

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #139
Invented Languages
9th Mar, 2021

[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge and, [hot off the heels](#)¹ of our last mini-series on Disney, I come to you with the excellent news that this is the first episode of another 3-part mini series, this time on language invention, creation, and discovery.

¹ after having just finished

Invented Languages

[00:00:38] Now, because talking about basic grammar and vocabulary is a little bit boring, and we are here to listen to weird and wonderful, slightly [unorthodox](#)², stories, this mini-series is going to be a little bit different.

[00:00:54] In the first episode, in this episode, we'll talk about Invented Languages, languages that are completely made up.

[00:01:03] In the second episode, we'll talk about Cockney Rhyming Slang, the strange [dialect](#)³, some might say actual language, spoken in a small part of London's East End.

[00:01:14] And in the final episode you will learn all about The Rosetta Stone, the stone that allowed us to finally understand the writings of the ancient Egyptians.

[00:01:26] This series has been a particularly fun one to make, so I hope you'll enjoy it.

[00:01:32] OK then, let's not waste any time and dive into the mysterious world of invented languages.

[00:01:41] Now, if you are thinking that every language is invented by humans, you are of course right.

² different from what is normally expected

³ a form of a language which is spoken only in one area by a certain group of people

Invented Languages

[00:01:47] Every language we speak was developed, normally over an **extended**⁴ period of time by an **extended** group of people.

[00:01:55] If you listened to the episode on the history of the English language, you'll remember all of the different inputs and influences that went into creating the English that you are learning now, and how the language is still developing.

[00:02:10] But the subject of today's episode isn't how languages are developed in general, but what's often called "**Constructed**⁵ language", language that was invented by one person, or a small group of people, with a specific purpose.

[00:02:28] In this episode we'll dive deep into the stories of three of these languages, three of these inventors of languages, and through this we'll better understand what, why, and for whom languages are invented.

[00:02:44] Our first example is of probably the most **prolific**⁶ inventor of languages, and I'm going to start by playing a couple of clips of languages that he invented.

[00:02:55] Ok, here's the first one.

[00:02:57] [Person speaking Elvish language]

⁴ longer or bigger than usual

⁵ something that has been made by someone and not naturally

⁶ someone who has produced a large amount of something

Invented Languages

[00:03:07] So that's our first language that he invented, and here comes the second.

[00:03:26] Now, can you guess who this is?

[00:03:30] Perhaps the [dramatic](#)⁷ music in the background gives it away.

[00:03:34] These were clips from the languages invented by J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of books such as Lord of The Rings and The Hobbit.

[00:03:44] If you have read the books or seen the films, you'll remember that most of the [dialogue](#)⁸ is in English, but different types of characters also speak different languages, languages that you can't understand and that sound very strange to you.

[00:04:00] That's because these are completely invented languages, languages created entirely by Tolkien.

[00:04:08] Now, if you have read any of Tolkien's books or watched any of the film [adaptations](#)⁹, you might think that these unknown words that some of the characters were saying were just random, strange sounding words that were [inserted](#)¹⁰ for dramatic effect, to make the characters sound more [exotic](#)¹¹.

⁷ exciting and impressive

⁸ conversation in a book, film etc.

⁹ films based on a book

¹⁰ put into

¹¹ strange and exciting because of coming from far away

Invented Languages

[00:04:27] But you would be [mistaken](#)¹².

[00:04:30] These aren't just random sounds, they are actual languages, languages with their own vocabulary and grammar rules.

[00:04:38] In Tolkien's [lifetime](#)¹³, he created anywhere between 2 and 20 languages.

[00:04:44] Now, the reason I've said between 2 and 20 is that this depends on your definition of language.

[00:04:52] If, by language, one means a [collection](#)¹⁴ of words and grammar that can be used to [convey](#)¹⁵ some meaning, then you could certainly argue that Tolkien created 20 languages.

[00:05:05] But if you define a language as something that you could use to communicate any idea, to translate any text, then you'd probably say he created no languages.

¹² wrong

¹³ the duration of a person's life

¹⁴ group, sum

¹⁵ carry, express

Invented Languages

[00:05:16] If we define language as a [collection](#) of words and grammar that can be used for practical communication, it's fair to say that Tolkien created two [fully-formed](#)¹⁶ languages, two languages that can be used for practical purposes.

[00:05:32] These are Quenya and Sindarin, which are both Elvish languages, languages spoken by the [elves](#)¹⁷ in his books.

[00:05:40] Now, when I say that you can use these languages for practical purposes, I mean practical purposes for the characters that use them.

