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Greeting: Nos som Ideologofaction, l'astravocal lengaç costroit e lour y ci hom
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"We are Conlangery, the podcast about built languages and their
creators." (Boral, Jack Keynes)

{Music}

George: Welcome to Conlangery, the podcast about constructed languages and the
people who create them. I'm George Corley. With me over in sunny
California, we have David J. Peterson.

David: Hi. I have a balloon with me.

George: I don't know how to respond to that. But up in Canada –

David: It's letting out air.

George: Okay. Up in Canada, we've got Joey Windsor.

Joey: Greetings from Calgary where kitty litter in the back of a car is for ice not
pets.

George: Ah, okay. So, I'm guessing it keeps the ice down without being as
corrosive as salt would be, right?

Joey: It gives you emergency traction on the road and confuses David
wonderfully.

George: Yes. Yes. Emergency traction.

Joey: It's also a service.

George: Hm?

Joey: It's a service to the neighborhood. After you get your car going, you drive off and, pretty soon, there's a lot of cat poop on the road.

George: That might be unpleasant for some people. All right. We have these two gentlemen on here because a topic came up during Lexember actually, mostly because of Joey's tweets because Joey was doing D&D conlangs. I was just thinking about, you know, there are people who use conlangs in D&D. I'll get a couple of them on. I know that Joey does it and David does it. Both of you are actually DMs and use them in DMing right?

Joey: Most recently, yeah. I also use them as a player once in a while.

George: Yeah. I think we'll talk a little bit about that too. I mean, it's something that can be used on both sides of it, though there's probably the question of if you're doing it as a player, is it something that your DM allows you to construct for him. We'll get into that.

First, I'm just gonna say Conlangery is supported entirely by our patrons over at Patreon. If you would like to help the show get better, give me a little bit of money in my pocket, then you can over to patreon.com/conlangery and pledge a monthly amount. We have some rewards up there.

I have some things in the works. Right now, the main thing that I'm looking at is I'm talking to someone who's a transcriptionist and I'm gonna budget a certain amount for her to start transcribing the show. But if I could get more pledges, I could get through the backlog a lot quicker than I would be doing now.

So, look out for that. Go pledge some money to us because, you know, right now I have to have a day job. I'm very bad at Patreon pitches.

David: I'm convinced.

George: All right. Let's get started. Conlangs and D&D – this is a really nice place to apply conlangs if you've got a group that is into it because you're –

David: I'm gonna be on the “It doesn't matter” fence. It doesn't matter whether they're into it or not. We'll get to that in a moment.

George: Oh, okay. Well, we'll talk about that. But basically a big part of D&D is the world-building. Conlanging is part of world-building. It's a great way to add some verisimilitude into the world. Why would you not want to apply your conlanging to things? I have not been able to find the time to actually play D&D, so I watch way too many videos and livestreams of it.

{00:05:01} Matt Colville says, “Take the things you like and put them in your game.” Well, our listeners, you like conlangs. Put the conlangs in your game. Let's talk a little bit about how that works. Now, let's actually talk about, first, how much buy-in you need from – especially if you're a DM trying to get this to players – how much buy-in do you need from the players? David, we'll start with you since you had that thought.

David: You don't need any buy-in. Basically, the way that I look at it, when it comes to any element of world-building, aside from it being purely a matter of taste – so, for example, let's just say that you came up with some sort of a language for one group and your player has decided, "You know what? I just don't like pre-nasalized stops. Get 'em out of here! I hate this language because of the pre-nasalized stops." That's one thing.

But aside from using a created language at all, you don't need buy-in. If it feels like you should, if your players are not working with it, it means that you haven't implemented it well. So, that falls onto the DM. In other words, it's not about whether your players are okay with it, it's how they're interacting with it and how that interaction has been scaffolded.

The way I like to figure it is, basically, your players should be able to do whatever their characters are able to do effortlessly – effortlessly. However, if it should take their characters effort, then you should make it effortful unless that part of it isn't fun, in which case you can just be shunted off.

Then, what that means is like, when you think about, I guess, from a Macros perspective – especially for those who haven't done D&D but who have conlanged – if you think about incorporating a conlang into the game, probably the first thing you think about is like, "Oh, your character is supposed to speak this language. I'm the DM and I don't understand anything you say unless you say it out loud in this conlang which I provided for you that you must learn." But that's really not the way it should be implemented. Joey, you wanna kind of take it from there?

Joey: Well, I'm gonna take the cue like, George, you already brought out Matt Colville as a DM. When he was starting the Chain of Acheron series, every once in a while, he would say something in Githyanki, I think it

was. And I was like, “Oh, cool! I actually invented that language! Here, please use my grammar.” He ignored all my tweets.

But for Matt Colville, it was just him going, “Aw, I think Gith would sound like this,” and adlibbing something off the fly. And all the players round the table were like, “Oh, yeah! That’s cool. That’s what they would sound like.” But you know –

George: Yeah. He’s not a conlanger – definitely.

Joey: No. I think he does appreciate the effort people put in. But exactly what David said – this is part of the world. If you walk by and you hear something, and if a conlanger is your DM, and if you walk past an alleyway and you hear some strange hissing that sounds like language but you’re not sure what it is, and the players go, “Oh, I roll a perception check. What does it actually sound like?” And you say, “Oh, it says,” I dunno, something like, [kortisarlulapɔl] {00:08:32}

You’re gonna be like, “Cool. I can choose to engage with that, or I’ve just gotten a really cool piece of flavor.” In my experience, there is one linguist at my table quite frequently, but all of the other players are like, “Oh, I need to make a mental note of that, see if I can find someone who can translate it or tell me what the language is or” – even if they’re exploring a shipwreck, I’ll put the name of the ship in some conscript that I’ve come up with. And they inevitably write it down and go and try and find someone to translate it in case it’s meaningful for them. Buy-in is not a problem at all, from that perspective.

