

Tutor: Prof. Dr. Franz Januschek

Seminar: "Fiktionale Sprachen und Sprachenerfinder"

Names: Anna-Katharina Jägeler, Laura Marie Ehlert

Interview with David J. Peterson

General questions:

1. When did you invent your first own language?

I created my first language in 2000. It was called Megdevi, and it was pretty terrible, as a first language is fated to be. It was enough to get me interested, though, and so I kept on inventing languages.

2. How and when have you discovered your passion for languages?

It came late in high school (roughly equivalent to Gymnasium), when I awoke one morning ashamed that millions of people spoke French and I couldn't. I made it my mission to learn every language on the planet, and became generally interested as a result.

3. How many and which languages do you speak?

I grew up speaking and hearing English and Spanish. In school, I got the opportunity to study German, Arabic, Russian, Esperanto, French, Middle Egyptian and American Sign Language. On my own I've studied several other languages that I know fairly well (Hawaiian, for example), but I don't speak them.

4. What do you think about

- Esperanto or similar languages, which were invented to make worldwide communication possible?

Esperanto is the most successful invented language ever, measured in terms of speakers, general usage and notoriety. It will never realize its goal of being the default second language of every person on the planet—or even a large minority—but it's fostered a stable community of speakers which is something no other conlang has ever done.

- the languages of the Elves (Quenya and Sindarin) from “The Lord of the Rings”?

Tolkien was the first one to use the historical approach which is now considered essential to naturalistic conlanging. He was never able to work with other language creators which put a ceiling on his growth as a language creator, but what he accomplished on his own is remarkable.

- Klingon from “Star Trek”?

Klingon has all the hallmarks of a first time language, but has enjoyed a lot of popularity, which is great. Its fame has brought a lot of attention to the art of language creation in general.

5. Would you prefer if all people speak the same language? Why? Why not?

It would be easy if everyone spoke English, since that's my best language, sure. English does seem to be the language of the internet, so to some extent the idea has been realized. That said, what we gain in ease we lose in expression. While for basic communication it's easy to just use one language, when it comes to expression—any kind of expression, be it artistic, rhetorical, inspirational—we shouldn't be limited to a single medium—linguistic or otherwise. The multiplicity of linguistic systems is part of what makes our existence is unique. We should try to maintain the systems we have and celebrate those who generate new ones.

6. If you were able to do it: Are there any linguistic features/characteristics of languages you would like to abandon?

Again, it depends what for. If it's for communication, I favor isolating languages (like English) over heavily fusional ones. But that's just my preference. No need to impose that on anyone else.

Questions about Dothraki:

7. Have you already been interested in fantasy books before?

I'd never read fantasy or sci-fi, no. This was new for me.

8. Which were your first steps in inventing Dothraki?

I started with the material in the books to ensure that I could account for it. It was important to not only incorporate that material but to make it look like it fit with what I was creating. All of it had to look like it came from the same system. This was a personal goal of mine, but also a top-level production goal for the entire *Game of Thrones* team. The point was to be as authentic to the books as possible.

9. To what extent have you been geared to the books?

I'm not sure I understand this question, but if I do, I think I answered it above...?

10. Have you been influenced by the description of the Dothraki-folk as brutal, strong and martial?

Such descriptions will influence vocabulary items, but not the language (i.e. the grammar). Linguistic systems evolve apart from human cultures—that is the grammatical systems themselves. There's nothing about a particular arrangement of nouns and the verb in a sentence which will say anything about a people's cultural identity.

11. Is it possible to recognize the characteristics of the Dothraki-folk in their language? If so, to what extent?

You can see it in the lexicon. A people will come up with words to describe the world around them and their way of life. Consequently, the word for "perfect" derives from the word for "stallion"—a way of describing the pinnacle of physical existence. This is purely a matter of explication, though—taking a common human experience or idea and encoding it using material that makes sense to a people. It has no effect on the language system itself.

