to fulfill their “initial brief.”

The diverse processes described by the interview participants reveal significant variation in how goals shape the conlanging experience, influenced by natural linguistic models. Some processes lead to fear and frustration, while others lead to satisfaction. When it comes to the deeply personal conlangs created by the interviewees, it appears that focusing on individual enjoyment rather than external comparisons to natural languages lead to a more satisfying language creation experience. It is curiosity, investment in the process, and a sense of satisfaction upon figuring out the ‘puzzle’ that motivated these conlangers to continue their craft. The evaluation of the language in comparison to natural languages is what elicited apprehension and frustration. While Si Sikwa expressed satisfaction in having completed a project, none of the interviewees identified the completion of a language as their *favorite* aspect of conlanging. Instead, they all cited various parts of the process—such as research, vocabulary creation, and problem-solving—as their most enjoyable activities. Their reactions to the challenges they face are what ultimately determine their sense of success in conlanging.

CHAPTER 6 — CONCLUSION

6.1 — REVIEWING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study explored three primary research questions regarding conlanging: the identity of conlangers, their motivations, and the characteristics of their constructed languages.

6.1.1 — RQ 1 — *WHO IS ENGAGED IN CONLANGING?*

The findings indicate that conlangers may predominantly be amateur linguists who typically begin language creation during adolescence. Many are multilingual and possess substantial practical linguistic knowledge acquired through their conlanging endeavors. The demographic profile skews towards younger men, with a notable representation of those identifying outside the gender binary. These individuals also form a larger community centered around their shared creative linguistic interest.

6.1.2 — RQ 2 — *WHY ARE THEY ENGAGING IN CONLANGING?*

The primary motivations for conlanging appear to be linguistic exploration, artistic expression, and as a part of the worldbuilding of other invented settings. Some conlangers described or alluded to an innate desire to investigate language structures and possibilities, with conlanging being the natural expression of that desire. The majority of participants also viewed conlanging as an artistic pursuit, categorizing their creations as artistic languages, or ‘artlangs’. Additionally, many conlangers create languages to enhance fictional worlds, often as standalone projects, though also frequently part of broader creative endeavors. It is crucial to note that these motivations are not mutually exclusive and may occur in varied combinations, or that a conlanger may have motivations outside of these central three.

6.1.3 — RQ 3 — *WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THESE CONLANGS?*

Contrary to previous assertions that conlangers prioritize rare linguistic features (Higley, 2000), this research found that most conlangs appear to incorporate features found in natural languages. Conlangers often draw inspiration from existing languages and aim to emulate natural linguistic patterns. Additionally, many develop custom writing systems and scripts for their languages, further emphasizing the creative aspect of the practice. It remains to be determined whether these patterns differ significantly from those in natural languages on a statistical level as well as if additional features not covered in this dissertation might reveal the differences claimed by Higley (2000)

6.2 — IMPLICATIONS

This study’s findings have significant implications for understanding a unique linguistic community hitherto unexplored in applied linguistics research. While the data collected represent only a fraction of the actual conlanging community—as evidenced by the thousands of individuals participating in conlanging discussions on Reddit and other social media platforms—the variety and depth of responses captured in our questionnaire and interviews suggest that this community may offer a fertile ground for research beyond applied linguistics. For example, the conlanging process could provide valuable insights into cognition and language processing. Moreover, the manner in which conlangers draw influence from existing languages may reveal important information about language attitudes and beliefs. Understanding the conlanging community as a whole may also contribute to emerging studies on media consumption and fandom

culture. These potential research threads could have profound implications for our understanding of human interaction with language, potentially revealing novel and creative approaches to language use in education and community settings. Further investigation into this area may yield valuable insights for both theoretical linguistics and practical language pedagogy.

6.3 — LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. The data collection, analysis, and reporting were conducted by a single researcher within a limited timeframe. While the high volume of responses in a short period is promising for future research, it also restricted the scope for more complex analyses. The statistical data presented here represents only a portion of the collected data, and statistically based comparisons between natural and constructed languages were not made. Although only three interviews were conducted, they were extensive and covered a wide range of topics related to conlanging, not all of which could be included in this dissertation. As case studies, these interviews cannot be generalized to the entire conlanging community. Additionally, the questionnaire sample may not be representative of the broader online conlanging community. Snowball sampling presents challenges in achieving a truly representative sample, and this study is no exception. The questionnaire was primarily distributed through specific Discord servers and on Tumblr, potentially leading to a younger demographic and a higher representation of non-binary identities among respondents. Future research should aim for broader distribution, including the Conlang Listserv and the main conlanging subreddit, to attract a more diverse range of participants. Conducting more interviews could also provide a deeper understanding of this diverse group.