George: I think what both of you are getting at is you need to build it into the game in a way that’s fun. Forcing players to speak in a conlang in order to play at all is not very fun because it’s difficult to go from 0 to 100 like

that. But having little snippets of it for flavor and then the option of being able to translate something later or maybe having your character learn it or something, that sounds more like it's something that can be fun for some players if they choose to engage with it, but they don't have to have it rammed down their throats.

{00:10:06}

David: To give you an example, all of the – well, let's just say if you're going with a typical D&D setting like the ones that come out of the box, all of the various races are supposed to speak different languages. Some of them share languages. Some of them have negligibly different languages. They even have little write-ups for these things that are very poor in quality.

But the idea though is that it works just like when you're reading fiction. Even though, when you're reading something like a Game of Thrones that's written in English, the idea is that the characters are all supposed to be speaking a language called the "Common Tongue," which is actually different from English. We're just translating it because it's too much to force your reader to learn an entire language in order to read a book.

The same goes for D&D. In other words, all of your characters will end up speaking a language. It probably will be called the Common Tongue that most of the NPCs around you also speak. So, you don't need a conlang for that. But there might also be other languages that are different from the one that everybody speaks.

So, like in the first group that I played with, I think there was one dwarf, one human, one gnome, one elf, and then one turtle-person. It happened that the elves were gonna be doing things in this game. So, that elf

character could understand when people were saying things in Elvish and could understand when it was written in Elvish. If he decided that he wanted to share everything with the group, then you just kinda bypass the conlang and did everything in English because he just got the information and relayed it, let's say, almost immediately.

However, since he is technically the only person that understands that language, it's his choice. He might decide, "You know what? I feel like I don't wanna translate everything that's being said right now for the group," in which case you can just say it directly to them. I usually do it via text message.

But also, I mean, the group is there and just like – let's say you were with a group of four friends in Spain and you were the only one that spoke Spanish, they could also take a shot at trying to understand what was said if they wanted to. They might not have any cognates in common, but that doesn't mean that they can't try to give it a shot.

Joey: Yeah. There'd be body language and stuff.

David: The same thing works especially with written language. If there's something that could be written in a conlang that nobody understands, I would write it all out and give it to them with the understanding that none of them speak it. But if they wanted to try to puzzle it out, they could if they thought that was fun. If they didn't, they could just hang onto it and see if they could find somebody to translate it.

You know, you give them the chance – the same opportunity that you would have being in a country where you can't read the script and don't understand the language. You might not be able to even sound anything out, but you might recognize, "Wait a minute. I've seen three different

police stations and they all have this sequence of glyphs, so that probably has something to do with police I'm gonna guess." You know what I mean?

Joey: I like using the written conlangs a lot in my game. One of the things – and I think this is a pet peeve of yours, George – is Draconic is a language and every dragon in every cosmology speaks Draconic. Draconic is not one of my languages. It's one of the D&D cannon languages that has a few words and everything. I've used that and I've said, "Oh, you're a good person. You speak this dialect that has to do with the metallic dragons. But this seems a little odd. Maybe this is chromatic dragon," or something, just making two dialects.

And I give them an intelligence check to try and figure it out. I set different difficulty classes. The player actually ended up rolling really well. So, she got that the sentence in Draconic meant, "Go to the mountain cave and fetch my fire sword." But what she didn't realize is that there's three different possessives in Draconic. One is for inanimate objects. One is for friends and relatives. And one is for all other nouns. The "my" in this example happened to be "relative," so it was actually his relative, a red dragon, who happened to be named "Firesword."

{00:15:03} Weren't they surprised when they showed up at the cave and there was a red dragon there!

George: Oh, okay! You guys both bring up, also, other points that I wanna go into. One thing – you guys both mentioned doing skill checks in order to figure out something that you don't know. One of the things that I feel is kind of limiting about D&D that was done probably just understandably to make things simpler but me as language nerd doesn't like totally is there's no

gradation to your understanding of language. It's just either you speak this language, or you don't.

Unless you're a barbarian or have certain backgrounds or something, if you speak it, you can read it. It's this weird place – how do you guys handle it? Is it just different kinds of skill checks like perception, intuition, whatever – or insight, not intuition.

David:

I don't think that's relegated solely to D&D. I think that's a part of many different types of fiction. I think it's what a lot of people understand the world to be. For many people, either you speak a language, or you don't. They're like, "Can you speak this language?" and if you start to answer like, "Well, I'm pretty good with blah blah blah blah blah." It's like, "Okay. So, you don't?" And it's like, "Well, that's not reality."

But that is reality for a lot of people in terms of how they believe language is supposed to work even though it probably isn't true of their own competence of foreign languages. For example, anybody who's taken a year of Spanish and says that they don't speak Spanish, they didn't pay much attention in high school, they're gonna do better understanding something in Spanish than they will something in Mandarin or something in Vietnamese.

It's not something that, I think, activates for a lot of people. It's not something they realize. So, it's no wonder that when you build something up like D&D and you incorporate language into it – and in the language guides it's gonna be like, "Here are your races. These races will speak these languages. If you want to speak extra of them, you can add this as a skill or a feature, and you speak more of these languages. You'll speak all of these languages fluently and all of the other languages you will speak zero of."

