

# TlhIngan maH! (We are Klingon)

Conlang, play and fandom in a ludicising world

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the use of the Klingon conlang outside the Star Trek franchise, trying to shed some light on why people invest time and effort to learn a very complex fictional language. The paper starts by outlining the history of the conlang, from its creation to its diffusion. It then proceeds to analysing the relationship between the Klingon language and culture and their common evolution. The use of Klingon is connected to the practice of cosplay and to the concept of fandom. Finally, the playful aspects of fandom and of conlangs are analysed in the context of the ludicisation of culture.

*Keywords: Conlang, Klingon, Fandom, Semiosphere, Ludicisation.*

## 1. QIt yIjatlh (Please speak more softly)

Duolingo is a popular online platform for learning languages. Highly gamified and partially crowd-sourced, it offers its users simple exercises to get acquainted with the lexicon and grammar of a new language. The languages supported by Duolingo are many, and others are added regularly, but two stand out among them as rather unusual: High Valyrian and Klingon. These constructed languages (conlangs) have been developed, respectively, for the TV series *Game of Thrones* (in the original book series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, only a few words of the language were present) and for the *Star Trek* franchise, in order to serve as the native tongues of the Valyrians and Klingons.

If the fact that Duolingo hosts courses for conlangs can be surprising, even more surprising is their number of subscribers: the Klingon course (while still in beta) has almost half a million active learners, while High Valyrian has 740 thousand – more than the double of Esperanto, which has only 342 thousand. While it is possible that some of these active learners do not really have the intention to master such complex languages, the fact

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that so many people choose to subscribe to these courses is already very interesting.

Why would someone choose to learn a conlang instead of “real” language? How does a language created to be used only in a specific set of fictional texts, escape them and start circulating in the semiophere? In order to answer these questions, in the next paragraphs I will focus on Klingon and on its diffusion.

Klingon, sometimes “Klingonese”, is probably the most successful fiction-born conlang in terms of people’s involvement in learning and using it – despite its being particularly complex.

The conlang was created in 1984 by linguist Marc Okrand. He was hired by Paramount Pictures to create a language for the Klingon species for the film *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (1984) directed by Leonard Nimoy.

That was not the first appearance of Klingons or of their language. The race was introduced in the original *Star Trek* series (1966–1969) and they were first heard speaking in their own language in the first *Star Trek* film (*Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, Robert Wise 1979). However, Klingons at the time were not intended to be an important part of the series, and in that first appearance the language spoken by the actors was, in fact, simple gibberish: just a set of sounds put together by James Doohan (a cast member) that were meant to sound alien and brutal (Okrand *et al.*, 2011).

With time, however, Klingons became more and more central to the *Star Trek* franchise, and the need for a more complex and structured language arose. Okrand, who had a background in the study of Native American languages, was hired to develop a full-rounded, complex language that was used in *The Search for Spock* and all subsequent *Star Trek* series and films.

Contrary to conlangs like Esperanto, Klingon wasn’t devised to have useful features, nor had any ambition of becoming language spoken by people in the real-world, let alone serving as a *lingua franca*. It was a solution to an artistic problem, not a linguistic one (Okrent, 2009). Yet, with time, it became one of the most successful conlangs, while being neither free from irregularities nor easy to learn. Klingon was able to attract certain people which then formed a community that brought it to life. Its fortune started with the publication of its dictionary.

In 1995 the first edition of the Klingon Dictionary, also written by Okrand, was published and 300 thousand copies were sold to *Star Trek* enthusiasts and curious readers. The editorial success of the dictionary is telling of the interest that the conlang was able to rise but must not be mistakenly correlated with the actual number of Klingon speakers. Far by being thousands, Okrent (2009) estimates the number of fluent speakers around twenty to thirty people.

Nevertheless, the interest around the conlang continued and in 1992 the Klingon Language Institute was founded. The institute is the official

organization dealing with matters related to Klingon language; its board organizes and sponsor conferences, delivers language courses (mainly online) and awards language certificates after thorough examinations. While the number of members of the institute is not disclosed, the Institute's Facebook page, which has 13 hundred likes, seems to indicate a large and active following.

One of the first deliberations of the Institute was that the only person authorized to add new words to the conlang was to be Marc Okrand, who is also the final arbiter in language disputes (Okrent 2009). Nonetheless, after the foundation of KLI the use of Klingon passed effectively in the hands of the fans, who, over the years, started to use it for all sorts of projects.