[00:05:49] You couldn't translate this episode, or a newspaper, but the languages Tolkien created existed in a different world. Evidently there was no need for Tolkien to create a word for podcast or Internet in his Elvish languages.

[00:06:06] From a young age, Tolkien was completely fascinated with language, playing around with other invented languages, and creating his own while he was still a teenager.

[00:06:17] His first job after leaving the army at the end of the First World War was for the English Dictionary, afterwards becoming a professor in Anglo-Saxon and then English language and literature at the University of Oxford.

¹⁶ complete

¹⁷ fantastic, mythical creatures, often with pointed ears

Invented Languages

[00:06:33] Tolkien himself was a very [capable¹⁸](#) [linguist¹⁹](#), he spoke and understood many languages, including Latin, Greek, Finnish, Welsh and Ancient Norse.

[00:06:44] The languages that he spoke and understood had a large impact on the languages that he created - you can see elements of Welsh and Finnish in the languages spoken by the [elves](#).

[00:06:58] For Tolkien, evidently the task of creating a language was deeply satisfying in itself, but he also believed strongly in the [mythical²⁰](#) power of languages, and the power of language to [convey](#) meaning.

[00:07:16] Of course, Tolkien could have made everyone in Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit speak the same language, but then a huge amount of the story would have been missed.

[00:07:28] Much like if we all spoke the same language, if we were all brought up speaking the same language, parts of our traditions, our [storytelling²¹](#), our [cultural heritage²²](#), and of course the [misunderstandings²³](#) that exist between different

¹⁸ able to do things well

¹⁹ someone who has studied the science of languages

²⁰ something which exists only in stories

²¹ the activity of telling or writing stories

²² ideas carried by previous generations

²³ things that are not understood correctly

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countries precisely because we speak different languages, they would be gone, or at least greatly reduced.

[00:07:49] So, of course all of his different characters needed to have their own language.

[00:07:55] For the Tolkien fans out there, this is no doubt [old news](#)²⁴, you knew this already.

[00:08:01] If you are a [die-hard](#)²⁵ Tolkien fan you might even have tried learning one of these Elvish languages yourself - there are hundreds, thousands even, of fan websites out there in Elvish, meetups for Tolkien fans to speak Elvish languages to each other, and opportunities to use these languages that Tolkien created.

[00:08:23] Indeed, although the Lord of The Rings and The Hobbit are fantastic stories [in their own right](#)²⁶, there are people that have suggested that the entire stories were almost an excuse for Tolkien to create this world full of his own [linguistic](#)²⁷ creations, that the different languages almost came first, then the [narrative](#)²⁸ was added afterwards.

²⁴ something that someone already knew

²⁵ huge (fan of)

²⁶ successful without having to depend on something else

²⁷ related to the study of language

²⁸ story

Invented Languages

[00:08:46] So, that is J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of Lord of The Rings and the creator of some of the most famous [mythical](#) languages of the modern [era](#)²⁹.

[00:08:57] Our second invented language is one that was created for very different reasons, and indeed, it was a language that Tolkien ended up being very [disapproving](#)³⁰ of, calling it “far deader than [ancient](#)³¹ unused languages, because its author never invented any legends”.

[00:09:16] Just as Tolkien’s languages existed to show the diversity of different groups of people, this language was created to try to bring people together.

[00:09:26] Can you guess what it is?

[00:09:28] I’ll play a little clip of it now.

[00:09:29] [Woman speaking Esperanto]

[00:09:30] OK, it is Esperanto, the [auxiliary language](#)³² created by L.L. Zamhenof in 1887.

²⁹ period of time

³⁰ someone who has expressed a bad opinion about something

³¹ very old

³²a language made for communication between people from different nations who do not share a common first language

Invented Languages

[00:09:54] Now, a quick administrative point is that there is an entire episode dedicated to Esperanto, it's Episode 69, so if you want a full [dose](#)³³ of Esperanto, that's one to listen to if you haven't done so already.

[00:10:10] As I [hinted](#)³⁴ at, Esperanto was invented for very different reasons to Tolkien's languages.

[00:10:16] While Tolkien's were there for [mythical](#), [storytelling](#) purposes, to give a voice and a language to an invented people, Esperanto was created to make communication easier between people who didn't speak the same language.

[00:10:31] The entire philosophy of Esperanto was that language [barriers](#)³⁵ divided people.

[00:10:37] Zamenhof was born in a town called Białystok, which was part of Russia, but is now part of Poland, near the border with Belarus.