- Joey: And automatically be able to read and write too.
- David: Yes. That's the other thing you brought up. Most of these people should probably not be able to read and write even if they speak the language.
- Joey: That was something back in second edition. Back in second edition D&D, you needed to take a skill in reading/writing competence. Then, when third edition came out, they just said, "If you speak the language, you also write it. We're gonna assume everyone's literate except for," as George said, "barbarians who start the game with illiteracy as a feature of their class." But that's been lost, unfortunately, from the core rule books.
- George: I feel like that's a thing – I feel like if I were going to run things, one thing that I would make would be a slightly different language system that would at least have two levels. You would have some languages you are proficient in and some that you are acquainted with, and you have to make a skill check or have certain penalties when you're trying to use them. That is one thing that you would have to have players buy into and understand that this is a thing.
- Joey: I do that.
- George: You do?
- Joey: It says in the core books that, I think, goblins use the Dwarven script. If I have a character that speaks, reads, and writes Dwarven, I'll at least give them a shot at muddling through some of the Goblin and going, "Okay. This word sounds familiar." And you think that might be "north." You don't know what the sentence means, but you're pretty sure you got "north" out of it, or something like that.

David: It also gives you the opportunity to mess with false cognates. You essentially give somebody, I would say, a wisdom check where, if you pass the wisdom check, it makes you reflect and think, “Wait. Just because that word sounds very similar to a word I know, it doesn’t mean it means the same thing.” Whereas, if you fail, it’d be like, “Yep. That’s the word for ‘safety.’ Let’s go! We’re fine.”

George: I think that Shadowrun has four levels for each language. But I think that’s too much granularity. It’s a little bit complicated.

{00:20:01}

David: It is interesting though. I wanna look this up.

George: I did like that fifth edition – I know that third edition, which is the one that I have played before, had it so, like, your intelligence modifier determined how many languages you spoke. They got rid of that, I think, in fifth edition and moved it to background, which makes a whole lot more sense.

Joey: Yes. Yes, it does.

George: Yes. There are very, very smart people who only speak one language.

Joey: I mean, they are assuming a bit of a melting pot. If you’re going to assume that every player or character can automatically read and write every language they speak, then they’re probably noble of some descent and they’ve probably been required to learn multiple languages. But I’m not sure that much thought actually went into it.

George: I think it was just, like, the standard American tendency of thinking that if you speak more than one language that is because you're smarter and you studied them in school, which is not how most people become multilingual in the world.

But, anyway, going on from world building because one of the interesting things about it – and it's true in most role playing systems, but you guys have both run D&D and I'm familiar with D&D, so we can talk about it from there – is there's a lot of the world-building that's kind of done for you and then you have to see about what you're going to do.

So, the most obvious one for that – and the one that if I'm building a D&D world, I would probably want to change – is the whole thing of one language per race. The exotic languages – like Draconic is fine. Maybe I can say that the Draconic that wizards and sorcerers automatically get is ancient Draconic to be like, "This is the magical language of the oldest dragons." That's cool.

But why is it dwarves speak Dwarvish and elves speak Elvish and humans speak Common, which automatically we're like, "Wait a minute. So, humans are in charge of everything?" Joey, you do a lot of conlanging actually for your world. Do you mess with those relationships much?

Joey: Not as much as I want to, and I think that's a matter of time. So, for example, I was talking about the Gith language earlier. I have a Proto-Gith language and two sister – well, two daughters – of Proto-Gith. That reflects the fact that there was a branch in the Githyanki and the Githzerai. I think one of them has voiced stops and the other one has – like, a voice/voiceless distinction – the other one has aspirated/unaspirated distinction. One of them has velars, the other one

has uvulars, and a few other little changes like that – plus some lexical items to do fun things.

I like messing with that dialectally. Or, if I have a player who speaks Elven and they go into the Underdark, I'm like "Well, Drow is definitely not the same as Elven, so you're gonna get a couple of," like David was saying, "false friends with the cognates. You can probably figure out a system of communication, very rudimentary, but it's very much a different language.

Or, if you end up on the other side of the continent, Common isn't so Common because I think of it as "common to the local variety," and if you're not from that local place, you don't speak that common language. That's my stance on it at least.

David: "Dwarvish" means "Common" in Dwarvish.

Joey: Exactly.

David: I would say that the reason that you probably have one race for one language in all of the D&D settings is because they're all rather self-contained. It's not only the case that it's, say, the elves that speak Elvish, it's also the case that the elves are all in one area. It's like 99.9% of elves in the world reside in Elfland, and they speak Elvish, and they talk to each other only pretty much all the time except for the 0.1% that serve as the NPCs that you need to interact with that are miraculously wherever they need to be.

{00:24:58} So, I'm not sure which one is more unrealistic. But in my case, the way I looked at it was, I kind of ignored whatever the races were, and I just said, "Let's just stick with regions." So, it's like, "All right. In this region,

this is the language that's going to be spoken. If most of the people that are there are dwarves, then that's fine.”

The thing is, if you go to some other region and there happen to be dwarves there, if they are long removed from the first region, they might not even speak Dwarvish anymore if they came from there. They're gonna speak whatever the local variety is. In that way, I try to make it stick so that it was languages per region.

Of course, the big elephant in the room that we're not mentioning here is that, in addition to the incredible investment of time required to create a campaign and maintain it and keep it running, there is also the investment of time that comes with creating languages, which is something conlangers are well familiar with.

This is why, when I went to do my DM campaign, I didn't create new languages. For the languages that I needed, I took languages that I already created that I thought worked well enough. Specifically, I also chose languages that I thought I might be using later on so that if I was fleshing them out, I would be killing two birds with one stone, so.

Joey: I mean, guilty as charged. Before I got really, really into conlanging, I have slipped Klingon into a few of my D&D games just to give them some other worldly flavor. Like, “This is very obviously a different language.” But I try not to do that too often.

George: Good for orcs or dwarves or something. I mean, if you were seriously conlanging for – like the stuff that you do, David – for movies and stuff, or for a book project or something, you wouldn't want to do something like that. But for a D&D game where it's all in fun and nobody really cares that much, that makes sense to me that you could use something

that's pre-existing that, maybe it wasn't made for this setting, but it gives you the idea that these people are speaking another language that has meaning to it.