For example, the fact that in the film *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (Nicholas Meyer, 1991) a Klingon character is seen quoting a line of the Hamlet and paradoxically remarking that one cannot really appreciate Shakespeare without hearing it in the original Klingon, enflamed the fantasy of many fans. In the following years, some of them started the "Klingon Shakespeare Restoration Project" with the (consciously nonsensical) aim of restoring Shakespeare's works to their "original" form in Klingon. This led to the complete translation in Klingon and publication of both *Hamlet* and *Much Ado for Nothing* as well as of several of Shakespeare's sonnets (Kazimierczak, 2010).

Klingon has also been used in other arts. In 2007, for instance, in Saint Paul, Minnesota premiered the play *A Klingon Christmas Carol* – a reimagined version of the Charles Dickens' novella adapted to Klingon culture and "performed entirely in Klingon" (with English supra-titles). Despite the fact that the audience for such a play might be quite restricted, the play has since undergone roughly ten different productions (Belkin, 2010).

There are also examples of Klingon music, such as the Klingon Anthem *taHjaj wo'*, written by Rich Yampell, who is considered to have been the first conversational speaker in Klingon. The conlang has been used to translate and perform several famous songs: it is the case, among others, of the "Klingon Pop Warrior", stage name of Jen Usellis, an artist translating and singing covers of contemporary rock and pop songs in Klingon.

Klingon has not been used by fans only to create new art: some of them integrated it in their everyday life. Some language enthusiasts have even attempted to raise the first native Klingon speaker: linguist Dr. D'armand Spears talked exclusively in Klingon to his son for his first five years of life, hoping to raise him as a Klingon bi-lingual. The experiment, however, failed: the child did speak some Klingon words, but gave clear signs of not appreciating talking in that language, and Spears finally had to switch to English (Okrent, 2009).

The appropriation and use of the language by the public, however, has not been unproblematic. In 2016 Paramount and CBS filed a lawsuit against

the producers of the fan-made film *Prelude to Axanar* (Christian Gossett, 2014) for copyright violation. The complaints were many but, among other things, they claimed ownership over the Klingon language: as they hired Okrand to create it, they argued, the language was theirs. This claim was immediately criticized by the Language Creation Society – a group of linguists and language inventors. They supported the idea that, thanks to the work of many enthusiasts that brought it to life, Klingon is now a living language and therefore cannot be object of copyright. A verdict is not yet available, but the question of the ownership of a language, be it a conlang, generates much debate.

The examples in this section have shown how fiction-born conlangs can have an importance and an influence that sometimes go beyond the boundaries of their fictional worlds. These languages can be used more or less independently from their original narrative, and they may come to occupy an important position in the life of several people.

## 2. 'IwlIj jachjaj (May your blood scream). A Klingon Semiosphere

In order to understand the role of Klingon both on the economy of the Star Trek fictional universe and in the life of people committed to learn it, we will investigate the cultural semiotic space that Klingon creates around itself and requires in order to be meaningful. To do so, we will use the concept of *semiosphere*.

The semiosphere was introduced by Yuri Lotman (1990) – father of semiotics of culture and one of the leading figures of the Tartu–Moscow semiotic school – and is related to the idea of modelling systems.

Lotman, especially in his earlier works (e.g. Lotman 1974), dedicated much attention to the study of modelling systems: communicative devices representing, in a more or less accurate way, specific aspects of reality. Modelling systems can be understood as “languages” in a broader sense, but their key feature resides in their “modelling ability”, that is, their being, at the same time, prescriptive models (archetypes) and descriptive models (prototypes).

Lotman distinguishes between primary modelling systems – natural languages – and secondary modelling systems – a much wider set comprehending art forms such as poetry, genres such as sci-fi, styles such as etiquette, sign systems such as street-signs, sign languages, metalanguages, specialized jargon and many others.

Modelling systems do not “exist” anywhere, if not sedimented in texts and practices – like the “langue” of Saussure (1916) can only be experienced

through the “parole”, modelling systems can only be encountered in textual forms.

According to Lotman, primary modelling systems project, around them, a *semiosphere* (1990). The latter has to be understood as a complex mechanism formed by a large number of secondary modelling systems and, in particular, of all the texts and practices that are produced through them. A semiosphere has often been roughly compared with the semiotic space of a culture.

Lotman describes the semiosphere as a hierarchic mechanism, having a centre – which has a strong modelling ability but little to none flexibility, and hosts texts such as constitutions, grammars and sacred texts – and a periphery – much more dynamic but with less modelling ability, and hosting texts and practices related to subcultures: the youth, avant-garde movements and similar. Around every semiosphere there are borders, which are far from impenetrable and work as porous spaces of dialogue and translation with other semiospheres.

