

The work of a language creator is often regarded with skepticism. "What's the big deal?" many ask. "All you have to do is make up words." And, indeed, one could proceed as follows:

- a = *blork*
- abandon = *glurg*
- abate = *plurfle*
- abattoir = *gluff*

And so on until there was a unique form for every word in an English language dictionary (in fact, with a computer program, one could produce dozens of "languages" like this in a matter of minutes). And while the resultant language would *look* different from English, functionally and semantically, it would be identical—a mere notational variant.

The reason, of course, is that language doesn't exist in a vacuum. While one can mix up the sounds of an existing language, by copying its vocabulary, one unconsciously duplicates the culture of that language's speakers along with it.

In building up the Dothraki language, I paid special attention to the cultural information a reader is able to glean from George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. At the most basic level, we see a nomadic race of warriors tied inextricably to their horses: they ride horses, they give horses as gifts, they eat horse meat, they worship a horse god—even their alcohol comes in the form of fermented mare's milk. The word *dothraki* itself translates to "riders". As horse riding is so central to Dothraki existence, it seems natural that the concept would crop up in their language in a variety of ways.

For example, the basic way to inquire after someone's state is, *Hash yer dothrae chek?* That translates literally to, "Do you ride well?" or, "Are you riding well?" In English, though, an appropriate translation would be simply, "How are you doing?"

In another area of the grammar, Dothraki expresses immediate pasts and futures using the same verb: *dothralat*, "to ride". Here are some illustrative examples:

- *Anha adakhak*. "I'm eating." (*Present*)
- *Anha vadakhak*. "I'm going to eat." (*Standard Future*)
- *Anha adakh*. "I ate." (*Standard Past*)
- *Anha dothrak adakhataan*. "I'm about to eat." (Lit. "I ride to eating.")
- *Anha dothrak adakhatoon*. "I just ate." (Lit. "I ride from eating.")

In discussing long distances, the Dothraki express themselves in terms of horserides. Dothraki has words for different types of horse gaits which line up with English terminology thus:

- *karlinat*, "to gallop"
- *chetirat*, "to canter"
- *irvosat*, "to trot"
- *onqothat*, "to walk"

Unlike English, terms for distance in Dothraki are derived directly from horse gait terminology. Using *karlinat* as a base, the Dothraki have an approximation for how far a horse in good health can gallop before having to stop to rest. That distance (let's call it a mile to make conversion easy) is referred to as a *karlina*. Using the other gait types, the same derivation model is applied and stands for how far a horse would move *at that speed* in the time it would take the horse to gallop a *karlina*. This gives Dothraki the following terms (all of which are approximations):

- *karlina* ≈ one mile
- *chetira* ≈ half mile
- *irvosa* ≈ quarter mile
- *onqotha* ≈ eighth mile

These terms, however, do not stand for exact measures. For example, a smaller horse with a rider who doesn't weigh much will be able to gallop further without tiring than a larger horse weighted down with supplies and a heavy rider. Thus, *karlina* may mean one mile for one horse and rider, and may mean two and a half or three miles for another—and the same goes for each of the four units—similar to how I can say, at two in the morning, that LA is 40 minutes away, while at eight in the morning, it may be two hours away.

One important fact to remember is that language users use their own experience to encode life as they see it. And just as "What's up?" doesn't *mean* "What's in the sky right now?", *Hash yer dothrae chek?* doesn't necessarily have anything to do with horse riding. Dothraki horse culture is simply a tool Dothraki speakers use to help them describe the reality around them. Part of the fun of creating a language is using an imagined culture as a palette to paint our own reality in different colors—and Dothraki culture has proved to be a fun palette.

The first created language of which we have documented evidence was invented by Hildegard von Bingen some time in the 12th century. The words of her *Lingua Ignota* (Latin for "unknown language") were, she believed, divinely inspired: a gift from God. It's hard to say to what extent she believed she was participating in a conscious act of subcreation. It's not hard, though, to imagine what she would think of the idea of someone being paid to create a language for a fictional race of people for a performance piece—an entertainment!

Not even a full millenium later, how the world has changed.

