

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

DUNE 2 MUSIC

I saw Dune: Part One at home because it came out during the pandemic. So I was excited to see Dune: Part 2 in IMAX, and I did not come away disappointed.

Now Frank Herbert's novel Dune from 1965 used to have a reputation for being quote "unfilmable." The book is densely packed with imagined customs and cultures, when I read it I felt like I had traveled 20,000 years into the future. The idea that you couldn't translate this novel to a movie only got worse after David Lynch's 1984 film adaptation completely flopped. But the 2021 movie was a hit, and Dune: Part Two has been an even bigger success.

The cast and director have been doing a lot of publicity for Part Two – but so have a pair of linguists. David and Jessie Peterson developed the language of the Fremen for the movie.

DUNE 1 CLIP

The Fremen are the indigenous population that live on the desert planet of Arrakis. Their language is called Chakobsa.

I first interviewed David Peterson in 2018 for an episode about how people create languages for fantasy worlds. Back then, he was a one-man-band. Now he and his wife Jessie work together on every project. I wanted to catch up with David to find out what it's been like working on the Dune movies, and how they work as a couple.

But before we get to that conversation, I want to play my episode from 2018. It will give you a lot of context of what goes into constructed languages. I began that episode by talking with somebody who is not a language creator. She's just a fan of a fantasy language.

Jen Uselies is a singer in Chicago. About eight years ago, a friend of hers told her about a show that was looking for performers. The show was A Klingon Christmas Carol. Jen was not a big Star Trek fan.

JEN: But I have this like a hardcore love of really goofy theater, and I was like, oh really? What do I have to do to get cast in that? And he goes well. Are you allergic to latex? I was like, uh no. So, he goes we'll come out and audition.

And then she learned something else about the show. All of her lines would be in the Klingon language. And yes, Klingon is a fully functioning language that actors who play Klingons on Star Trek have to learn. In this case, at the Klingon Christmas Carol, there would be supertitles over the stage in English, so the audience knew what was going on.

That might be intimidating for some people, but Jen is also an opera singer. She was used to performing in foreign languages.

JEN: I picked up on the language very quickly and the pronunciation and my fight skills were my choreography skills weren't so great.

But wait did you say that there's fighting involved in the in the show.

JEN: Oh absolutely. The Fessey wig party -- it turns into a giant bar brawl. Klingons aren't having a good time if there's not a little blood involved.

She did the show for two years. It was a blast. And then she found out that a podcast called Improvised Star Trek was looking for someone to sing "Kiss Me" by Sixpence None the Richer in Klingon. And they were wondering if she was interested.

JEN: And I was like Oh heck yes!

SONG: KISS ME

JEN: Within 24 hours we were picked up by Team Coco dot com and the Mary Sue. And just a whole bunch of other big blogs and websites and we're like oh my gosh! What just happened? The response to it was overwhelmingly positive. It's kind of crazy because like the Internet I always say like the Internet hates everything. But for some reason the Internet really liked this!

Jen thought, what if I put out an album of songs in Klingon? She worked with translators on songs that she thought a Klingon would sing -- like Love is a Battlefield.

LOVE IS A BATTLEFIELD

That blew up, so she started doing concerts. And she doesn't perform as Jen Uselies. She created a whole new persona as The Klingon Pop Warrior.

Is it hard to sing in Klingon?

JEN: Yes it does yes. It's not easy. There are some really awkward sounds. It's pretty grating on the vocal chords. It's a very harsh guttural sounds in the language. And you just you get a lot of that kind of stuff and then trying to make it melodic and pretty. I usually don't do more than a 60-minute performance just because more than that and it just starts to feel really wrong.

To this day, she can't believe there was an audience out there waiting for a Klingon rock star.

Although, if you look at the history of constructed languages – or conlangs for short -- this was a long time coming.

Now people have been inventing languages on their own for centuries -- as a hobby. But those languages would usually die off because not many people spoke them. The difference is now we can see a whole fantasy culture attached to those invented languages.