The hierarchy that we have described, however, is not fixed in time. Diachronically speaking, modelling systems can move from the periphery to the centre of the semiosphere, be dismissed and vanish or end up being relegated to nostalgic minorities. Semiospheres are dynamic and alive just as much as the cultures they are related to.

Now, what happens if we try to apply this model not to a natural language, but to a conlang?

The need of having a cultural space around an artificial language is generally acknowledged by most language inventors. The composition of the first poems and songs in Esperanto, for example, was considered instrumental to the full realization of the language potential by Zamenhof and other enthusiasts: if the conlang could create art, then it could become a “real” language (Tonkin, 1987).

For fictional conlangs, worldbuilding has also been indicated as a way of supporting the creation of the language. It is the famous case of Tolkien, who claimed that he wrote his novels so to have a setting for his invented languages (Tolkien, 1977).

This was not an exception, in fact «the most respected languages in the conlang community often have years of work behind them and may even be attached to whole “conworlds” or “concultures” that help give them coherence and a model “literature”» (Okrent, p. 249).

For Mark Okrand and the Star Trek writers the necessity of linking the Klingon language to the alien culture was perfectly clear. From the phonetics side, the decision was made to make the language as unlike human as possible, not by adding unpronounceable sounds (which would have been problematic for the actors), but by violating the rules of commonly

co-occurring sounds (Okrent, 2009). However, the alien character of the language had to stem also from what the language was able to express.

He [Mark Okrand] knew the language was supposed to be tough sounding, befitting a warrior race – which he achieved through the preponderance of back-of-the-throat sounds and the intentional absence of small-talk greetings such as “Hello.” (The closest translation in Klingon is *nuqneH* – “What do you want?”) (Okrent, 2009, p. 231–232).

There are several examples of common human expressions that cannot be translated in Klingon, including “thank you” (replaced by “congratulations”) or “goodbye” (replaced with “success!”). This fact is due to an acceptance of linguistic relativity (certain ideas in one language cannot be understood by those who live in another language) which is also reflected in the naming of one of Star Trek main characters: Worf, son of Mogh – a Klingon raised by humans who owes his name to linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf one of the advocates of linguistic relativity, also known as the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis (Kay and Kampton, 1984).

The Klingon language, then, was created to be a primary modelling system, to influence and describe all the other elements of Klingon culture portrayed in Star Trek. Over the years, many aspects of Klingon culture have been explored in the show, and a series of secondary modelling systems are outlined, among which: cuisine, fashion, design, music/poetry, ethics, warfare, technology, dialects, religion, rituals and many others.

Despite these efforts, the Klingon semiosphere remains clearly fictional. Compared to the complexity of the semiospheres of natural languages, this one seems mostly empty: the number of texts and practices portrayed in the series and films and the modelling systems that we can reconstruct from them is immensely smaller.

The gaps in the Klingon semiosphere, then are filled with “default content”, cultural elements unconsciously picked from the very human, contemporary Western culture. Most of the Klingon cultural traits, then, do not challenge in any way the normal paradigms of western culture. For example, Klingon’s familial bonds are very similar to our own: they are monogamous, they contract heterosexual marriages and raise the children within the family. Even in domains that are presented of paramount importance, such as warfare, the assumptions are mostly the same: there is a differentiation between war and peace as different and opposed statuses, there is a difference between military personnel and civilians, the army has a very human organization based on a chain of command as so an and so forth.

What we have, then, is a semiosphere realized by applying a few alien traits to another semiosphere. It is a form of “cultural make-up” and works exactly as the make-up that actors embodying Klingons have to wear.

Interestingly enough, we can see a sort of parallel evolution in the language, culture and appearance of Klingons in Star Trek (Fig. 1). In the first stage (roughly the first season of the original series, aired in 1967) Klingons were portrayed as generic space-barbarians – violent and evil – their language was just some harsh gibberish and the make-up was meant to make the actors look like a greenish version of Fu Manchu (Gross and Altman, 1995). The alterity of Klingons is here represented according to an attitude that Lotman et al. define as chiefly oriented towards the content (1978): the culture of the “other” is seen as chaos, entropy a non-culture. Here Klingons are “barbarians” in the etymological sense: they have no language, only gabbling sounds.

