

From the Mouths of Dwarves: a New Language for a Refurbished Race

I've been thinking about constructed languages lately, since I'm dealing with my own Sa'adani language in my novel revisions. As synchronicity would have it, WBA list member Chris Mennell just wrote me about creating a dwarven language. He asks,

Any advice on how one should go about crafting a realistic sounding, original form of language for a race of people that has, for all intents and purposes, been pre-defined in the minds of everyone by a specific author?

The author in question, as he notes elsewhere, is Tolkien—although it bears pointing out that Tolkien based his own work on existing folklore about dwarves from Germanic and Nordic sources. I think it is fair to say, though, that the western cultural concept of dwarves is certainly shaped by the lore from that part of the world. (Here is a good basic round-up of [western lore about dwarves](#).)

Sidling Up On Language Construction

There was a time not long ago when there was very little written or published about constructed languages. Today, and with the internet to hand to do research, that has all changed radically.

I'm not going to reinvent the wheel with a detailed linguistics discussion here that a blog post can not do justice to anyway. At the end of this post I'll point to some of these sources I find especially useful when inventing a language.

Meanwhile, I think where I can add value to this conversation is in my particular approach to designing languages. So in answer to Chris's question, if I were going to create a language right now for my merry clan of dwarves, and wanted it to be a fairly original work, here's how I'd go about it.

1. Define the Nature of Dwarves in This World.

This might or might not be like the dwarves we know from folklore. If I'm unfamiliar with that lore I would read some of it, because otherwise my conception of dwarves is probably shaped by all kinds of media that has borrowed from these sources, from old folktales to Disney and Tolkien and beyond. This does nothing but obscure what the root inspiration for “dwarf” was. I need to be in touch with that foundation before I can build upon it.

The Goal

My goal here is to be able to write out a one-page (or longer) description of what dwarves are like in my world. Here is my chance to differentiate my dwarves from those of other settings. Do

I want them to be a mirror of the dwarf I know from folklore? If not, how do I want them to be unique? What is different about them?

I ask myself questions like, what do they look like? Where do they live? What do they eat? What are their characteristics? Their ambitions? Their values? Do they have magic or technology? How religious are they? How did they come to be? Did they evolve like humans or were they created by a god? Or what? And most importantly (and possibly related to that last), what about them makes them “dwarves” and “not human”? (Or in the alternative, are they just short humans?)

At the end of this process I need to be able to sit with my eyes closed, and imagine myself walking around a dwarvish settlement. I need to “see” this in my mind's eye and more importantly, “feel” what it is like to be a dwarf there.

If I can't accomplish this as a straightforward act of imagination, then I create a dwarf character and interview him or her, writing out what they have to say as they tell me about themselves, about their customs and what their life is like.

There are many other ways to develop a race and elaborate on their character. The point here is that before I do any language work, I have to be certain I have a really good feel for what my dwarves are like. Then I'm ready to think about their language.

2. Getting the Feel for the Language

If I've developed the race and their character with the process outlined above, I may very well have started to get a feeling for what this dwarvish tongue sounds like to my ear. It happens for me about the time I am walking around their streets in my mind's eye and listening to conversations around me. Although I may understand them as “English” in my head, some part of me is picking up on the “tone” of the dwarvish language that is native to this place.

If I can't get to this point through the imagination exercise, I can do it through a logical one. I ask myself: what must this language sound like? Is it harsh in tone, like the grinding of stone on stone? Is it abrupt and curt? Or a tumble of joined syllables, like a rush of rocks in an avalanche when a dwarf is excited or arguing? Maybe your conception of dwarves is something different: maybe their tones are slow and sonorous like warm earth in a summer field, long drawn-out vowels suggesting the sturdiness of rock and mountain.

The Goal

Here I want to come up with a sense of the kinds of sounds used in the dwarvish language.

“Stone-on-stone” sounds might translate to “ch” like in English “church”, or a guttural “ch” like in German “ach”

“Abrupt and curt” might mean there are a lot of voiced hard consonants, like the “ck” in “crack” and short one-syllable words.