But what happens when we speak the language of fantasy characters in the real world? Does that change how we communicate with each other, and what we reveal about ourselves?

It turns out – yes.

AD BREAK

Now the granddaddy of constructed languages in fantasy worlds, in the modern era, is JRR Tolkien.

I've talked before about how The Hobbit and Lord of the Rings were groundbreaking in a lot of ways, like having maps of Middle Earth, which was a novel idea. The same thing is true with the languages that Tolkien developed for the Elves in his stories.

Michael Drout is a Tolkien expert. And he says Tolkien was one of the first fantasy writers to appreciate how much we can learn about a fictional culture by studying their language.

MICHAEL: And I think that that interaction between culture and language in history is just much easier to see in something like a constructed language you know in a fantasy structure.

And he thinks studying the language of a fantasy culture can give us a new perspective on our own language and how it reflects our culture in ways we often take for granted.

MICHAEL: And to see it right there in you know a manageable amount in Middle Earth I think gives us great insight into how this is happening in that sort of distributed intelligence of the millions of people who are making the culture we live in right now. And so it's I know it's kind of just a microcosm argument but I think it's a pretty good microcosm argument when you have to see how all the things could fit together and how they would you know you have to keep bending the edges and creating ad hoc explanations in little Middle Earth. I think it gives you a better understanding of how culture works in full big earth.

But Tolkien didn't expect people in full big Earth to try and speak Elvish. And we know that because he didn't create a lot of verbs for the Elves.

MICHAEL: So when they came time they wanted to write dialogue in Elvish for the Peter Jackson films they just had no verbs. And finally David Salo who is a linguist at the University of Wisconsin who was their consultant they said you got to make something up, you know use the same sound system use the same rules, use the same words, but we don't have enough verbs to have a conversation. But really the films gave it such an impetus and you had people wanting to expand the language and people wanting to write poetry in Elvish and write stories in dialect doing what had happened in Klingon.

For people who consider themselves Tolkien purists, any change to the language he created was heresy.

MICHAEL: And so what you get then is a split because people say that's not real Elvish and others saying you know you're a stick in the mud and not allowing us to do what the language should do. And they're like, that's not really what Tolkien said. He never came up with these words and there's always there's always

something that you can point to that's like awkward -- there's no Elvish word for milk so let's call it first water because we have a word for water. We have word for first and the more like canonical people like that. That's so ridiculous token would never compound like that. And so not only did you have groups of elves linguists you had two competing groups of Elvish linguists who hated each other.

Of course, when Klingon was created, nobody thought that would take off — least of all the guy who invented the language, Marc Okrand.

Marc was hired in the mid 1980s to invent a Klingon language for the Klingons in Star Trek III. But he didn't invent the language from scratch. We did hear Klingons speaking their own language in the first Star Trek from 1979, but that was gibberish.

CLIP: STAR TREK THE MOTION PICTURE

MARC: And so I listened to that and wrote down you know phonetically what I was hearing, wrote down what the subtitles meant and imposed a structure on it.

Even though the audience wouldn't understand what the actors were saying in this newly constructed Klingon language, Marc wanted it to feel alien in its syntax. So he looked at what were the least common rules for languages. For instance:

MARC: In any language there's sort of three basic parts of speech in a sentence which is the subject the verb and the object and you have to put those three elements in any in any language you have to put them in some order or other English it happens to be that word or the subject and then the verb and then the object the least common by far are the ones where the object comes first. So that's what I chose for Klingon for Klingon and I chose object and then verb and then subject.

Marc says the actors playing Klingons were model students in learning this new he created because it was a creative challenge they didn't expect to get. But then Marc himself faced a challenge when he was brought back years later to work on Star Trek VI.

That movie was about a detente between the Federation and the Klingon Empire that was mirroring the end of the Cold War in real life.

In one scene, the Klingons reveal that they can quote Shakespeare, in English. But the director had a last minute addition; he wanted Christopher Plummer's Klingon character to quote Shakespeare in Klingon – to say, “to be or not to be.”