6.4 — FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should aim to broaden the scope of investigation into the conlanging community to validate the findings presented here and explore the underlying reasons for observed relationships. For instance, the high representation of non-binary individuals in conlanging may warrant further examination. Additionally, comparing the conlanging processes and influences between those who began spontaneously and those introduced through other means, such as the internet, could yield valuable insights. In-depth inquiries into the conlanging process itself should be pursued, potentially shedding light on the cognitive mechanisms underlying this creative linguistic endeavor. From a sociolinguistic perspective, investigations into the conlanging community could explore how terminology is defined and used within the common and among various subgroups. The psychological and sociological aspects of conlanging also merit further investigation. Building on the work of McCain et al. (2022), who explored individual differences and social behaviors associated with geek culture, or following Woo's (2018) series of interviews with individuals immersed in geek culture, similar studies could be conducted within the conlanging community to examine what patterns emerge among conlangers. There is also room for expanded typological studies to draw comparisons across a wider range of features found in natural languages. Such research could determine whether the differences observed are statistically significant or if they represent broader patterns reflected in other areas of conlanging. These avenues for research have the potential to significantly enhance our understanding of the phenomenon of conlanging and its implications for linguistics, cognitive science, and cultural studies.

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CHAPTER 8 — APPENDICES

Appendix A: CUREC Approval

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES
INTERDIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
DEPARTMENTAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
Department of Education
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY
student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk; staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk



[REDACTED]
Department of Education, Social Sciences Division
University of Oxford

18 March 2024

Dear [REDACTED]

Research ethics approval

Research title: Understanding linguistic creation: an exploration of the 'conlanging' community and their invented languages.

Research ethics reference: EDUC_CIA_24_076

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this study.

Please note the following:

Personal data: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's [guidance and legal requirements](#).

In-person activities: Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available from the Safety Office's [website](#).

Amendments: Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the [SSH IDREC webpage](#).

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk / student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk or ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'S. Cadwallader'.

Dr Stuart Cadwallader, DREC Member

cc: [REDACTED]

Appendix B: Participant Materials

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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Director: Professor Victoria Murphy

Principal Investigator: [REDACTED]

Primary Researcher: [REDACTED]



iv. SAMPLE RECRUITMENT FLYER

Understanding linguistic creation: an exploration of the ‘conlanging’ community and their invented languages

Ethics Approval Reference: **TBD**

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR QUESTIONNAIRE AND POSSIBLE INTERVIEW

[QR code to questionnaire here]

The creation and development of constructed languages (‘conlangs’)

We are looking for volunteers to participate in a questionnaire about conlanging. If you are aged 18 or older and have created a language before, you are invited to participate in an online study. The questionnaire would take about 20 minutes of your time. You would be asked to answer questions about your linguistic and conlanging background, as well as provide information about the features of a language which you have created. If interested, you will also have the opportunity to potentially take part in a more in-depth interview about you and your conlang(s).

If you are interested and would like to participate, scan the QR code above or follow this link to take part: **[shortened URL here]**.

If you would like more information, please contact [removed] at the University of Oxford Department of Education, 15 ~~Norham~~ Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY. There is no obligation to take part.

Thank you!

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY
Tel: +44(0)1865 274024
general.enquiries@education.ox.ac.uk www.education.ox.ac.uk

Director: Professor Victoria Murphy

Principal Investigator: [removed]

Primary Researcher: [removed]



i. QUESTIONNAIRE INFORMATION SHEET

Understanding linguistic creation: an exploration of the 'conlanging' community and their invented languages

CUREC Approval Reference: TO BE ADDED ONCE RECEIVED

General Information

The aim of this research is to explore the phenomenon of language creation, or 'conlanging'.

We appreciate your interest in participating in this survey. You have been invited to participate as you are over the age of 18 and we understand that you have created at least one language. Please read through this information before agreeing to participate (if you wish to) by ticking the appropriate box below.

You may ask any questions before deciding to take part by contacting the researcher (details below).

The Principal Researcher is [removed] who is attached to the Department of Education at the University of Oxford. This research is being completed under the supervision of [removed].

In this survey, you will be asked to provide information about your experience with language creation, including questions about your linguistic background and motivation for conlanging. You will also be provided with the opportunity to share information about the features of a language you have created. This should take about 20 minutes. To make this survey approachable to conlangers of varying experience, no formal linguistics knowledge is required. Where it is unavoidable, some linguistics terms may be used, but explanations are provided.

The data will be used for research purposes only.

Do I have to take part?