“Slow and sonorous” might translate to drawn-out “mmmm” sounds.

If you are trying this and can't come up with anything, then in the worst case scenario you can do this through writing out language sounds and just picking the ones you like off the page. The reason I suggest the mental/imagination exercise approach first is because that lets you have a rationale for why the language sounds and operates as it does. This can have some trickle-down effect in cultural design work that you do later on.

Whatever method is used, here's the end result: We're starting to define the phonemes that make up the dwarvish language. Phonemes are the individual sounds out of which words and language are made. “Ch” is a phoneme. “Th” as in “thick” is a phoneme. “Mmmm” is a phoneme. And so on.

3. Building Blocks

Phonemes then come together into little word elements called monemes (or morphemes; essentially the same thing). A morpheme is the smallest unit of a word that has a meaning. “-ing” is a morpheme. “un-” is a morpheme. Etc.

Decide what vowel and vowel/consonant combinations occur in this language, and which ones are never seen at all. Combine these with morphemes and join them with other word elements and you are soon creating words themselves.

[Here is a great tool](#) to use that both explains and walks you through this process of defining the elements of speech, how frequently they occur, and how they fit together. This tool is a template specifically made to help you construct a language and goes far beyond the tip of the iceberg I just touched on above. (Scroll halfway down the page to the “Start defining your own language” button, fill in the name of your language, and click that button.)

4. Think About Grammar and Meaning

Once I have word lists (verbs, nouns, and pronouns are the essential minimums), then I can think about a grammar. Grammar dictates how a language fits together. What order do our words go in and how does that affect the meaning of our sentences? Do we conjugate verbs?

Do these people and their language have a different understanding of time and so express tenses differently ([like the Hopi do in our own world](#))? Does our language assign a gender to nouns, and if so, is that reflected in the words that refer to that noun? If you want to think more in this vein, here's a report that illustrates the impact that gendered grammar has on [how people think about things](#).

Grammar and vocabulary are highly influenced by a society's culture. Here is where those earlier mental exercises about the nature of this race comes in very handy. To take an example

from our own world, Eskimos have no word for “war”, nor do they conduct warfare. As famous anthropologist [Margaret Mead wrote about this](#),

The idea of warfare, of one group organizing against another group to maim and wound and kill them was absent. And, without that idea, passions might rage but there was no war.

In contrast, Eskimos have multiple words for snow and snowfall, and the various states the snow is in at any one time. The thing that is alien to their experience they have no word for, while the thing that is ever-present in daily survival has many names.

But this can also be put another way: the thing they have no word for (“war”) does not exist in their culture, while the thing they have many words for is both abundant and occupies much of their awareness.

If a people lack a concept, they do not embody it in their culture or their language. This is an important point to keep in mind when constructing a language, which is a lens through which a culture is reflected.

What is commonplace in your culture? How people name things also shapes how they see the world around them.

On Being Original With Language Development

So to return to Chris's original question, I advise:

- Forget what's been done before (as much as you can.) Concentrate on getting in touch with the culture and race that you are bringing into being, including your own quirks and spin on it.
- Put yourself in their shoes and examine the minutiae of their daily lives.
- Follow an orderly method for uncovering the phonemes that “feel” right, and growing them into monemes and words and grammar. Use the tools I've linked to to help in that process. This will yield a realistic sounding yet original language.
- Grow your vocabulary with care, and consider the cultural implications of how your people behave and how this would be reflected in their language.

And when you've done some work in this regard, I hope you'll share it to the World Building Academy forum. I'm sure many fellow world builders would love to see what you've come up with (if you are willing to share something that I realize may be published as a product in the future.)

Related Links:

[How to build a language, and good stuff on the history of constructed languages.](#)

[How to build a language toolkit.](#)

[Constructed languages: examples and how-to.](#)

and for some bonus fun,

[How to Swear Like a Dwarf.](#)