David: I mean, Empire of the Petal Throne is the best way to go about it. In some ways, it's a life-long project, and it also can be, I guess, disillusioning to put a lot of work into something like this and then have the campaign filter out after three or four meetings, which happens.

George: That's the other thing is how much time investment do you want to put into this particular campaign if it ends up not working out well, which, I mean, maybe you can use the same world for another campaign in the future or something like that. But it's up to each person how much time and effort you want to do, in addition to DMing. Because if you're doing the world-building, you're probably going to be the DM.

Joey: George.

George: Hm?

Joey: Just from Lexember this year, you're familiar with my Tekhwosian conlang. I started that, I think, probably two years ago. I've got the character's names who are gonna play in this game. I already know that the linguist character is going to be Dr. Thaddeus Charles Etterington because my player made that character name.

I've been working on Tekhwosian now for two years. I've been working on the game for two years – people haven't even played it! But I don't care because I'm also a conlanger. So, I'm just in the process of creating this language. It lets me world-build. I've never gotten to use it or never got the campaign before, but I'm still having fun just conlanging anyway.

David: Yeah. That's cool. It's just really hard managing adult schedules.

Joey: Yeah.

George: Can we talk a little bit about Tekhwosian? Because what you did for Lexember – reading through the stuff about Tekhwosian – there's all these interesting things that, I think, you were building it into your world and also building it for the game in an interesting way. Because your source for all of the notes on each word that you're giving – like the primary source that it goes back to – is a guy called “Kest the Provider,” who wanted to conquer the Tekhwosians, right? And he had a guy he was working with, Fmonikh, right? What is it?

{00:30:09}

Joey: [fmonix] {00:30:10}

George: [fmonix]. Okay. You sort of made a little bit of mystery and a little bit of a puzzle in that he is not sensitive to all the distinctions in it, and so his material is very unreliable, in addition to just being an outsider, right? Can you talk a little bit about what your reasoning was there and how did you build that out?

Joey: As a Dungeon Master, I'm setting this game kinda Indian Jones style. My characters will have access to firearms, which have been built into recent D&D settings like Waterdeep and things like that. They're going to be university professors and, thanks to the dissertation by Dr. Charles Thaddeus Etterington, he has figured out that Tekhwosian was actually a pitch-accent language and Kest the Provider, a warlord that existed some

3000 years prior and completely devastated the Tekhwosian culture, wasn't sensitive to pitch-accent distinctions in the language.

He just thought there were homophones all over the place – or homonyms all over the place – when it wasn't true. He also wasn't sensitive to the distinction between an obstruent coda and then a glide-onset versus just a rounded obstruent, which is a phoneme in the language which also puts in a few more problems.

The background of the game is, after this professor figures out it's a pitch-accent language, all of these previous archeological expeditions that have gone to the mouth of the river looking for the Tekhwosian culture has failed, and he goes, "Well, this doesn't have to mean 'the mouth of the river.' This is also a compound form that means 'waterfall.' If we go to the other end of the river, there's a waterfall and nobody's investigated that area yet."

The party assembles and they go away with this knowledge. I will make available my Tekhwosian grammar for anyone's who's actually interested. But when they come up with something, I'm gonna say, "You're reminded of an excerpt from Kest's journal where he calls this either this or this. You can translate it one of these two ways."

Then, it's up to the player characters to decide, "Well, we really think this is probably the translation. Let's assume it's correct and act accordingly," which means – at one point, they have to find either the heart of the king or the heart of the mountain, which would be a mine shaft – "king" and "mountain" being one of these minimal pairs.

They can go down this ancient mine shaft, or they can go looking for wherever the king happens to be buried, as an example. The players don't

have to do a lot of conlang interpretation if they don't want to, they're just gonna be constantly presented with "This could mean this, or it could mean this. Take your best guess, and let's see how it plays out."

David: Wow. That's really cool. I like that.

Joey: I hope it pans out. I'm looking forward to playing it one day.

George: I definitely like that approach. I think that shows how rewarding it can be if you do try to do this. But, at the same time, it's a lot of work to put into something that's – so, David, you talked about you just break it out into regions and talk about it in regional ways. And then, Joey, you were talking about the Common here is not the Common there. Which I think is more the way I would want to run it would be –

Joey: It's kinda two ways of saying the same thing.

George: Yeah. It is, really. Because D&D campaigns usually will start in a small, constrained area, right, especially if you're taking seriously that this is a pseudo-medieval setting. People can't really move that far around easily until they start getting magic and stuff. So, I can see that happening and, like, I can zoom in on this one area that's gonna be the starting area and say, "Okay, what is the lingua franca here? What are the minority languages here? What other races live here? Do they have different languages?" And that can make sense. But I would not want to put it as strictly one language per race.

{00:34:59} I'd probably want to have – at least humans would have several different language families. And then maybe because we wanna focus more on humans we can have some of the other races be slightly more monolithic. But still, maybe the elves have two languages, maybe the dwarves and the

gnomes speak the same language – just depending on what the historical relationships between peoples are.

David:

In the case of my world, first it started off smaller than – I was looking at kind of a small area that I was working with and which was gonna expand. It really made sense to focus on region because basically you had a big elf kingdom that was self-contained and not widely spread. And then to the east of that was a Dwarven kingdom where, up north, that was where they started and then they kind of moved down south. So, there's been a separation between the two areas. It's the type of thing where you add a few centuries, they probably won't be speaking the same language. But in this case, it was more recent.

Then, after that, there's a human kingdom. This is all in one landmass where all these people know about each other and are kind of talking to one another a little bit. But then, I needed to introduce a new set of humans that came from a distant place, kind of like an island mass that was far off to the east.

