

Holly Lisle's Create A Language Clinic

By Holly Lisle

Chapter One Why Create Languages?

There are a few basic reasons I can come up with, including the one that has led me to create several dozen so far.

- You write fantasy or science fiction or another form of fiction that would benefit from characters speaking or writing in languages that are unique to your worlds.
 - You are a role-playing game designer, game master (GM), or worldbuilder, and you need workable languages within the game.
 - You are a conlanger, you love languages, and you'd like to see how someone else organizes the process of creating them.
- You want to do something really different, but you don't want it to involve the pain of tattoos or piercing, and talking with your friends in your own real language would be really, really different.
- You're a Secret Master of the Universe, and your plan to take over the world involves getting everyone on board with one language—and you want it to be one that only includes concepts of which you approve.
 - It's ridiculously fun.
 - Yes, but ...

Why a language? How could a made-up language possibly add to a work of fiction, or a game universe, or your personal amusement?

Consider the following:

A Language Is the Soul of Its People

We breathe language, we live language, and we dream language. Language is the way the past communicates with the present, the way the present communicates with the future, the way we form our goals and aspirations, transmit them to others, and make them come true. Shared language allows us to gather together to share our dreams and our strength; languages that we do not know drive us apart.

Language is what we have instead of telepathy, and it's a good replacement. With someone who shares our language, we can express emotion, make plans, tell stories about things that once happened and things that never will, invent new ideas, create worlds. Language is magic.

Common language is the first requirement for a people to be a people. Without shared language, there can be no comprehension, no understanding, no shared ground between two people, or between two groups of people. Ideas break in translation, concepts vanish where there are no equivalent words. The other requirements that make up a people—a shared philosophy and shared goals, die on the altar of the common tongue.

If you cannot communicate with each other, you cannot know each other.

Languages Shape Thought

What does "snow" mean to you?

Cold white stuff on the ground, right?

What does it mean to an Eskimo, who lives in a world where snow is both ally and enemy, and who has multiple words for the same frozen white stuff, each specifying a subtle difference: snow that is safe to walk on, snow that is treacherous and will collapse, snow that packs well, snow that can be cut into blocks, snow that is coming and that will kill those who wander out into it.

The concept of "snow" is something entirely different to someone whose life depends on understanding and identifying its subtleties. To understand snow as an Eskimo understands snow, you have to live as an Eskimo lives. And you have to learn the words.

Understanding that languages shape thought is a form of power. Those who control words and the meanings of words control the thought of the people. If this were not the case, books would never be banned from schools or states or nations, the Chinese government would not be making deals with Internet search engines to censor out words like "freedom" and "democracy" from the Chinese people, and the PC movement would not be fighting words like "fireman" and "waitress" and "handicapped" and "fat." And politicians and political weenies would not constantly be trying to align enemy political camps with the devil as they see him. Her. Whatever.

Words matter. The language you first learn molds your thoughts. You cannot comprehend science as anything but magic if you do not have (or invent) a scientific vocabulary; you cannot discuss philosophy with only concrete nouns; and you cannot create a genuinely foreign culture using only the concepts embodied in the English language.

To some folks, "freedom" really does mean nothing—the concept doesn't exist in their language, or the experiences in their lives. If you're going to understand (or create) those people, you have to learn to see the world through the eyes of their language.

Languages Create Conflict

In the real world, language-induced conflict is not a good thing. (For examples of language-induced conflict, study English-speaking Canadians and French Canadians, Albanians in Serbia, and Latinos in the US.) Fights get ugly, they divide people, and they prevent communication.

But can't we all just get along?

No. Because (circle back to point A) language is the soul of a people, and you can't be a people if you don't speak the same language, because different languages embody different concepts and preclude non-speakers from ever truly belonging.

Sometimes you can't even be a people if you do speak the same language—but if you don't, forget it. You're dead in the water before you begin.

As crappy as this is in real life, it's great in fiction.

You can have two nations sitting side by side, loathing each other and believing horrible things about each other because the people cannot understand what the translators say, and so are at the mercy of those who speak both languages. If they could just communicate with each other directly, they would discover that they have much more in common than they have been led to believe.

This story could feature either the evil manipulators who profit from their ignorance, or the hero who finds a way to give them a common tongue. Or both.

You can have a man and a woman from different cultures who speak different languages natively, and who must overcome the difficulties of their language-induced mindsets in order to become allies against a greater foe. (As in my novel TALYN.)

You can have a character's history mistranslated and have her act on an erroneous assumption based on the translation, with horrifying results. I did variations of this with both the ARHEL books and the SECRET TEXT trilogy.

Once again, words matter—and if you're creating the languages and the concepts that imbue them with their souls, you have free reign to build in the sort of bone-deep conceptual conflicts that can give to sides a reason never to see eye to eye. And when you have that, then you can make them have to work together.

From there, it's all just fun.