12. How did you start Dothraki? Which feature was the first one you thought about/invented?

I like using languages with case systems (more like Russian than German, where case is almost more a matter of agreement), so I decided to make Dothraki a case language. This is a concept that's unfamiliar to a lot of English speakers, but I felt it wouldn't be too bad to learn if there weren't too many cases—and, indeed, there are only five, and they're not too tough to learn.

13. Are the sounds/rules/words of Dothraki in analogy to another language you already know or did you invent them all on your own?

Dothraki will have things in common with other case languages and other inflectional languages, but such similarities aren't intentional: they're just a natural consequence of building a language with cases that's inflectional and head-initial. Many such languages will share similarities.

14. How long did it take until the basics of Dothraki have been built?

There was an initial period of two months where I spent about 14 hours a day working on the grammar and the lexicon that brought it to a certain level of stability. Over the next six months I finished it up so that, grammatically, it's now quite stable.

15. Have you already written a longer text in Dothraki? (approx. 1 page)

Well if you include the dialogue I've translated, I've probably done pages and pages. For a single connected text, I don't think so. I do more translation than text generation.

16. Do you sometimes talk Dothraki with other people?

I've used Dothraki a little bit with some of the fans during our meetups on IRC. Some of them have gotten better than me, though. I need to keep up with my fluency.

17. Do you think Dothraki is better than other languages you know? If so, why?

I don't think any language is better than any other language. Conlangs can be compared in their level of completeness and quality of construction, but that's really a different thing from comparing how one feels using the language as a means of expression, which is, to my mind, entirely subjective.

18. What do you think is so special about Dothraki? What do you think is the most distinguishing feature in contrast to other languages?

I'm not sure it has one. What does Russian have that distinguishes it? I've studied Russian, but I honestly couldn't say. It's just an inflectional language. Amongst conlangs, Dothraki is the first naturalistic conlang successfully realized for a production, which I think is significant.

19. Do the actors find it hard to learn/talk Dothraki?

Some do, but some take to it naturally. Amrita Acharia (no longer with the show, as her character died) was incredible.

20. Do you have a favourite word / sentence in Dothraki?

Looking back, I really like the word I came up with for "moon", *jalan*. It sounds just right.

Questions about Valyrian:

21. To what extent have you already invented your Valyrian language?

I think there must be something lost in translation here. I *did* create the High Valyrian language. I did that for the recent season of *Game of Thrones*. So to what extent...uh...to the fullest extent possible...?

22. In what way are High Valyrian and Astapori Valyrian similar to each other?

They're about as similar as Latin and Old Spanish are to each other. The latter is descended from the former, and that's the case with Astapori Valyrian and High Valyrian.

23. Was it more difficult to work with given words/terms than inventing a completely new language?

It's a different challenge. For Dothraki there was a lot to account for; for High Valyrian, almost nothing. That said, I certainly enjoyed using what little there was of High Valyrian to flesh out a system. I had a lot of fun creating the language.

24. Is it hard to invent several languages simultaneously/successively in such a short time?

It's time-consuming, but this is what I'd do for fun anyway, so it doesn't feel like work. In the case of Valyrian, the languages were related, so really it was just the process of creating High Valyrian and then deriving Astapori Valyrian from it.

25. How did you develop the Astapori Valyrian language? In which steps?

I mentioned this above a bit, but essentially I created a fully fleshed out High Valyrian language, and then created a series of steps that derived Astapori Valyrian from it. This included sound changes, grammatical changes and semantic changes. While all the words are quite recognizable if you know High Valyrian, the grammar is totally different.

26. Which one of your invented languages is your favorite? (Dothraki/Valyrian/
Castithan/Irathient) Why?

Probably Irathient. It's the closest to my personal preferences for a language (entirely subjective, again). It's actually quite difficult to use for me, but I love it all the same. Its sound is my favorite as well, though it is somewhat difficult for me (the third most difficult. Dothraki is the easiest for me, then High Valyrian, then Irathient, then Castithan). I love adding to Irathient's vocabulary. If I have nothing else to do with any of my languages, I usually just add to Irathient's vocabulary because it's fun.

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