Naturally, they spoke their own language. The thing that precipitated this was not the fact – I mean, what race they were; it didn't matter – it was the fact that they were from an entirely different area that didn't necessarily – I guess their place of origin wasn't the same as the humans that started in this main continent area.

There it was just – I dunno. The locale was just much more important. Naturally, most of the people they encountered in this main city did speak the language there, but they spoke it as a second language, which brought with it everything that that entails. It also allowed me to use that language as a second language for various purposes. In this case, it was tied to one

of the major religions that was in the city – or in this kingdom – at the time.

George: Great. That works.

Joey: I was gonna say, one of the things we also haven't touched on is, when we're talking about races like elves – or in my case, Tieflings and other infernal beings – lifespan is gonna play a major role. For humans, we're gonna change our language every generation or so – so every 25 to 50 years – and, after centuries, sure, you're not speaking the same language.

If you're talking about the Infernal language where these demons have existed for eons, that language doesn't change a lot. It might get new borrowings but, chances are, ancient Infernal is gonna be pretty close to modern Infernal or contemporary Infernal.

George: Or not even going into exotic languages, but elves in D&D I think live, like, 700 years.

Joey: Yeah. 500 to 700.

George: So, in 700 years, great-great-great-grandpa is still alive for the elves, but for humans, that's enough time for one language to be completely mutually unintelligible from its ancestor. So, you end up with weird –

Joey: If an elf speaks the Common Tongue from 500 years ago, all of a sudden, another human shows up and it's this weird, archaic Old English or something.

George: Yeah. Although, there is a question of, how are you gonna mix up all the races together? If you ended up with an elven and human kingdom where

there's – let's say the elves are the nobility mostly, and then you have humans and there's intermarriage so there's lots of half-elves, you've got people of wildly different longevities, what effect is that going to have on language change? Are there gonna be diverging dialects that one is super conservative and one is still innovative or are they gonna balance out somehow?

Joey: I mean, it's a good theoretical question. I would suggest you almost ended up with class or register differences. You get into the sociolinguistics there a little bit.

David: How much longer do elves live than humans, usually?

{00:40:01}

Joey: To the power of 10, typically.

David: Oh, my god.

Joey: I mean, the books say humans can live into their 70s or 80s. But if you're thinking medieval Europe, the average lifespan was like – you were lucky to reach 35 years old as a human, as a non-noble. Elves are 500 to 700.

David: Oh, boy. So, you're definitely gonna have more than one spouse unless you're gonna be living a long, lonely time if there's intermarriage there.

Joey: Well, that was Lord of the Rings, right? Tolkien had to give Aragorn long life from being one of the dunedain rangers just so he could be with Arwen, I think.

George: Yeah. Well, that was – yeah. That’s interesting. Well, Arwen also choose to become mortal too so that she would eventually die. Although, I’m not familiar enough with Tolkien to know the exact mechanics of that. Does she go to the same place that humans go when they die, or is does she fade like other elves do? I’m not sure.

Anyway, that’s Tolkien. We’re talking D&D. They’re tangentially related. But I mean, any role playing system, any role playing setting, of course, you could have an element of language because there are sci-fi settings where you’re going off to different planets. Well, you go to the next planet, it’s almost certainly going to be a different language people speak there.

Joey: So, when D&D comes out with the Spelljammer campaign setting again, they need to hire conlangers.

David: You know, I think we’ve had this conversation privately, but it makes sense to have it on this podcast. It makes zero sense that there isn’t at least one full-time conlanger employed by Wizards of the Coast.

Joey: I mean, my CV is on the website.

David: It’s ridiculous. I mean, beyond that, it’s almost insulting that they have anything about language in there at all and they don’t hire somebody to do it. It’s such a no-brainer because, I mean, first of all, it’s such a cool thing that a lot of people would be really interested in. But it’s also something that not every DM has the aptitude for or the interest in actually building it up.

And second, even if they want to, it takes a lot of time. It would be so nice if there were just some off-the-shelf languages for D&D that DMs

could do the same thing they do with everything else in there – either take it off the shelf because they like it or don't wanna bother. Or if they wanna do something different, they can do something different.

It's absolutely mindboggling, I mean, with how many races and languages everything is claimed to have. I mean, that's an endless number of books that could be published, let alone what you might do if you wanted to get different dialects from the same proto language. Or, I'm sorry, related languages from the same proto language.

There's so much there. You could hire one person, and have it come out slowly over a long period of time or hire a bunch of different people and come out with a bang and publish, like, 10 books at once. Anyway.

George: One project I've thought about, you know, we could get together and make these homebrew and sell {indistinguishable} {00:44:07} books too, but who has the time? One project that I was –

David: Let's just say that – you could, you could. You'd have to have everything in there that was special or unique to D&D be separate so that you didn't step on somebody's IP and get sued.

Joey: The good thing about D&D is they have a Creative Commons license that puts almost everything in their content as public domain. You can use it. They just put a couple restrictions on where you can publish it. Then, there's a few privative things. Like, you're not allowed to do anything with the illithids, because that's actually property of George R. R. Martin that D&D has licensed – or a few things like that. But, by and large, it's fair game.

{00:45:01}

George: Wait a minute. George. R. R. Martin did the illithids?

Joey: He also did the Gith, but they were a very different non-sentient race. I think it was '87 or '88 he published the book with them in it. It might have even been a short story or something.

George: One project I've thought of making, which I have many more creative projects in my head than I have time to do, but going back to – like, even the game mechanics do some world-building for you. In D&D, magic is packeted into individual spells. A lot of those spells have verbal components. You also have, in the class descriptions, certain classes – certain spellcasting classes – get certain languages. It doesn't have to be that way, but it's sort of implied that spells have incantations in secret languages.