MARC: And I thought oh no. And the reason I thought oh no is because one of the decisions I made and when I was making up the grammar of Klingon was that there's no verb to be.

So he decided to go with the translation “to live or not to live?”

MARC: So I go over to Christopher Plummer and he says I understand you have a new phrase to teach me. I said yes he says what is it. Well to say to live or not to live there's a number of different ways I've could have done that but I kind of did it a very simple way. So it means live or live not which is (speaks in Klingon) So he says Yeah. I said yeah he says that's too wimpy that's too wimpy. He didn't say that he said something else but that's what he meant he said think of something else that's more Klingon like oh no what am I going to do. So I said what if what if what if we say top ta bet he goes ta ta is good let's do that. Well up until that moment tach was a suffix that meant to continue doing whatever the verb is so you say eat plus tach means to keep on eating to continue eating something like that. So I kind of promoted tach to be a verb in its own right that means to continue to go on to endure.

CLIP: STAR TREK VI

Christopher Plummer changed the Klingon Dictionary. And yes — Marc wrote a Klingon dictionary, which was published in the 80s.

MARC: But what I thought honestly and truly thought would happen is people would buy it some thumb say oh look there's the Klingon word for shoe. Ha ha ha. You know I put on their coffee table. But that's not what happened. What happened is people bought it and read it very thoroughly and studied it and a language speaking community started to get going I think it really got going.

Marc didn't find out about all this until he was invited to a conference of Klingon speakers.

MARC: That was odd and I wasn't prepared for it frankly because I'd go I'll admit I'm not a very good speaker of Klingon because when I was doing all this there

was no particular reason to be one. So when it started happening I was kind of taken aback that people were doing it but it was all it was also fascinating to read what people were saying about the language and I realized it was more complicated and interesting than I thought it was when I was going along making it up.

As I mentioned earlier, language creation is nothing new, people have been doing it for eons.

David Peterson is a member of the Language Creation Society. They create conlangs for their own sake, beyond sci-fi fantasy properties.

DAVID: There's also an element of writing to it because when you're creating a lexicon you're essentially creating the entire history of a people through their words.

David has been hired to create languages for sci-fi fantasy worlds. In fact, he won a competition to create Dothraki – the language of the warrior clans in Game of Thrones.

DAVID: It was incredibly grueling because I just spent every hour working on my proposal. I made it through the first round, which was judged by other language creators that I beefed up my proposal again. I had over 300 pages of material by this point in time. We sent the final four proposals off to the producers and they chose mine.

David thought he had created the next big conlang that would take on a life of its own in the real world – basically, the next Klingon.

DAVID: We were super excited about the Dothraki job. Two months later Avatar comes out. So if you're if you're looking at something that you know took off – the Na'vi language did take off it's still very successful. So then by the times you know Game of Thrones comes along it's like well it's another created language -- it never had a chance.

He has a few theories why Dothraki didn't take off in the way that Na'vi did. But his main theory is that Avatar appealed to a younger audience that has the time and energy to learn a constructed language.

After that, he was hired to create few more conlangs, and they didn't take off. And then, he was hired to invent a language for The CW show The 100, which is about the descendants of people who survived a nuclear war. This language, which he called Trigedasleng, was supposed to be an evolution of English in the future.

CLIP: THE 100

The 100 doesn't have a big audience, but the audience is young, very loyal – and they love these characters called The Grounders that speak Trigedasleng. So the fans really took to the language. In fact, they ask David questions about it all the time.

DAVID: And it's just it's really wonderful it kind of took me by surprise. This is the reaction I thought I was going to be getting with Dothraki and that just never happened at all.

Now that he's seen the potential of how a community of fans can form around a conlang – and the power that language has as a tool of worldbuilding -- he's become an advocate for conlangs being a part of any fantasy culture.