In the second step (Second season, aired in 1968), Klingon culture started to have more defined and less generic traits. The language, although not a real conlang, had some internal coherence, and the make-up commenced to acquire some autonomous looks. In this stage, Klingons are still “barbarians”, but intended as a “inverted image” of the human civilization portrayed in Star Trek (Lotman, 1990, 142). Their culture has some specific traits, but they are built in opposition to standard culture – they are described through an operation based on what Lancioni (2009) describes as *ratio facilis*: based on the reuse of familiar cultural traits but inverted. In this case, the perspective is one oriented towards the expression (Lotman et al., 1978): the culture of the other, now, is perceived as “wrong”, it is not chaos any more, but a system preceded by a negative sign.

In the third step (the language is from 1968, the improved make-up from 1979), then, we see that Okrand conlang is accompanied by standardized sophisticated appearance as well as some well-established cultural traditions. The approach to the Klingon culture, now, is less superficial and more complex. With Lancioni, we could say that now it employs a *ratio difficilis* in which new, alien cultural traits are added to the Klingon semiosphere, while the systematic inversion ceases. What is created, then, is a sort of make-up, a layer of “klingoness” that is applied to our semiosphere, covering and changing some of its features, but leaving many others unchanged.

### 3. Qapla’! (Success!). Conlang, fandom and play

Cosplay, portmanteau of “costume play”, is a word generally attributed to Japanese journalist Nobuyuki Takahashi. It indicates the practice of dressing and wearing fashion accessories in order to resemble, as faithfully as possible, to fictional characters from Japanese manga or anime. The practice originated from Japan in the 1970s and was associated with amateur manga authors, which advertised their characters in *doujinshi* (amateur

Evolution of Klingons			
Language	Gibberish	Draft language	Conlang
Culture	Generic barbarians	Cultural traits	Established traditions
Make-up			

Figure 1: A schema representing the evolution of Klingon.

manga) marketplaces (Rahman *et al.*, 2012). Since then the practice has expanded geographically – becoming a world-wide phenomenon – and in the range of characters represented, now including those of films, digital games, TV series both Japanese and from other countries.

Cosplay has been indicated by some studies (Napier, 2007) as a way of escaping the monotony of ordinary life and to insert surreal features to mundane surroundings (Benesh-Liu, 2007). Nevertheless, compared to other playful activities involving masking (such as carnival, masked balls and trick-or-treating), cosplay is characterized by the fact that a specific character (and not a generic role) is represented in the most faithful way possible.

Rahman *et al.* (2012) underline how, for many enthusiasts, the costume alone is not enough to make a cosplayer: role-playing one's chosen character is equally important, adding therefore a layer of performance to the mere representation of the character.

Roleplay (be it in a context of cosplay, in larps, or in role-playing games) often involves some form of voice-acting, while players often try to imitate or act out the linguistic habits and quirks of their character. Speaking fictional conlangs, then, could be seen as a form of cosplay, or, at least, as connected with this practice. The use of the language, in this case, is only partially to convey the meaning of the spoken message: its main use is connotative and strengthens the cosplayers' representation of the character.

Cosplay and conlangs, due to their involvement with specific elements of well-established fictional worlds, are related to *fandom*. "Fan", short for "fanatic", is a term that originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in order to indicate



highly enthusiastic sport supporters and especially boxing enthusiasts. With time, the term has widened to include any form of strong attachment and identification with cultural idols (actors, rock stars, musicians, sportsmen) and products (music, films, books, comics, etc.).

The study of fandom in a first moment focused mostly on sport fans too (e.g. Brown, 1998), but later, especially starting from the 1990s, began to focus on cinema, television, games and then on transmedia fandoms (e.g. Lewis, 1992; Hills, 2002), leading to the idea of “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 1992; 2006).

Henry Jenkins (1992) famously defined fans as “textual poachers” (an expression inspired to Michel De Certeau’s “braconnier culturels”): wanderers in lands they do not own – in what Eco (1994) have called the fictional woods – they collect there everything they find pertinent and they bring it along, tracing with their path and their collections new ways of living their everyday life.

Fandom, thus, is a sort of a “fetishist” approach to texts or performances (and, when we deal with fiction, to the possible worlds they create, their inhabitants, cultures and languages). Fans, however, do not have a solipsistic relation with the text, they work as a community. Duchesne (2005) underlines how fans explore and play with their identity, both personal and as a group. Fiske (1992, p. 34) describes activities related to fandom as “(semiotic) productivity and participation” but also to “Discrimination and Distinction” (*ibidem*).

Semiotically speaking, we could say that fandom revolves around two mechanisms, one of imitation and representation, and one of proving competence through performance.