I was thinking about someday doing the exotic languages – doing Draconic and Infernal and Celestial – and going through the spell lists of what's in the D&D SRD and just making incantations for each of them. Arcane spells would be in Draconic and divine spells would be in Celestial or Infernal, whichever you wanna choose, and stuff like that. Anyway, that's a thing that somebody could do.

Joey: This is why I took Latin in undergrad because I wanted my characters to be able to speak Latin while they were casting spells. That quickly faded.

One of the things I do is, if a bard casts Silence, wizards all of a sudden are almost done. If they have a verbal component to their spell and they're under a Silence-thing, they're done. If they happen to be underwater – you try speaking underwater. Unless they can cast the spell speaking Aquan, they're screwed. I love that.

David: This brings us back to our main point here, which is that the bard is the best and most overpowered class in all of D&D. There is no possible way that you can beat a bard. There's just none. They're too powerful.

George: Here's a question to you guys – because one of the idle thoughts that comes to me talking about spellcasters and silence – what would you do if you had a character who wanted to be a deaf spellcaster and tried to have you let him do his verbal components with a sign language? It's like he has a disability because he can't do any perception check that requires hearing, right, but an advantage in that he's immune to Silence.

David: Well, I mean, anything that's in D&D, that's just the way it starts, right? I mean, I don't think anybody's ever run a campaign where they do everything strictly by the book. If somebody wants to do that, I mean, it's a simple swap, I think. Whatever is verbal is now done with sign. If their hands are tied, then they can't spellcast. It's the same thing as if they were Silenced or something.

The only place where things would get tricky is how well articulated these signs need to be in order to actually effectively produce the spell. Because, of course, a lot of the times in D&D, characters are holding stuff in their hands. The question is, if the hand shape is super important, then the spell might not come off as well.

But, of course, deaf signers are holding stuff all the time. In that case, they tend to get by. They're holding a cup, they just use one finger and people, for the most part, get the idea. But who knows if, I guess – it's kind of a weird thing to think of, but it's like, if somebody who's fluent in ASL watches somebody else in ASL who's holding something in their hands and signing, they can fill in the blanks.

Whatever entity needs to understand the sign in order for the spell to come off correctly, do they have the same plasticity that human beings have when it comes to understanding human language? I have no idea.

Joey: I would need more time to think on that one, yeah.

{00:50:00}

George: It's just a hypothetical, honestly. I don't know if people have tried to do this. If you've tried to do this, let me know. f

Joey: In the PHB, there are rules. A bard that is deaf and has to perform Fascinate or something has a 20% failure chance if they're deaf, or something like that. I can't remember exactly what it is. But there are actually rules in the Player's Handbook about this – although not specifically for substituting in some sort of gestural ASL sign language in there. I don't think that exists yet, but I love where the idea's going for that one.

George: I think you'd have to have someone who seriously wants to role-play the character this way and not be necessarily trying to do it just to be a munchkin somehow.

Joey: I do presentations at our local version of Comic Con, which is the Calgary Comic & Entertainment Expo, on making conlangs and putting conlangs into games and things like that. Inevitably the one question that always comes up is, "What about the first level spell Comprehend Languages?" You know, spells break everything. But I love it when my players go, "Okay. Our dungeon master is a linguist and a conlanger, inevitably this is gonna come up. I'm gonna prepare this spell." They find something

carved into a rock and they go, “Oh, I don’t recognize this language that is made with claws, but I’m gonna cast Comprehend Languages.”

And I said, “Oh, okay. You touch the surface and you get it means, ‘place where we move discretely.’” Because Comprehend Languages allows you to get the literal meaning of something. The literal meaning of [hruwəpɹɹ] {00:51:58} in my Lizardine language is, “place where we move discretely.”

All of my characters go, “Oh, shit. We’re in a bad place. We need to hide.” But that’s the Lizardine word for “borderland.” Just because they get the literal meaning as it would be translated into their version of Common doesn’t mean they actually understand what’s going on.

I love screwing with players that try to get around my language things with magic.

George: That’s an excellent point. “Rules as written,” as people like to say. You get the literal meaning of it and, sometimes, the literal meaning of it doesn’t tell you anything about what it means. I’ll point out, Comprehend Languages is one thing, at least that’s sort of a resource that people spend. But if you got a warlock, some of the warlocks can take a thing where they just can read any language anyway, all the time.

Joey: Yeah. But it’s the same thing, I think – like, to get the literal meaning.

George: Yeah. There’s a lot of things like that that you end up running into. I think that’s a great way to handle it because you can sort of make it so that someone who actually understands the language and learned it the right way, either as a native language or studying it as a second language – they are involved in the culture enough that they may get some of those

references or that they might just automatically understand in context, “Oh, that means that this is the borderlands.”

Whereas, somebody who magically understands the language will understand the language with no cultural context to it. So, they’ll tell you what these words mean but they’re not sure what all that means in this particular place and time.

Joey: The other caveat I put on that is, if you read the spell description and if it’s written language, you actually have to be touching the surface. It’s like, “Place your hand on the surface somewhere that’s not easy to touch.” And if you want your wizard up there, they have to risk a 100-foot fall or something like that. A wizard’s not gonna survive that if they’re first level, so maybe the juice isn’t worth the squeeze.

David: Or maybe the surface is a trap too.

Joey: Yep. I do that. All of a sudden there’s an exploding rune in there. I dunno. David, what’s your thoughts on magic getting around these language devices?

David: The funny thing is, that has never come up.

{00:55:00} I mean, they’ve had that ability and they’ve had times where it might’ve benefitted them to use it. Never once have they thought of it. Never once.

Joey: They’re gonna listen to this episode of Conlangery and now it’s gonna start happening to you.