The full history of language creation as a form of spiritual communion, philosophical experimentation and artifice is a fascinating and varied one (for more information, check out Arika Okrent's *In the Land of Invented Languages*), but for now, I want to focus on the use of created languages in television and film. As a starting point, it's useful to examine the usage of "foreign languages" in television and film. Though it's hard to imagine at this point a Russian character speaking something other than authentic and grammatically appropriate Russian in a feature-length film, that hasn't always been the case.

Consider, for example, the film adaptation of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (1967). Moviegoers are familiar with the racism inherent in casting the "other" in older films (for example, Pat Morita, a Japanese-American actor famous for playing Mr. Miyagi in *The Karate Kid* franchise, plays a Chinese white slaver and is credited as "Oriental No. 2"). For the film, if an actor *looked* "Asian" that was good enough. That same attitude extended to the use of language in the film. Even without knowing Chinese, you can watch *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and tell that the "Chinese" spoken is complete and utter gobbledygook. That, though, was simply a detail: as long as it sounded "Asian", that was good enough. And mind, this was 1967.

If, in large part, audiences of the time were able to accept this practice for natural languages, what hope was there for authentic *invented* languages?

As it turns out, the same creative pressure that led to the fake Chinese of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* also led to some of the earliest uses of created languages in one form or another. In order to satirize Nazi Germany, for example, Charlie Chaplin invented a fictional country called Tomainia for his film *The Great Dictator* (1940) that was supposed to *look* German. The signage in the film is written in Esperanto. Similar creations can be seen in television shows like *Danger Man* (1960-68), where in order to be able to use Soviet countries as a backdrop, the show runners used Soviet-like country names with invented dialogue that *sounded* vaguely Slavic, but which wasn't an actual Slavic

language. This tradition of fictional "real" countries and fictional "real" languages has continued into the present, with some modern examples like the Krakozhian language in *The Terminal* (2004), and the more fully developed Ku language in *The Interpreter* (2005).

Still, it was unheard of to create an entire language for a fictional race of people. Usually in fantasy and science-fiction movies and films, snippets like *Klaatu barada nikto* (*The Day the Earth Stood Still*, 1951) sufficed. That changed when the creators of the original *Land of the Lost* (1974-76) television series reached out to linguist Victoria Fromkin at UCLA to create a language for the primate humanoid Pakuni people. Fromkin developed a more-or-less full grammar and about 200 words that were introduced gradually in the show, to allow viewers to learn the Pakuni language as the show progressed.

Of course, the watershed moment was *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (1984), when Marc Okrand was hired to create a language the Klingons could speak in the film. While there were many who likely weren't aware of the Pakuni language in *Land of the Lost*, a movie for a franchise with such broad appeal like *Star Trek* using a created language changed everything.

While movies and shows continued to be made that used language-like elements rather than full conlangs, using actual created languages became more acceptable. In science-fiction especially, we saw conlangs starting to pop up for shows and movies all over: *Alien Nation* (1988-90), *Dark Skies* (1996-97), *Stargate* (1997-2007)—and, of course, the next generation of *Star Trek* television shows and movies.

The next large-scale production to use a conlang was *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy (2001-03). Peter Jackson was determined to be as faithful to J. R. R. Tolkien's books as possible, and since the books themselves were an outgrowth of Tolkien's own created languages, the movies simply couldn't go to screen without featuring the languages of Middle Earth.

It was likely the outstanding success of *The Lord of the Rings* that led Hollywood producers to believe that there was a potential market for created languages in film. Those of us who create languages, then, were lucky that *Avatar* (2009) was the next film to take the leap. Not only did *Avatar* feature a fully-developed created language (Na'vi created by Paul Frommer), but the film was, well, *the highest grossing film of all time*.

So, where are we now? Following *Avatar*, of course, came *Game of Thrones* (2011-present) featuring the Dothraki language, and in film, *John Carter* (2012) featuring a fleshed-out version of Edgar Rice Burroughs' Barsoomian language. And with more productions on

the large and small screen featuring created languages, the expectations of the audience have been raised. New big-budget productions that feature fictional beings are expected to have fictional languages for those beings to use. *Klaatu barada nikto* simply won't cut it any longer.