DAVID: It's not expensive to get somebody like there are people that already are just spending it almost every single free hour of their day working out a created language that would be over the moon to have created for example a language for the Martians in Supergirl. And so since it's not going to be super expensive why not? And so it's just. I mean God it just kills me to hear when you know shows and movies are skating by on gibberish. There's no point to it right now.

David also thinks there is a correlation between how often characters are featured on a show and how popular the language is in the real world. Another reason why he thinks Dothraki didn't take off is because the Dothrakis were not on Game of Thrones very much after the first season.

And even the popularity of Klingon started to wane when Star Trek didn't feature the Klingons for many years.

That's why Klingonists have been excited about the new show Star Trek, Discovery, which features the Klingons very heavily. And there's a lot of buzz around the language consultant on that show, Robyn Stewart, who in

many ways represents the next generation (no pun intended) of Klingons speakers.

ROBYN: And there's also I mean let's face it head on there's a stereotype but the Klingon because being a virgin that lived in a mother's basement somebody that has the intellectual capital and the spare time to learn an entire language from scratch for fun has enough other negotiable skills that they do not need to live in their mother's basements and are probably doing quite well for themselves.

In fact, beyond being a Klingon consultant, Robyn is also a pilot. And you'll hear the wind whipping behind her because Robyn was calling me near a military base off the Eastern seaboard of Canada.

ROBYN: You know I have the army life; I have the flying life and the Klingon life. Probably more lives than that.

Yeah. By the way, your Klingon name is spelled Qov, how do you pronounce that?

ROBYN: It's going to sound like a wind noise again. Oh I say it rhymes with stove except the first sound is like choking on spinach. Oh yeah I need some more color in there. Have you ever choked on spinach like you're eating it. And then you realize something's going down your throat and it's too much and you have to go on to get it back.

Oh yes. I mean it's spinach. But certainly I've had that experience

ROBYN: I actually think that speaking Klingon and having the ability to say that that will may have saved my life. I was actually joking once and did that to.

I said to Robyn, the one thing that has always baffled me about the success of Klingon is that it's such a harsh language to speak and listen to. It makes sense for the Klingons. They're this fierce alien warrior culture. They're often the antagonists in the story, or maybe anti-heroes.

But she says that's the point. Klingons are rowdy, and boisterous. They're also very blunt, which she finds freeing.

ROBYN: It's actually easier to discuss really hot button topics because the same conversation hasn't been said over and over again. The same trite words are coming out. I have a good friend whose father was murdered and he you know told his Klingon friends you know that you know in Klingon and somehow reading it like you there's no use of isms in calling on you just say the things. It's so

strange to have like learn these new words and have them go like you know right to your soul.

She says Klingon has become a part of who she is, in the real world.

ROBYN: We were talking once about body modification. There was somebody that came to one of the Kabamba of the Klingon conferences and they had this tattoos but had done for me no actual interesting body modifications and you are talking about this and you know this kind of a world like you made this huge step thing. And I said you know I mean going on I but you know by speaking going on where we are mapping the insides of our head in ways you know we're altering the business the surgery

That's funny because it totally ties into Arrival. You know the short story it was based on in the movie the idea that the way you speak the language begins to change the way you think

ROBYN: Yeah that concept that way someone speaks entirely is you know changes the way that they can look at the world. No sadly they have found very little evidence for it. It's so appealing.

Jen Useleis, the Klingon Pop Warrior, agrees with Robyn. Taking on the attitude of a Klingon is liberating.

JEN: Because everything about Klingons is hard they work hard and they fight hard. But they also love really hard and everything is very immediate. For them it's very much about living in the present because you know big blue meth cock jaj from today is a good day to die like you know.

But to keep evolving, Klingon needs to keep branching out, so it's not dependent on Star Trek. I think that's why Jen's music also represents a next phase of Klingon culture evolving in the real world.

As I mentioned before, she tries to pick songs that feel Klingon-like. But she's also pushing the boundaries of what a Klingon would say or feel.