No. Please note that participation is voluntary. If you do decide to take part, you may withdraw at any point for any reason before submitting your answers by simply closing the browser window. Any data entered up until this point will be discarded. All questions in the questionnaire are optional.

How will my data be used?

The questionnaire will not collect any data that could directly identify you, except that at the end, you will be invited to leave your email address if you would be willing to take part in an online interview with me, to explore your conlanging in greater detail. This is entirely optional and voluntary. If you leave your

Data collected during the interview will be kept anonymous through your use of a pseudonym. Participating in the interview does require that I have your email address, which will be stored separately from the main questionnaire database.

Your IP address will not be stored. We will take all reasonable measures to ensure that data remain confidential.

The audio-recording of our interview will be stored in a password-protected electronic file on University of Oxford secure servers until it has been transcribed, at which point it will be securely deleted. The data you provide will be used in my [Master's](#) dissertation, as well as possibly in academic publications and conference presentations. Identifiable information (which will be limited to your email address) will be deleted as soon as it is no longer required for the research, unless you have indicated that you wish to be contacted for future research. Research data will be stored for at least three years after publication or public release of the work of the research.

Who will have access to my data?

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data and, as such, will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that we perform in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights>.

The data will be accessible only to me and my supervisor.

Who has reviewed this research?

This research has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, Oxford University Department of Education's Departmental Research Ethics Committee, a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. The reference number is: **TO BE ADDED ONCE RECEIVED.**

Who do I contact if I have a concern or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact me ([removed]) or my supervisor ([removed]). We will do our best to answer your query. We will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of our Departmental Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford Department of Education, who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible: student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk; 15 ~~North~~ Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY.

Please note that you may only participate in this interview if you are 18 years of age or over.

If you have read the information above and you agree to participate, with the understanding that the data you submit will be processed as stated above, please complete the attached consent form.

email address, this will be stored separately from the main database, which will be anonymous. If you are happy to be interviewed and are selected to take part, I will contact you again with full information about this strand of the study and ask for your consent separately at that time.

You may also be asked to provide your email address if you wish to be contacted for future research. If you leave your email address in this case, this will be stored securely separately from the main database.

Your IP address will not be stored. We will take all reasonable measures to ensure that data remain confidential.

The responses you provide will be stored in a password-protected electronic file on University of Oxford secure servers and will be used in my [Master's](#) dissertation, as well as possibly in academic publications and conference presentations. Identifiable information (which will be limited to your email address if you choose to supply it) will be deleted as soon as it is no longer required for the research, unless you have indicated that you wish to be contacted for future research. Research data will be stored for at least three years after publication or public release of the work of the research.

Who will have access to my data?

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data and, as such, will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that we perform in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights>.

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Who do I contact if I have a [concern](#) or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact me ([removed]) or my supervisor ([removed]). We will do our best to answer your query. We will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of our Departmental Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford Department of Education, who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible: student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk; 15 [Northam](#) Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY.

Please note that you may only participate in this survey if you are 18 years of age or over.

Please tick the box to confirm that you have read the information above and that you agree to participate, with the understanding that the data you submit will be processed as stated above. Ticking this box will take you on to the survey. If you do not wish to proceed, please close your

browser window now.

Yes, I agree to take part

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Director: Professor Victoria Murphy

Principal Investigator: [removed]

Primary Researcher: [removed]



ii. INTERVIEW INFORMATION SHEET

Understanding linguistic creation: an exploration of the 'conlanging' community and their invented languages

CUREC Approval Reference: TO BE ADDED ONCE RECEIVED

General Information

The aim of this research is to explore the phenomenon of language creation, or 'conlanging'.

We appreciate your interest in participating in this interview. You have been invited to participate as you are over the age of 18 and we understand that you have created at least one language. Please read through this information before agreeing to participate (if you wish to) by filling out the attached consent form.

You may ask any questions before deciding to take part by contacting the researcher (details below).

The Principal Researcher is [removed] who is attached to the Department of Education at the University of Oxford. This research is being completed under the supervision of [removed].

In this interview, you will be asked to provide information about your experience with language creation, including questions about your relationship and history with conlanging. You will also be provided with the opportunity to share more detailed information about the features of a language you have created and your thought-process behind its creation. You will be invited to provide samples of your conlang, both written text and audio files (if your language has a phonological form). This interview should take about 1 hour but can be extended if you are happy to share more. Alternatively, the interview may be broken up into parts if it is inconvenient or burdensome to talk for a whole hour in one sitting.

The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed to ensure an accurate record of our conversation. The data will be used for research purposes only.

Do I have to take part?

No. Please note that participation is voluntary. All interview questions are optional. If you do decide to take part, you may withdraw for any reason before 30th June 2024 by simply contacting me and indicating your wish to withdraw your data. You may also withdraw at any point during the interview for any reason.