Get Your Supplies Together

Let me stress organization right from the start. I cannot describe the sick feeling I got in the pit of my stomach when I lost my scattered language notes for the (very) complex and varied languages of Arhel (used in *Fire in the Mist*, *Bones of the Past*, and *Mind of the Magic*). I'd fully worked out those languages, and I realized that if I ever wanted to write in Arhel again, I was going to have to reverse-engineer the languages from the bits and pieces that exist in scattershot form in the books. I'm not sure I'll ever go back and do more books in Arhel, in spite of the fact that I love the world and love the characters. The loss of all my language notes, and to a lesser extent my worldbuilding notebook, is the primary reason.

DO NOT let this happen to you. Obtain the following supplies:

- A scratch pad or pile of scrap paper or cheap ringbound notebook. (I use the notebook, because I like hanging on to my scribbles. Sometimes they have good ideas that I can use elsewhere.)
- One three-hole binder per language (or group of languages per writing universe). I highly recommend side-bound pressboard report covers. They will only take up as much room as you use, unlike three-ring notebooks), and they are less likely to damage your pages than a three-ring notebook.
 - Hole punch, or pre-punched printer paper
- Tabbed page dividers to go in between sections of your language. This is not a must-have, but those tabs can keep you sane when you're flipping rapidly between vocabulary, grammar, written, and sound sections of your language, and I recommend them with all my heart.
 - Do-it-yourself language-creating kit, which should include:
 - Black ball-point pens or other pens with quick-drying black ink for filling out forms (you don't want to smudge something critical because you wrote it in a smooth but slow-drying gel, and the use of glitter inks, fluorescent ink and other colored inks will not reproduce well when you photocopy your notes)
 - A set of fine-tipped drawing pens of variable width for designing your alphabets. I recommend Tech-Liner drawing pens because they're both good and relatively cheap, but any sort of technical drawing pens with black ink will do. You want widths from 0.1mm to 0.5 or 0.7mm. (In a pinch, you can use a ball-point pen or magic marker, or a brush and India ink, but carefully test your ink to make sure it won't bleed through to the next page.)
 - A metal straight edge or decent-quality ruler
 - If you're working from the print edition of this book, you'll also need access to a copier, to copy off the worksheets.

Your Notebook Layout

If you would like to set up your language's notebook before you get started building the language, print off the sheets (recommended numbers of each sheet for BASIC language building are noted below the sheet name) and put them into your binder, marking the tabs on your dividers as indicated if you're using tabs, and numbering pages as noted.

You may find as you go along that you'll need extra pages in some areas. If you have to make a trip to use a copier and want to make sure you have what you need when you get home, you'll most likely want to make a few extra copies of the Vocabulary Sheet, Vocabulary Rules Sheet, and Syntax Rules Sheet. These are the sheets I run out of, if I run out of anything.

- BASIC INFORMATION (tabbed divider)
- Linguistic Background Sheet —print one sheet
- Reduictionary Alphabetization (RA) Sheet —print one sheet
 - VOCABULARY (tabbed divider)
- Vocabulary Sheet —print three sheets for BASIC development, more as needed
- Prefixes and Suffixes Sheet —print one sheet for BASIC development, more as needed
- Vocabulary Rules Sheet —print three sheets for BASIC development, more as needed
 - GRAMMAR (tabbed divider)
- Case Conjugation Sheet —print one sheet for BASIC development, more as needed
- Tense and Person Sheet —print one sheet for BASIC development, more as needed
- Syntax Rules Sheet —print three sheets for BASIC development, more as needed
 - WRITTEN LANGUAGE (tabbed divider)
- Written Language Alphabet or Syllabary Sheet —print one sheet
- Written Language Designer Sheet —print three sheets for BASIC development, more as needed

You'll notice that each sheet has a letter before the space for the page number (A, B, C, etc.) Group all your A pages together in numerical order (if you end up with more than one page), then all B pages together in numerical order, and so on, and put them in your notebook in alphabetical order. This will make finding things at a later date much, much easier.

Protect Your Work

Make sure that every time you do a sheet, you promptly put it in the notebook. Be a little paranoid as the project grows and you become sure the language is one you like and might want to use for more than one book. Photocopy your work and store it in a safe place.

Bank box? Maybe.

Parents' house? Only if they know its value to you.

Personal fireproof safe? If you can swing the price of one, sure.

But someplace safe .

The point is that once you've used your language in a published work of fiction, you want to know that your background will be safe for the rest of your working career. If you lose it and you want to go back one year or ten years or twenty years later to work in that world, you have a mountain of work ahead of you before you can step back in and pick up where you left off.

And you might discover that you simply cannot get back a working version of the language you need, in which case, you will have to either give up on the project or approximate what you lost.

If you approximate, you're going to get nasty letters from readers who are good at languages and who can spot the places where you screwed up. As a final alternative, you can drop back 200 years and punt, declaring that in the older world, they spoke a variant dialect.

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