[00:10:47] Białystok was a [melting pot](#)³⁶ of different languages, cultures, and [ethnicities](#)³⁷, and Zamenhof believed that if everyone could speak the same language,

³³ amount

³⁴ mentioned, but not directly

³⁵ things that stop people from going somewhere or understanding something

³⁶ a place where different things are mixed together

³⁷ different races of people

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then it would be easier to communicate, there would be less fighting, and everyone would be happier.

[00:11:05] He set out to create a very easy language to pick up, to learn, so easy that an [illiterate](#)³⁸ [peasant](#)³⁹ working in the fields could learn it with just 10 minutes a day.

[00:11:17] Esperanto is based on Romance, Germanic, and Slavic languages. The idea was that if you spoke a language from any of these language families, it should come pretty naturally.

[00:11:31] He also removed pretty much all of the annoying, difficult [aspects](#)⁴⁰ from other languages.

[00:11:38] There are no [phrasal verbs](#)⁴¹ or irregular endings.

[00:11:42] There are no [subjunctives](#)⁴², or [genders](#)⁴³ of objects.

³⁸ someone who can't read or write

³⁹ a poor, simple farmer

⁴⁰ parts

⁴¹ a verb made of more than one word

⁴² a kind of advanced grammar form

⁴³ either of the two grammatical sexes (masculine and feminine)

Invented Languages

[00:11:46] And it works on the basis of ‘root’ words, which then have [prefixes⁴⁴](#) and [suffixes⁴⁵](#) added to them to change their meanings.

[00:11:56] So, to give you an example if you add ‘mal’, ‘m a l’, to the start of a word, this changes the definition to be the opposite of what the word without ‘mal’ means.

[00:12:08] So juna ‘j u n a’ is young, but maljuna, with ‘mal’ at the front, the opposite of young is....old.

[00:12:19] And blanka is white, malblanka, the opposite of ‘white’ is, well you might have guessed it, it’s black.

[00:12:28] The result of this is that you only need around 500 root words to get by, to manage, so you can learn 500 words, and if you know the rules about [suffixes](#) and [prefixes](#), ta-da, you can speak Esperanto.

[00:12:46] It is a logical language, things make sense, it’s easy, it’s [functional⁴⁶](#), and this was exactly why Tolkien, although he was [initially⁴⁷](#) supportive of it, it was exactly why he ended up criticising it.

⁴⁴ letters or group of letters added to the beginning of a word to make a new word

⁴⁵ letters or group of letters added to the end of a word to make a new word

⁴⁶ something that works

⁴⁷ at the beginning

Invented Languages

[00:13:00] It didn't have magic, it had no story behind it, it existed just to [facilitate](#)⁴⁸ communication.

[00:13:06] And for Tolkien, that was removing a large part of the beauty of language.

[00:13:13] But, that is just Tolkien's opinion.

[00:13:15] For the hundreds of thousands, or perhaps even millions of people who do speak Esperanto, it is an absolutely fantastic invention.

[00:13:25] It lowers the [barriers](#) to language learning, and lowers the [barrier](#)⁴⁹ to communicating with people who can't speak your language.

[00:13:33] And if that's not the point of language, then what is, an Esperanto [purist](#)⁵⁰ might say.

[00:13:40] Now, our third invented language is in a very different category.

[00:13:45] Tolkien invented languages to give a voice to his [fictional](#)⁵¹ characters, to create [myths](#)⁵² and stories.

⁴⁸ make something easier

⁴⁹ something that stops people from going somewhere or understanding something

⁵⁰ someone who believes that something should be done in the traditional way

⁵¹ not real

⁵² stories that many people believe, but which are not true

Invented Languages

[00:13:52] Zamenhof created Esperanto to [facilitate](#) communication, to make it easier for people who didn't understand each other to understand each other.

[00:14:02] Our third example of an invented language is something called Láadan.

[00:14:07] Unless you are a big fan of invented languages I imagine you might not have heard it before, but here's a little clip of it being spoken.

[00:14:16] **Person speaking Laadan:** [00:14:16] Person speaking Láadan.

[00:14:50] **Alastair Budge:** [00:14:50] Láadan is a language created by a lady called Suzette Haden Elgin in the 1982 science fiction book Native Tongue.

[00:15:00] The reason I think this language, or at least the idea of this language is so interesting is that it was created to test something called the Sapir-Whorf [hypothesis](#)⁵³, which is the idea that the structure of the language you speak changes your [worldview](#)⁵⁴, and your behaviour.

[00:15:21] English, as a language, is quite a [male-dominated](#)⁵⁵ language.