How will my data be used?

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15 Norton Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY
Tel: +44(0)1865 274024
general.enquiries@education.ox.ac.uk www.education.ox.ac.uk



Director: Professor Victoria Murphy

Principal Investigator: [REDACTED]

Primary Researcher: [REDACTED]

iii. INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

Consent to take part in research study:

Understanding linguistic creation: an exploration of the 'conlanging' community and their invented languages.

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: **TBD**

Purpose of Study: to explore the phenomenon of 'conlanging,' in which individuals create and develop personal, constructed languages (conlangs).

Please initial each box if you agree with the statement

- I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and have had these answered satisfactorily.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary. I am free to withdraw at any point before 30th June 2024, without giving any reason.
- I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored, and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.
- I understand I will not be identifiable from the dissertation or any other outputs arising from this research.
- I consent to being audio recorded.
- I understand how audio recordings will be used in research outputs.
- I agree to the use of quotations in research outputs in which I will not be identifiable
- I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.
- I agree to take part.

Name of participant

dd / mm / yyyy

Date

Signature

Appendix C: Interview Questions

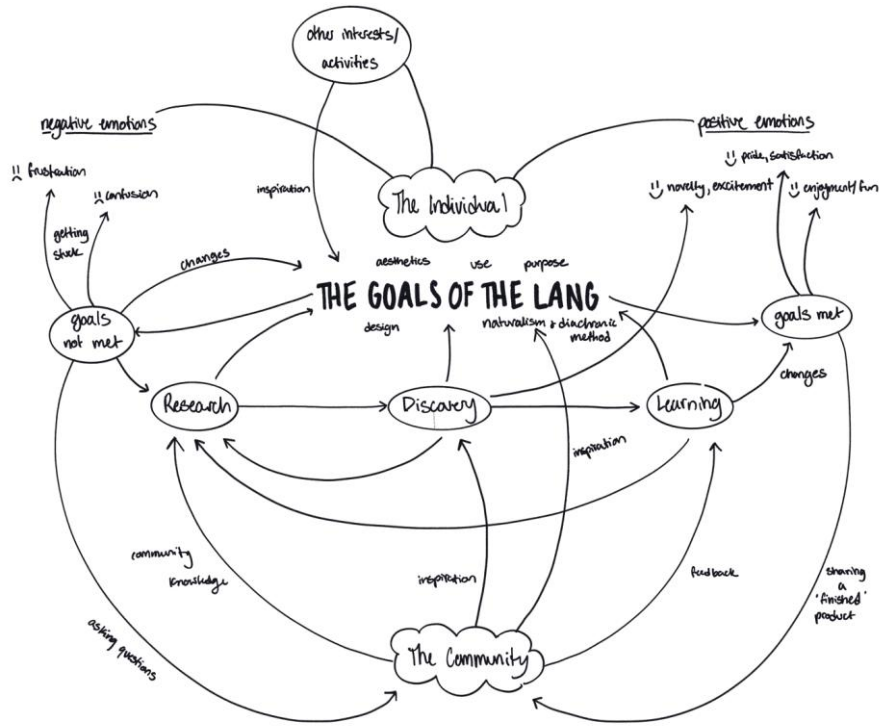
“CORE” QUESTIONS

1. Can you walk me through the timeline of your relationship with conlanging? What got you started making languages?
2. And what’s kept you making them still today?
3. Can you describe your process for creating a new language? Where do you start and how does it develop?
4. Are there any negative sides to conlanging? A ‘most difficult’ part?
5. What is your favorite part about conlanging? Could be a particular linguistic process (e.g., evolution) or a product (e.g., having a finished, usable script)

“EXPANDED” QUESTIONS

1. Can you give me an overview of your conlang? Where it comes from and why you started making it?
 1. The ‘conlang showcase’ portion of the interview will hopefully cover the main parts of the interviewee’s conlang in greater detail than the online questionnaire, delving deeper into its phonology, orthography, lexis, and grammar. Ideally, this will lead to questions that target certain aspects of the language, such as:
 1. Why did you decide to divide the grammatical cases this way?
 2. How did you decide on this set of sounds for the phonology?
 3. How do you develop the lexis/create new words for your conlang?
 4. What was the process like for developing this script?
 5. Specific questions related to details found in questionnaire responses
2. How do you prioritize ‘naturalism’ in your conlanging? Is that something that particularly matters to you? If so, why? If not, also why?

CONLANGING: ART, PUZZLES, + 'GOOD' CONLANGING



CONLANGING: (the general phenomenon) UGLOSSIA-IN-COMMUNITY