Imitation has several forms, including wearing the colours of a sports team or the shirt of a specific player; imitating the fashion style of an artist; creating of homages, parodies and fanfiction; and, of course, cosplaying and speaking conlangs. It is a way of approaching the objects of the fans’ fetishism, but also a way of expressing one’s own belonging to a specific group, a sort of fandom uniform. If this can become painfully evident in the case of hooligans, whose violence often target supporters “wearing the wrong colours”, some degrees of exclusivity and xenophobia are common to every form of fandom.

The exhibition of competence as proof of one’s belonging to the fandom and commitment to their passions is also a core mechanism in fandom. Be it a sports fan that shows off her knowledge about her team’s achievements or a TV show enthusiast proving her encyclopaedic knowledge about the events portrayed, fans often perform actions to demonstrate that they are “true fans” and deserve recognition.

It is interesting to acknowledge that the common juxtaposition of “jocks” (who love sports and physical activities) and “nerds” (who prefer reading

and indoor activities) is not productive when we deal with fandom. Football supporters and comic books aficionados, despite their difference of interests, share the same sort of fetishist attitude and adhere at the same mechanisms of fandom.

Imitation and competence, however, are not mere tools for passion-centred community-building. Both these attitudes, in fact, have a rather strong playful character.

Imitation is one of the four forms of play described by Caillois (1967), based on the pleasure and freedom experienced when wearing masks, but also on make-believe and pretend play. *Mimicry*, as Caillois calls it, is a powerful drive for humans, and allows them to exercise their creativity and their compassion.

On the other hand, the exercise of competence can be rather pleasurable too. It is related with what Caillois calls *agon*, which is play involving some form of challenge and competition. Testing oneself, showing off skills – regardless if they can have some “real-life” value – are forms of *agon*.

*Agon*, and the pleasure that can derive from it, has an important role in learning Klingon. If conlangs do have a component of mimicry and are a way of “entering” the possible world of Star Trek, the challenge of learning Klingon makes it something more, for its practitioners.

The difficulty of the language keeps it from being just another part of the costume. The ones who end up sticking with it are in it for the language – and the cachet, the respect, that comes (from however small a group) with showing that you can master it. Anyone can wear a rubber forehead, but the language certification pins must be earned (Okrent, 2009, p. 235).

Writing a play in Klingon, translating Hamlet or even just communicating with other fans at a convention only using the conlang is a real challenge. And as all challenges, being able to overcome it can give great satisfaction.

#### 4. Bertlham (end). Conclusions

The initial question of this paper – why someone would choose to learn Klingon instead of a “real” language – has now some possible answers.

People learning Klingon might be Star Trek fans. They might want to learn a few words for enhancing their cosplay skills, or for understanding what Klingons say in the show. They also may want to feel more integrated with the fandom and impress other fans with their dedication. However, not all Klingon speakers are *trekkies*, in fact some of them are not interested in the show at all, only in the language (Okrent, 2009).

Klingon, then, is sometimes learned because of the appreciation of its complex structure and for the challenge that it poses. In other words, learning Klingon is (also) a game – a serious one, requiring much effort, but still playful and, in a way, fun.

Klingon can also be studied for both these reasons at the same time it can provide a sort of erudition that mixes the pleasure of knowing and the challenge of acquiring knowledge.

The success of Klingon outside the transmedia narrative of Star Trek, then, its path that from the creation of the Klingon Language Institute brought to half million subscribers on Duolingo can be interpreted as one of the effects of the ludicisation of culture.

The ludicisation of culture<sup>1</sup> is a cultural trend (dating probably from the Enlightenment, from Rousseau's and Shiller's works on education) that sees playfulness and games become more and more culturally relevant. The rise of digital games boosted this trend and nowadays all kinds of games, as well as other forms of play experiences, enjoy a new cultural centrality. Today, games are perceived as socially and culturally relevant, they become ways to describe our reality as well as models to shape our reality (Thibault, 2017). At the same time, the cultural boundaries that used to define the contexts in which play can may be acceptable are being deeply redefined (Idone Cassone, 2017).

In semiotic terms it can be described as a movement of play towards the centre of the semiosphere (Thibault 2016). Play is a modelling system that has always been common to all semiospheres, but nowadays, due to several factors, both social and technological (see, e.g. Ortoleva 2012), is acquiring an unprecedented centrality.

The presence of High Valyrian and Klingon in Duolingo (incidentally an app that makes large use of gamification – another effect of the ludicisation of culture) is another proof of the centrality and influence that play is acquiring in our societies.

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1. Sometimes it is also referred to a “gamification of culture” or “ludification”. I chose to use the term introduced by BONENFANT and GENVO, 2014.

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