SONG: MY HEART WILL GO ON

JEN: Even when I'm doing silly love ballads like my heart will go on like there's something really powerful about a Klingon singing that song and you know and talk to you about their heart continuing on.

Is there when you sing that. Is there a more literal translation to my heart will go on. Like my heart will not explode or it on myself or something?

JEN: It actually, you hear TACH and that means to continue.

And we know that Tach means to continue because of a change that Christopher Plummer added to the language.

Although My Heart Will Go On takes on a meaning in Klingon because:

JEN: Klingons have fully redundant organ systems so it kind of makes sense on a literal level that if something happened the heart would go on!

SONG: MY HEART WILL GO ON (FADE OUT)

AD BREAK

It's been really satisfying to see David Peterson doing publicity for Dune: Part Two. As you heard, six years ago, he was lamenting how often language creators are taken for granted.

David helped develop the Chakobsa language. That's the language of the Fremen people on the desert planet Arrakis. The novel Dune takes place 20,000 years in the future. But there are cultural fragments left over from our world.

For instance, Chakobsa is not a made-up world. It's the name of a real language in the Caucasus region. But in the novels, Frank Herbert's fictionalized version of Chakobsa doesn't sound Russian. He actually incorporated a lot of words from Islam and Arabic cultures.

Although Herbert was not as much of a linguist as Tolkien. So, there was a lot of work needed to expand what Herbert had established in the books.

David was hired to work on Dune: Part One. We did not hear a lot of Chakobsa in that film because the focus was on Timothée Chalamet's character Paul Atredies. He is part of an aristocratic family that is betrayed and destroyed. In Dune: Part Two, Paul and his mother rally the Fremen people to help them overthrow the villains who betrayed them.

When David came back to work on Dune: Part Two, he had a collaborator -- his wife Jessie. They're now a team. I wanted to know how their partnership works.

DAVID: Honestly, it works really, really well. And I can say that with a certain level of authority because I've done language creation projects collaboratively several times. Several times. I have never worked as well with anybody as well as I've worked with Jesse. It seems pretty natural.

So Jessie once you come on board, were you, what were you most excited about in working on Dune 2?

JESSIE: Honestly, I was really excited to jump into the language itself just with vocabulary because David had created a system of these derivational suffixes that you could add to roots to create new words in really interesting ways, so I was honestly really stoked about digging into that and learning more words. And so for that, I, I basically had to learn what structures David had created for the language, um, and everything that he had as a foundation for the first Dune movie. From there, we, we did a lot of vocabulary expansion. We needed a lot more words created.

DAVID: There was a, a big ramp up between Dune 1 and Dune 2. Dune 1, you know, I kind of got to spend my time creating the overall structure for the language. All of this was used rather minimally, uh, and that was understood beforehand with the understanding that there was going to be a lot of material in the second movie.

So, how did you work with the source material? Because Frank Herbert certainly had ideas as to what the Chakobsa language should sound and, and where it had sort of evolved from.

DAVID: Eh, kind of, I, I mean, um, he, there really isn't, uh, evidence of, of a language in there, like, not like the way there is in, uh, George R. R. Martin's work. It's more, he took words from different languages, a lot of them from Arabic, but also from many other languages, and would just use them periodically as terms sometimes with the same meanings, sometimes with slightly altered meanings. But what you don't see is evidence of things like, uh, inflection and syntax that was just on us.

Was there ever a time that the two of you were working together and you sort of, you know, politely disagreed about something and you kind of went back and forth about it?

JESSIE: All the time? <laugh>.

DAVID: <laugh>.

Yeah. Like what? I love some examples.

JESSIE: Oh, goodness. I can't think of a specific example.

DAVID: Yeah. because like, you know, we also work on a ton of other stuff where that happens.