⁵³ an idea or explanation for something that has not yet been proved

⁵⁴ the way someone sees the world and things in general

⁵⁵ where the male gender is more common or strong

Invented Languages

[00:15:26] We often use male words to describe things that apply to both men and women - [mankind](#)⁵⁶, for example, instead of womankind.

[00:15:36] And even in that example, of man and woman, the root of the word is man, it's the male part.

[00:15:45] The philosophical idea that Elgin wanted to experiment with, with her creation of Láadan is of a language that put women at its centre, and made it easier for women to use and express themselves.

[00:16:00] To do this, Láadan is [constructed](#) completely differently to English.

[00:16:05] At the start of a sentence in Láadan you need to use a word that introduces what you are going to be saying in the sentence, and at the end of the sentence you need to add another word that explains how sure you are about what you have just said, whether it's something you know to be true, or whether you have just heard someone else say it.

[00:16:27] Elgin believed that male-dominated language means women often have to repeat and [clarify](#)⁵⁷ themselves, whereas in her invented language of Láadan women wouldn't need to do this because the meaning is right there in the sentence.

⁵⁶ the human race

⁵⁷ make something clear, understood

Invented Languages

[00:16:44] Láadan now does have some [die-hard](#) fans, some people who are absolutely passionate about what it is and what it represents, but Elgin's idea wasn't for this to become some [widespread](#)⁵⁸ language that took over from English or Spanish or Mandarin.

[00:17:02] Instead, she created it as an example to get us thinking about how what we say affects how we think.

[00:17:11] If a language is dominated by male words, male roots of words, and men find it an easier language to use than women, how does this affect the behaviour of men and women who use that language?

[00:17:26] The answer to this question might be 'it doesn't affect it at all', but Elgin's idea was to at least get us thinking about it.

[00:17:34] And as far as that is [concerned](#)⁵⁹, she definitely succeeded.

[00:17:39] Now, we actually have a fourth, bonus invented language to talk about today, and it's a bonus one because it's not completely invented, or at least it isn't invented [from scratch](#)⁶⁰.

[00:17:52] I'll play a clip of it now, and I'm sure you will recognise it.

⁵⁸ found over a large area or number of people

⁵⁹ related, something that we are talking about

⁶⁰ from the beginning, without using something that existed before

Invented Languages

[00:17:55] **People speaking Special English:** [00:17:55] Where are you from? I am from a big city speak and say your city.

[00:18:05] **Alastair Budge:** [00:18:05] Now, it's English, right?

[00:18:07] Well, yes and no.

[00:18:09] It's actually something called Learning English, but was first called Special English.

[00:18:16] It was created in 1959 by the Voice of America broadcasting service, and **intended**⁶¹ to be a very basic, simple form of English that helped people learn the language.

[00:18:29] As you can hear, it is spoken slowly, very clearly, and the vocabulary is basic.

[00:18:38] While this isn't an **entirely**⁶² invented language, it is something called a **controlled language**⁶³.

[00:18:45] It's based on something called Basic English, which was developed after World War II by a **linguist** and philosopher called Charles Kay Ogden.

⁶¹ planned, meant

⁶² completely

⁶³ an easier, simpler version of language

Invented Languages

[00:18:55] Similar to Zamenhof and Esperanto, Ogden believed that world peace and [prosperity](#)⁶⁴ would come from everyone speaking one language and being able to communicate more easily.

[00:19:08] But he took a more colonial [approach](#)⁶⁵, and believed that language should be English, either in its basic or in its complete form.

[00:19:18] He said, and I'm quoting directly here “What the world needs most is about 1,000 more dead languages—and one more alive.”

[00:19:28] So, although this is by no means [accusing](#)⁶⁶ the Voice of America of wanting to kill off every language other than English, the origin of its Learning English, or Special English is Ogden, and his Basic English.

[00:19:43] These four are of course only a tiny selection of the [man-made](#)⁶⁷, invented languages.

[00:19:49] We haven't talked about Valyrian or Dothraki, the two invented languages in Game of Thrones, or Newspeak, the language created by Orwell in 1984.

⁶⁴ the condition of being successful

⁶⁵ way of seeing things

⁶⁶ saying that someone has made something wrong

⁶⁷ made by people and not naturally

Invented Languages

[00:20:01] All of these languages are created for slightly different reasons, they serve different purposes.

[00:20:07] Some are [mythical](#), others are [functional](#).

[00:20:11] Some use different sentence structures, others [restrict](#)⁶⁸ what you can say.

[00:20:16] What they do all teach us, though, is that language is imperfect.

[00:20:21] We might try to simplify it to make it easy for everyone to understand, but then it loses some flexibility, we don't have the words to say exactly what we want and we end up saying things that we do not mean.