David: It’s funny because – this has nothing to do with conlanging – but my experience as a DM is like I prepare for all of these possible eventualities

of them doing this, this, this, this, this... And they spend two and a half hours arguing with an NPC over which one of these pastries is the best.

Joey: Yeah. Players go left when the options were “up,” “down,” or “right.” I’ve actually run a game and the players, I don’t know why, but they said, “Hey, guys, let’s head north.” And I was like, “What? No. I gave you a map with an X on it, guys. No!” And they actually did the game completely backwards. It was a complete fluke that they ended up needing this really, really high challenge rating right off the bat, which gave them just enough power to literally do the game backwards.

So, when they got to the very final thing, combat lasted, I dunno, three rounds, four rounds. And they’re like, “That was so easy. Why was that so easy, Joey?” “You guys literally did the entire game backwards. Those were the Challenge Rating 2s, and when you were Level 2, you took up the thing that was Level 7.” They do it. Players do it.

George: Well, I mean, that’s why when they go for a left turn, you just, subtly behind the scenes, move your plot hooks around. Although, it’s harder when you’ve put a giant X on your map.

Joey: Yeah. Except they forgot about having the map, when it was a physical prop that was actually in front of them with X on it.

David: That happens.

George: That would be a thing even with, you know, you’re doing conlanging/world-building stuff. What happens if you do all the world-building for a particular area that you expect your players are going to go to, and then suddenly, they go in some direction where you don’t know

anything about it, you haven't figured out what is even there? What do you guys do in that situation?

David: Oh, brother. I mean, that basically happened because I had set things up so that my players would go south. I don't know if you remember when I explained that there was this big Dwarven kingdom in the north, and then there was kind of a separate one in the south.

I had set things up for them to go to that Dwarven kingdom in the south. Both my wife and I worked on this, by the way. She does a lot of my planning. She set up the whole city and everything. I created banners for 24 different Dwarven guilds. I had a whole set of things going there.

And then, just through the natural course of events, they learned somewhat the lay of the land and where they could go. And they learned that there was this big city to the east, which was where I planned that they would go after the Dwarven kingdom. And they were like, "Let's go there!" I'm like, "Oh. Okay. This is happening."

So, it's like, "Okay. Just throw them" – as they head there, and I can't dissuade them, I just throw them enough random encounters to get to the end of the night. Then, I can stop everything I'm doing and go plan all of this stuff which wasn't ready yet. My god.

George: You got to build a city in a week! Or how often do you game?

David: Oh, well, we're all adults so every 7 to 8 weeks.

Joey: Oh, my god. I'm so lucky.

George: You got a month or two to make a city.

Joey: I mean, I play twice a week.

David: Wow. Oh, nice.

Joey: I am in enough games with enough different groups – so there’s one core group of us that play almost every Saturday. We’ll play all day every Saturday. So, if we get to a point like that, we just go, “Okay. Cool. That’s all I have planned. Can you start running your game for the next three hours because I’m out?”

David: Well, that’s cool. That’s actually a really neat idea. Wow.

Joey: We have a lot of simultaneous games going. My girlfriend picked up one of the Prefab adventures, and she was running that, basically to give me a break from DMing.

{01:00:03} One of the other guys is running a game when he’s not too busy with school and finishing up his education degree. Then, I would like to think I’m pretty good at just going on the fly, whether it’s random encounters or –

Here’s one thing, if you describe something in enough detail, your players will spend 2 hours puzzling over what it does before they even touch it. If you describe an intricate glyph and picture system on a doorknob, they won’t even look for traps, they will sit there trying to solve a puzzle when it’s an unlocked door. If you need to kill time, just describe something in intricate detail.

David: That’s good. Oh, man.

Joey: I mean, I have needed to pause the game for 45 minutes because I had to run out and pick something up, completely unrelated to D&D. I literally made this box, and when they got to the temple I said, “There’s a Warhammer stuck into the side of the mountain and this box is hanging off of it.” I had three switches on it. One side was labelled in Klingon. One side was labelled in Lizardine. One side was labelled in Gith. And one side was labelled in probably Dothraki actually.

I said, “You have everything you need to get into this box,” and I left. It was a physical prop. I made it out of paper and whatnot. I came back 45 minutes later, and they said, “Well, we tried this, and the box didn’t open or anything.” I’m like, “You have everything you need to get into it.” Finally, one of them looked at me and they said, “The Warhammer, right?” I’m like, “Yeah. Just break the fucking thing open.” It wasn’t an actual puzzle, but it spelled them while I had to leave.

David: Nicely done.

George: That’s great, though, that you can put a challenge there that they’ll just talk about on their own for a long time and give you some breathing room. That’s something you can do with conlangs though, right? You can give them the text that’s on the door, and maybe it’s just totally just flavor. Probably you wanna make it somewhat relevant so that it’s somewhat useful information but just not necessary for them to advance. And then people puzzle over it and try to figure out what’s going on.

Joey: My Lizardine language, I designed it around a coded orthography. I actually made – it’s about an 18” wooden shield with four rotating platforms on it so you can reorganize the orthography to code things. There’s probably about 40 sets of words that if you have the wrong

setting on the code wheel, what should be “push” comes out as “pull” or “jump” will come out as “descend” or something like that.

My players absolutely love that, probably because it had a physical prop. Two of them were trying to puzzle out this wheel, and another two of them were sitting with a copy of the grammar that they found on someone’s backpack or something like that. But, “Oh, if this means this and this is what I see in the wall, this must mean we need to go right to avoid the traps,” and if they had the settings wrong on the code wheel, they’d go the wrong way and get trapped.

My players seem to love that because they didn’t have to be linguists to figure it out, but there was, “This is how you decipher. This is where you look to see what you have found it to mean.” They loved it.