JESSIE: I think it's more on other things. I think with Dune, because it was already, like the structure was already there, that at that point it, it was more, if anything, I would bring, you know, a pile of ideas to David and say, sift through them and find one that seems to fit best. I'm a brainstormer, you know, bring me a problem and I'm going to try to come up with 10 different ways to, to solve it and see which one kind of lands best with somebody else. And so it's not that I'm particularly invested in one idea more than the other. It's that, well, here's, you know, 10 different routes that we could take to solve this. Which one sounds best to you? And let's do it. I know in some projects we've had disagreements with what the most, I'm going to air quote this logical way of expanding a route through a particular derivational. You know, suffix or prefix might be where it's like, well, if you add a quality of X, this is what it should be interpreted as. This is what it means to me. And, um, sometimes we disagree on that. because our brains apparently work a little differently at times.

DAVID: That's the, the usual marriage stuff.

JESSIE: <laugh>.

Well, I'm actually curious now, because I mean, you were working on all this stuff solo and now you've got a, you've got a partner you're working with. When you look at what you've created afterwards, is there a sense where you look at the work you created together and just say, oh, you know what, this is taking this to a different level, that I wasn't doing this entirely on my own?

DAVID: Yeah, that's the thing. Like the way I looked at it, all of the stuff we do. because, you know, I worked by myself for, for like 10 years and all the stuff we've done since then. I could have done all of that on my own. It wouldn't have been as good, period. I mean, and that's, that's really the best way of looking at it. It features ideas that absolutely would never have occurred to me on my own. That's just 100% better across the board

JESSIE: And definitely better documented.

DAVID: <laugh

<,laugh> So you guys go, so you were in Hungary, right? That's where you went on set? Yeah. Yeah. Uh, so once you got there, were there things that started to change once you started seeing the costumes, the sets, the getting a feel for it or even, uh, working with the actors?

JESSIE: Well, we didn't actually get to see the actual sets, and we did not work with the actors. Um, and so we were separate from, so it's, we were there, but you know, kind of on a different side. We did see, we were, we, uh, more images. Yeah. Because they, they did have a, you know, like along the walls, like pictures

of costumes and props and things like that. So we did get to see more of that. It's hard to, to really pinpoint what was most beneficial about that experience. But I think it was a really big asset to be there to just have all day, every day reserved for the project, because there was so much work to be done. And it was a way of saying, we're going to, you know, shut down everything else and only work on these translations for a 10 day stretch and produce well over a hundred pages of translations within that timeframe, being able to just go directly and say, Hey, here's our question, and get it answered within, you know, 45 seconds. If we had gone back and forth over email with the time differences would've taken at minimum a two day turnaround. And if they didn't necessarily understand exactly what we were asking, our question could have been answered in a different way, which would require another set of, no, that's not what we meant. And those emails are really easy to get lost in the shuffle, especially on their end because, you know, in the production they're doing so many other things, and it answered so many of our questions and we were able to just, you know, jump right back into it and not worry about it. because that would sometimes set the, the full scene where knowing how one line was meant to be translated, we could then better understand the, the whole scene in terms of what the best approach would be for translating.

I love you guys to get really specific in terms of like describing a particular scene that you worked on where it was a really interesting creative challenge. Like, could you talk about like, what was going on in the scene? Uh, what were some of the really interesting challenges in terms of what the characters were saying to each other.

DAVID: There is a scene at the end where Paul is addressing the war council, and this was all done in English. And first off, we were like, this doesn't make sense because of the situation. You know, this is the, this is the war council. Everybody here is Fremen. Why is he speaking English? And so, uh, on our own, we decided to translate this anyway. Part of it is like, you know, ask for forgiveness, not permission, but, um, but that's not quite what this is. You don't ask, Hey, do you think we could translate this into Jacob said, and they say, Hmm, maybe. And they're like, all right, give us some time to do that. You say, we have translated this into Chakobsa. Here it is. And we think that it might make more sense to use this rather than English. And you know, the work is already done, so give it a shot. So yeah, we, we translated this, but not only that, it was a difficult piece to translate. So the English is, but you're afraid. What if he could be the one? This could be the moment you've been waiting for all your life. You're praying now to your grandmother who passed away nine moons ago. She lost an eye a rocket smashed her face as she was crossing the belt. She was 12. And it happened at that time, this world had a Fremen named Dune. Some of this was

quite simple, like, but you're afraid. What if he could be the one that's, this is part and parcel with stuff we'd already translated before, but, uh, didn't have a word for grandmother. That was I think, an easier one.

