

Dothraki and Esperanto: an interview with language creator David J. Peterson

David J. Peterson, a noted language creator, has been hired to flesh out the Dothraki language from George R. R. Martin's epic fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* into a full-fledged, speakable language. This constructed language, or conlang, is to be used for an upcoming HBO television series based on the novels. The title will be *A Game of Thrones*, after the first book in the series.

The show's producers hired the Language Creation Society to find an expert for this job; out of thirty-five proposed versions of Dothraki, Peterson's version was selected for the series.

David J. Peterson studied linguistics at UC Berkeley (B.A., English and linguistics) and UC San Diego (M.A., linguistics). He started creating his own constructed languages in 2000, beginning with a personal language based on Esperanto and Arabic; he has been active in the conlang community since early 2001, including volunteer work for the Language Creation Society, and he's one of the editors of *Speculative Grammarian*.

His website showcases thirteen of his conlangs (some more developed than others); his main project, Kamakawi, is influenced primarily by Hawai'ian. Most of the linguistic details of his instantiation of Dothraki remain confidential until nearer the time the TV series is to be aired, but what's been released so far suggests that it's an *a priori*, fusional and synthetic language with influences from Russian, Turkish, Estonian, Inuktitut and Swahili.



Jim HENRY

Jim is a language creator who has been speaking Esperanto since 1996. He lives in Stockbridge, GA.

jimhenry@pobox.com

I interviewed David J. Peterson by email in May 2010.

How did you first get interested in constructed languages?

It was the convergence of three classes I was taking at the time: Esperanto, Arabic and Introductory Linguistics. Due in large part to the influence of Esperanto and all the natural language data I was getting in linguistics, I hit upon the idea that someone could create a language not for international communication (Esperanto, I reasoned, fit the bill for that), but just for personal use—say, between friends. As soon as the idea hit me (it was in a linguistics class), I immediately started designing the phonology for my first language: a poor project with the regularity of Esperanto and the structure of Arabic. I would later discover that I wasn't the first to have this idea.

Who taught that Esperanto course at Berkeley? What was it like?

That was actually the first time that particular Esperanto DeCAL course was taught at Berkeley, and it was co-taught by Lana Shlafer and Mina (or Stelet) Kim. I thought it was a unique experience since both Lana and Mina had been speaking Esperanto since birth (they were raised bilingual in Esperanto and their native language—Russian and Ko-

rean, respectively). It's one thing to take a course in a constructed language, and quite another to take it from two native speakers.

I still remember everything I learned. All I would need to communicate comfortably in Esperanto is more vocabulary (well, that and I'd probably avoid using any participles). When it comes to a language instruction course, I can't think of higher praise to offer – though, of course, it was also a lot of fun. I still have my USEJ sticker on my guitar case.

What, if anything, did you already know about Esperanto before taking that course? What motivated you to take Esperanto rather than one of the other language courses offered that semester?

My mother told me about Esperanto when I was a senior in high school (though I still can't figure out how it ever came to her attention). That was the first time I'd ever encountered the idea that a human could invent a language. It seemed pretty outlandish at the time.

Several months later, we were at a library book sale and I came across *Step by Step in Esperanto* by Montagu C. Butler. I looked that over, and took it with me to Berkeley.

As for the course, language classes at Berkeley are five units. That semester I was taking Arabic and Russian, in addition to a class for my English major and introductory linguistics. All told, that comes to 18 units—a hefty load for a freshman (average is 12; heavy is 15). I wasn't planning on taking any other classes that semester, but during the first week I saw a flier for the Esperanto DeCAL posted on the front door of my dorm. I had a good experience with the



Part of a preview from HBO's upcoming television series *Game of Thrones*, based on George R. R. Martin's books. The series will use David J. Peterson's expanded version of the Dothraki language.

previous DeCAL I'd taken (on the Doors and Jim Morrison's poetry), and figured I already knew a bit about Esperanto, so tacking on another class wouldn't be too much trouble.

Which of your own conlangs is the best developed? Which is your favorite?

Same answer for both questions: Kamakawi. Kamakawi was the first language I created after I realized that my previous languages suffered from serious flaws (beginners' mistakes; everyone makes them). Even so, the language wasn't perfect to begin with, but I've stuck with it over the years, and have really gotten it to a good place.

You've mentioned before that you're natively bilingual in English and Spanish. Do you reckon that influenced your interest in languages and linguistics, or in conlanging?

In the long run, perhaps, but initially, quite the opposite. It's very difficult to raise a child to be truly bilingual; usually one language predominates over the

other. In my case, that was English. I was doing pretty well with Spanish, but then I was moved away to Fresno, away from my mother's side of the family. There I had pretty much no regular contact with Spanish speakers any longer, and English took over. By the time I moved back, I'd lost too much time, and Spanish became a source of frustration for me. I tried to block it out, ignore it—and the thought of learning languages other than Spanish was abhorrent to me. That was a serious roadblock. I had to reclaim my fluency and tap into my native knowledge (and for that, I have not only my Spanish teachers to thank, but my grandmother. I've always understood her Spanish, and she never gave up speaking it to me).

What can you tell me about Dothraki semantics and pragmatics?

I tried at all times to adhere to the ideals espoused by the Dothraki in George R. R. Martin's books. There's a kind of Dothraki mindset that one gleans from the books. They're warriors, of course, but there's also a series of dualities. For example, the Dothraki are nomadic, yet they have one fixed city (Vaes Dothrak), and there's a certain code of behavior that applies to being in the city, and a different one for being elsewhere. I tried to bring these different senses of place into the language where possible.

For example, in Dothraki something done in secret is done *torga essheyi* —literally, “under a roof”. The Dothraki believe that all honorable acts are under-

taken beneath the open sky, so to do something under a roof—is to do it secretly, and in a way which doesn't merit approval.

Is the form of the Dothraki word “ido” (wooden, fake) an inside joke vis-a-vis the Esperanto/Ido schism?

Hee, hee... You caught me! I would like to say, though, I don't wish the Ido community ill, by any means. Think of it as kind of good-natured ribbing—the way one might tease someone from a rival school. But make no mistake: If I were choosing sides in an Esperanto-Ido athletic competition, I'd proudly wear a green star sweater.

How would you say “ne al glavo sangon soifanta” (not to a sword thirsting for blood) in Dothraki?

Man, what a line to choose! You're really making me work for this. I'm even going to have to dust off the seldom-used present participle... Nice not to have to coin any words, though.

Vos arakhaan feveya qoyoon...

Dang, 11 syllables... Of course, if this were in verse, I'm sure the *vos* could be clipped to *v'*. That'd give us 10. Anyway, I would note here that this is the translation of a line of verse, and that the phrasing, as a result, is unusual (if I had the full sentence with the verb, I think I'd do it a different way, but without the verb, this is the best way).

[Editor's note: The extended interview with supplemental info can be found at <<http://pobox.com/~jimhenry>>.] ★