[00:20:37] We might try to make it more complicated, but if it's too complicated, if it's too hard to learn and to use, people cannot say what they mean.

[00:20:48] And often you find words in languages that don't quite translate to your own.

[00:20:54] I imagine you will have experienced this with English, or with another foreign language that you have been learning.

[00:21:01] You find a word or expression, you might find a definition, or a translation, but the true meaning won't be exactly right.

⁶⁸ put a limit on, control

Invented Languages

[00:21:10] I have an [ongoing](#)⁶⁹ game with my wife, whose mother tongue is Italian, where I always take a little [pleasure](#)⁷⁰ if there's a word in English that you can't completely translate into Italian, and she will take the same [pleasure](#) if she can find one in Italian that doesn't quite translate into English.

[00:21:29] One might think that languages are complete, that their development over thousands of years has meant that we are able to say whatever we want to say.

[00:21:38] But of course the experience of anyone who speaks more than one language, and certainly anyone who has gone to the trouble of inventing their own languages, knows that this is far from the truth.

[00:21:53] OK then, that is it for today's episode on invented languages, the first part of this three-part mini series on [unorthodox](#) language stories, language invention, creation and discovery.

[00:22:08] I hope it's been an interesting one, that you've learnt something new, and that it's made you think slightly differently about how language is [constructed](#).

[00:22:17] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

[00:22:21] What words or expressions do you have in your language that have no direct translation to English?

⁶⁹ something that happens continuously

⁷⁰ enjoyment, happiness

Invented Languages

[00:22:27] And similarly, are there expressions in English that don't directly translate into your mother tongue?

[00:22:33] I would love to know.

[00:22:35] You can head right in to our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:22:44] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:22:49] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Hot off the heels	after having just finished
Unorthodox	different from what is normally expected
Dialect	a form of a language which is spoken only in one area by a certain group of people
Extended	longer or bigger than usual
Constructed	something that has been made by someone and not naturally
Prolific	someone who has produced a large amount of something
Dramatic	exciting and impressive
Dialogue	conversation in a book, film etc.
Adaptations	films based on a book
Inserted	put into
Exotic	strange and exciting because of coming from far away
Mistaken	wrong

Invented Languages

Lifetime	the duration of a person's life
Collection	group, sum
Convey	carry, express
Fully-formed	complete
Elves	fantastic, mythical creatures, often with pointed ears
Capable	able to do things well
Linguist	someone who has studied the science of languages
Mythical	something which exists only in stories
Storytelling	the activity of telling or writing stories
Cultural heritage	ideas carried by previous generations
Misunderstandings	things that are not understood correctly
Old news	something that someone already knew
Die-hard	a very strong supporter of a person
In their own right	successful without having to depend on something else
Linguistic	related to the study of language

Invented Languages

Narrative	story
Era	period of time
Disapproving	someone who has expressed a bad opinion about something
Ancient	very old
Auxiliary language	a language made for communication between people from different nations who do not share a common first language
Dose	amount
Hinted	mentioned, but not directly
Barriers	things that stop people from going somewhere or understanding something
Melting pot	a place where different things are mixed together
Ethnicities	different races of people
Illiterate	someone who can't read or write
Peasant	a poor, simple farmer
Aspects	parts
Phrasal verbs	a verb made of more than one word

Invented Languages

Subjunctives	a kind of advanced grammar form
Genders	either of the two grammatical sexes (masculine and feminine)
Prefixes	letters or group of letters added to the beginning of a word to make a new word
Suffixes	letters or group of letters added to the end of a word to make a new word
Functional	something that works
Initially	at the beginning
Facilitate	make something easier
Barrier	something that stops people from going somewhere or understanding something
Purist	someone who believes that something should be done in the traditional way
Fictional	not real
Myths	stories that many people believe, but which are not true
Hypothesis	an idea or explanation for something that has not yet been proved
Worldview	the way someone sees the world and things in general

Invented Languages

Male-dominated	where the male gender is more common or strong
Mankind	the human race
Clarify	make something clear, understood
Widespread	found over a large area or number of people
Concerned	related, something that we are talking about
From scratch	from the beginning, without using something that existed before
Intended	planned, meant
Entirely	completely
Controlled language	an easier, simpler version of language
Prosperity	the condition of being successful
Approach	way of seeing things
Accusing	saying that someone has made something wrong
Man-made	made by people and not naturally
Restrict	put a limit on, control
Ongoing	something that happens continuously

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Pleasure

enjoyment, happiness

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com