JESSIE: Yeah.

DAVID: Because we just derived it from, we had a, a root for mother from which we'd also derived reverend mother. And was like, all right, well, let's just come up with a strategy for grandmother. But this was interesting. Who passed away nine moons ago. Ago is like one of the worst words in English.

<laugh>. What? Why?

DAVID: It's awful. Well, if you think about like, what even is it, uh, just on the face of it, what part of speech is ago?

I don't know.

DAVID: Uh huh. <laugh>, like most it, it's prepositional in nature, but it's not a preposition. So in other words, like you say, like, we went to the movie before. She did, we went to the movie after she did. But then it's like, you have ago, and it can't be used before anything. It could only be used after time expressions. Historically, it comes from, uh, a preposition A and like a gone.

JESSIE: Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>.

DAVID: Yeah. So wad-zi is, uh, is ago. Well, oh, it's a prepositional phrase. That's what it is.

JESSIE: Yeah, and it was shortened

DAVID: Wa-zi

JESSIE: It means before now.

DAVID: So, so technically it's an adverb. Okay.

JESSIE: So we used it as a reduction of before now.

DAVID: Ah! Okay. Okay. And then of course, wa is something that derives ultimately from eye.

JESSIE: Like your eye to see.

DAVID: Your eye. And it's a reduction of at the eye of, and then it's been reduced. So it was reduced from unwathi to unwa, and then that just kind of disappears to wa. She was 12 when it happened. That was what I was remembering. So the nine moons, that was pretty clear, but she was 12 when it happened. In English, right, If you want to give somebody's age, you say they were X. Right. In different languages, you date you, you say something different. So you, you know, uh, tango cuarenta y tres años. That's literally, I have 43 years in like High Valyrian you say, I have seen 43 years. And so then we needed some sort of expression to say that she was 12 when it happened, which is a very complex phrase. I am pretty sure that Jesse came up with that.

JESSIE: Yeah. So instead of like saying, you are 12, or she was 12, we decided to make it a phrase that boils down to, you would say she had walked for 12

years at that time. Uh, because we had a lot of metaphorical imagery built into some of the phrases and words that we had created about, you know, the sand and movement on it and walking through it. And so, um, we had decided to use that to say someone was 12 years to say you had walked for 12 years.

DAVID: Yeah.

Hmm. Um, so you didn't work with the actors, but, um, did some of them have, did you learn that some of them were, were having more difficulty or, or with it, or, you know, did they ever have to have you like, you know, like, Hey, somebody has a question for you.

DAVID: Well, I could tell by their performances that some of them had difficulty. <laugh> <laugh>.

All right. Well, who nailed it? <laugh>.

DAVID: Oh, I, well, one thing I was a little surprised by. So, um, I record the dialogue for all our productions, and I, I generally record it the same way, which is, I, I record the line exactly as it's supposed to be read, then I do it slow, then I do the English. The request came through that, uh, Timothée Chalamet specifically asked to only have the slow version in the English, which I'd never gotten that request before. because like, when it's done slowly, like it's done, you know, without really pacing, without, you know, the intonation. because you know, like, I don't know, just this line, but you're afraid, what if you could be the one, you know, regular speed like that. Right. But then the slow one like that. So it's very clear how everything is pronounced. But you know, usually I would say most actors use both. He only wanted the slow version. You, you comply with that. Uh, and just we sent it on. I was very impressed with how he did it, especially the, the last scene. Yeah. It was done very well. Uh, both, you know, it was pronounced very well, which that part, I guess is less surprising since he was only had the slow version to work with, but also the flow of it was very good and very impressive. And so it's like, well, yeah, you perform like that, you get it whatever way you want. <laugh>

So David, I think I talked to you about six years ago. In those years, has the field changed at all in terms of, uh, are, are there, is there more demand now for constructed languages? Or is it about the same as it was when we talked back then?