David: That’s true. Also, I mean, just the way that people try to encode things in the real world – I mean, certainly people that share a language will try to hide something from another one. You could always just bust out a cipher just because that’s what the character wanted to do. Then, you could bring in writing systems for that as well and just say, “You see this writing system here.” It’s like, “Do any of us know this language?” “No. No, you don’t.” Because it turns out it’s not a language at all. It’s just a cipher. It’s just a series of symbols.

Joey: Comprehend Languages just doesn’t work on that.

David: Yeah. And they’re like, “Why? It must be some magic spell.” And then they’re like, “Somebody’s enchanted this with something.” It’s like, “Yeah. Maybe that’s the reason.”

- George: Or it's using the script that somebody knows but it's just a cipher of Common or whatever. It's not actually that language. So, they look at it and they're like, "I have no idea what this means. It's just gibberish." Then, people have to figure it out.
- David: Especially if you have a campaign like Joey's, they're so used to having language around them.
- {01:05:05} That would be an amazing misdirect. Oh, wow.
- Joey: I mean, I'm really lucky my players around my table indulge my linguist ways and they accept it as this is something that would happen in a real world, and it's one of Joey's interests, so he's obviously gonna incorporate it at some point. Hopefully, he's not gonna be a complete dick about it and make it impossible. But my players indulge my linguistic tendencies.
- George: Well, I think it's about time that we wrapped up the show. Do you guys have any final thoughts, just any takeaways that people should have from here – from this episode – about if you're gonna use your conlangs, not just in D&D but in role playing in general, what is your advice to people?
- Joey: You can only do better than what's already there for you. If you use it at all, if you embellish it at all, if you even just do fun voices with your characters and assume maybe different regional varieties or racial varieties – however you wanna go – have different accents, you're already improving the role play experience for everyone at the table from what's just on the page in the rule books.
- David: I'll also throw this in. Even if you didn't wanna go so far as making languages or using your own languages, even building in a naming

language for the various races of your game will, I think, add a nice level to it. First, when players hear a name, they'll be able to recognize it and start to say, "Oh, that's probably that name."

But you can also even have fun with it and just remember that, all right, these people aren't supposed to speak this language. What would happen in the real world? So, like – what was that name? Okay. Well, the only name I can think of right now in Arabic – you could probably get by pretty easily – but the last name I was thinking about was [qadri] (Qadri) {01:07:28}. I'm sorry. That should be a trill, shouldn't it? [qadri]

It's got a Q in the beginning. So, as a DM, you can just say, "What's your name?" "My name is [qadri]." Then, they try to repeat it, and they try to repeat it as best they can because they don't speak the language, right, so they're still just giving it their best shot.

I did that with – my dwarves had this language. In fact, they spoke the language that the orcs did in Bright. But there was a character. They were engaging with this character who's going through – she was the leader of the caravan. So, they say, "What's your name?" The character says, [χoudza] {01:08:11} They said, "What?" "[χoudza]." And they're like, "Could you slow down?" "[χoudza]." So, they're sitting there trying to repeat it because, later on, they needed to tell somebody else who it was. They had to try to repeat it.

The thing was, that was a real situation, right, because they didn't speak that language so, no, you don't get to write it down, you just gotta do your best to sound it out and hope you can get somebody else to understand it. You can always have fun like that even with just a naming language.

Joey:

I like that.

George: That's a great suggestion actually. I know I said we should be wrapping up, but I wanna talk about that because one of the biggest things that DMs wanna have is a list of names for NPCs just to – you can whip up a naming language pretty easily and generate some names and have that as your list.

Now, they're all within the culture and all consistent in terms of phonology and everything, and you're like – and that's added a lot more to your world than the default list of names in the book, which are all over the place and weird.

David: And you'll run out. This way, you can just generate more.

Joey: And if you don't feel like doing it, you can go to the LCS's jobs board – plug, plug.

{01:10:00}

George: Tell Wizards of the Coast to do that.

Joey: I think David and I have both tweeted them telling them that a few times now.

David: You know what we should do though for all the new dot-commers – I'm sorry. Not "dot-commers" anymore. That was the 90s. For all the tech people in San Jose and San Francisco who are now running D&D games on their own because it's hip, "Hey! It'll only cost you a few thousand dollars to hire a conlanger to create some languages for your campaign. Why not?"

Joey: I mean, it's a lot cheaper than that for just naming languages, but.

David: Oh, come on. We're talking San Francisco/San Jose here. This is tip money for them, all right?

Joey: Perfect! I could use some tip money.

George: Well, that's a great idea. Seriously, the audience for this show is not those rich tech people, but the audience for the show – yeah, you could definitely make up some naming languages at least for a list of names and then you can make those naming languages related in interesting ways still without having to build out full conlangs and such.

Even that will get you good world-building. If you wanna go further and invest the time and build full-conlangs for your D&D worlds, that's great. You basically are doing the same conlanging that you would do for anything else just it's for a game instead of for a novel.

We wanna encourage people to try this out. Do it to the level that you are willing to invest in your games and such. Yeah. I think that's a great takeaway. Before we overstay our welcome too much – David, thanks for being on.

David: Mm-hmm!

George: Joey, thank you for sharing your experience.

Joey: [xitanθsə] {01:12:16} Which is TIEFLING for “Hell yeah!”

George: Oh, yes. That was the other one you had is Tiedling with lots of insults and profane words. Anyway, the rest of ya'll, thanks for listening and happy conlanging!

{Music}

George: Thank you for listening to Conlangery. You can find our archives and show notes at conlangery.com. Conlangery is supported by our patrons over at Patreon. A special thank you to Ezekiel Fordsmender, Graham Hill, and Margaret Ransdell-Green, as well as all of our other patrons for their support.

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