DAVID: I think it's about the same, but not that it's remained static. Demand was steadily increasing. The pandemic changed a lot of stuff, and the writer's strike changed a lot of stuff. I, I will say something, I think that a steadily increased is the amount of productions that could have a created language do. In other words, if this is like 2008, let's say that there's 25 productions that could possibly have a created language, maybe one of them would. I you round that and say, today there's 25 productions that could have a created language, I would say it's

probably like eight that do. And that's a massive increased percentage wise. That I think has, has in in general been a success. And I think that what that says is production knows that it's a possibility. And that's great.

So are you, uh, both, are you, are you satisfied with, uh, the amount of your work that remained in the final cut of the film?

DAVID: Yes. Yes. <laugh>

JESSIE: Yes. Yes.

DAVID: And I, and listen, that means something when we say it. Yeah. Because most, more often than not, that answer is no. More often than not, our work is cut to the bone. Paper Girls is a great example of that. Paper Girls was a show on Amazon. We really love the language we created for it. We translated a bunch of stuff for it. Our material can be heard in like a staticky radio transmission for a couple seconds in the first episode. And that's, it never occurs in the rest of the episodes. And we weren't credited for our work.

JESSIE: You know, that's obviously worst case scenario. Yeah. I think, um, well, I guess worst case would be it didn't show up at all.

DAVID: Yeah, sure.

JESSIE: I don't know.

DAVID: Uh, by the way, if we can give a shout out, A friend of ours, Jake Penny, created an entire language for a Madame Webb, which just came out. Whole thing was cut, and Jake was not credited. So that was a real, real bummer. Yeah. Um, it, it happens

JESSIE: When, and when David says, you know, like, we're, we're happy with it. Um, it's also a level of understanding the scope of how much we had thought might make it in. Because for instance, I was really happy with how much of the language that we created for Elemental showed up in Elemental, given the fact that it was a kid show, given the fact that it was animation and even just having words scattered here and there was really satisfying in terms of understanding the scope of the project.

DAVID: Yeah.

JESSIE: What we saw in Dune was so far beyond that in terms of how much is in there. And what made me happiest was that there were definitely entire conversations that you could see from a director point of view at some point could have been easier just to say, you know what, just read it in English. But they didn't. And they even had background, you know, actors speaking in the language that doesn't get subtitled, but you hear them in the background like murmuring and it's in the language. And so all of those decisions to have so much of the language represented that was just beyond incredible. It was, it was really amazing.

DAVID: Yeah, it's really saying something when it's like the lion's share of what you translate, uh, for production actually shows up. And then not only that, you translate stuff that wasn't called for and that shows up too. It, it, it was, it was really something that we could be quite proud of.

Well, it's interesting because there's been a lot of coverage about why Dune 2 has, Dune 2 has gotten such a warm reception. And I think that a lot of, a lot of people are yearning for like a smarter, more complicated, serious adult sci-fi, that's been a reaction to a lot of what's come out in recent years. Hopefully that would also mean that a lot of people are going to be watching this constructed language with subtitles and be like, yes, that's also we want more of too.

JESSIE: We hope so.

DAVID: Yeah. It'd be nice <laugh>,

You're like, I'm not, I'm not counting on it.

That's it for this week. Thank you for listening. Special thanks to David and Jessie Peterson and everyone we heard in the 2018 episode.

If you'd like to hear more episodes about Dune, in 2017 I did an episode called The Book of Dune where I talked with Muslim fans of the series about the way that Frank Herbert incorporated aspects of Islam into the Fremen culture. And in 2021, I did an episode called The Ecology of Dune where I looked at the environmental messages in the book and whether Frank Herbert would fit into today's contemporary environmental movement.

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