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# THE LINGUISTIC AND SOCIOCULTURAL FUNCTIONS OF DOTHRAKI AND HIGH VALYRIAN IN “GAME OF THRONES”: CONSTRUCTED LANGUAGES AS TOOLS FOR WORLDBUILDING<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT:

*THIS PAPER OFFERS A CONDENSED LINGUISTIC AND SOCIOCULTURAL ANALYSIS OF DOTHRAKI AND HIGH VALYRIAN, THE TWO CONSTRUCTED LANGUAGES CREATED BY DAVID J. PETERSON FOR HBO'S "GAME OF THRONES". DRAWING ON PETERSON'S WORKS AND INTERVIEW INSIGHTS, THE STUDY EXPLORES HOW THESE LANGUAGES CONTRIBUTE TO NARRATIVE AUTHENTICITY AND IMMERSIVE WORLDBUILDING. DOTHRAKI IS EXAMINED THROUGH ITS PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES, EQUINE-CENTERED LEXICON, AND CULTURAL GROUNDING IN A NOMADIC WARRIOR SOCIETY. HIGH VALYRIAN IS ANALYZED AS A PRESTIGE LANGUAGE WITH LATIN-LIKE STATUS, MARKED BY GRAMMATICAL COMPLEXITY AND SYMBOLIC POWER. BOTH CONLANGS ARE SHOWN TO REFLECT THE SOCIOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS AND IDENTITIES OF THE FICTIONAL WORLD, SERVING NOT ONLY AS TOOLS FOR REALISM BUT ALSO AS MARKERS OF CULTURAL DISTINCTION. THE PAPER ARGUES THAT, DESPITE THEIR FICTIONAL ORIGIN, THESE LANGUAGES FUNCTION WITH THE INTERNAL LOGIC AND STRUCTURAL DEPTH OF NATURAL LANGUAGES*

**KEY WORDS:** LANGUAGE CONSTRUCTION, GAME OF THRONES, DOTHRAKI, HIGH VALYRIAN, WORLDBUILDING, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE, FICTIONAL SOCIETIES

## INTRODUCTION

This paper offers a concise linguistic analysis of the two constructed languages, Dothraki and High Valyrian, featured in the HBO fantasy series “Game of Thrones”. Constructed languages, or *conlangs* [1], refer to languages intentionally devised for specific purposes, whether for artistic expression, fictional universes, or even as experimental linguistic projects. These languages are meticulously crafted, constructed from the ground up, often with their own grammar, vocabulary, and phonetics. They provide a means of communication within the context of a fictional world, lending authenticity and depth to the narrative and the cultures

<sup>1</sup> This article represents a shortened version of part of a chapter of the author’s unpublished doctoral dissertation for the Doctoral School of Linguistic and Literary Studies, “Babeş-Bolyai” University, Cluj-Napoca, entitled “From Fiction to Function. The Use and Influence of Dothraki and High Valyrian Constructed Languages in the Game of Thrones Fandom.”

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portrayed. In “Game of Thrones”, language assumes a crucial role within its highly diverse setting. Here, the presence of not only the two specially crafted languages for the TV series, High Valyrian and Dothraki, but also their respective dialects hold significant importance [2]. Initially, a brief overview of these languages is provided, followed by a brief account of their creation and development processes. This analysis draws upon insights from David J. Peterson<sup>3</sup>, the linguist responsible for developing both Dothraki and High Valyrian. In 2009, the series creators, David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, commissioned the Language Creation Society to develop the Dothraki language for the television adaptation. Linguist David J. Peterson was appointed to this task, bringing his expertise in language construction to bear. Peterson [3] characterizes his approach to Dothraki as distinctive, noting that it was his first professional conlang project. In contrast to his earlier personal projects, the development of Dothraki was not an entirely individual undertaking. Instead, it was inspired by the fictional universe and characters created by George R. R. Martin, the author of the original “A Song of Ice and Fire” book series. Nevertheless, Martin’s literary work provided only a limited linguistic foundation, consisting primarily of a small set of nouns and proper names. Both Dothraki and High Valyrian are unequivocally constructed languages—often termed “artificial” languages in specialized literature—designed to enhance the authenticity and plausibility of the fictional society depicted in “Game of Thrones” for its viewing audience. In her study, Stria [4] uses the term artificial ‘as a broad name for all languages that are the result of deliberate and conscious creation and planning’, and we will adopt a similar approach.

### **DOTHRAKI – CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS AND CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND**

Dothraki serves as the primary language spoken by the nomadic Dothraki people in the television series. This group of warriors, recognizable by their long braids and adeptness in horse-riding, roams the expansive plains of Essos, known as the Dothraki Sea, situated beyond the mythical Narrow Sea. Often referred to as “*horselords*”, their profound connection with horses is such that they are believed to be born, live, and perish while on horseback. Drawing inspiration from a blend of cultures including the Mongols, Huns, Alans, Turks, as well as various Native American plains tribes, the Dothraki epitomize a formidable and nomadic lifestyle. As stated by Benioff, ‘George had created a few words for them in the book, but it wasn’t fully fleshed out. For the series, we actually thought it would be much more believable if we heard them speaking their own language, rather than have them speak in heavily accented English. We really felt the only way it would work is if there was a real language.’ [5]

Consequently, the producers tasked David Peterson with creating a language described as “harsh-sounding” and devoid of English consonants to ensure it sounded distinctly foreign. Benioff noted that “Dothraki changed the sound of the show” [5]. Regarding their culture and lifestyle, the Dothraki people ‘live in hordes called “*khalasars*”; their chieftains are called “*khals*” while the wife of a “*khal*” is known as a “*khaleesi*” [6]. According to Peterson [3], ‘the Dothraki frequently make reference to riding horses (“*hrazef*”). Even the deity worshipped by the Dothraki is a horse called the “*Great Stallion*” (“*Vezhof*”). Dothraki fight battles on horseback and ride to get around the grassy plains of Essos known as the “*Dothraki Sea*” (“*Havazh Dothraki*”). When a *khal* can no longer ride his horse, he is no longer the leader of

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<sup>3</sup> Author’s note: Peterson has a Bachelor’s Degree in English and a Bachelor’s Degree in Linguistics from UC Berkeley (2003), and a Master’s Degree in Linguistics from UC San Diego (2005). He taught English at Fullerton College from 2006 to 2008.

his “*khalasar*” (Dothraki horde). As a result of the importance of horses to Dothraki culture, there are many idiomatic expressions related to horses and riding’ [3].

## LEXICON

Following an overview of Dothraki culture and language, this section offers a concise linguistic analysis emphasizing its distinguishing features relative to English and natural languages, alongside its language acquisition potential. Peterson’s initial phase in developing Dothraki involved extracting lexical items from the first three books of “A Song of Ice and Fire”, including key nouns and proper names such as “*khal*” (the leader of a Dothraki horde), “*khaleesi*” (queen, wife of a “*khal*”), and “*Khalasar*” (a horde loyal to a single “*khal*”), “*Dothrak*” ([I] ride – the verb “*dothralat*” (to ride) in the 1<sup>st</sup> person singular or “rider”), “*qoi*” (blood), “*vaes*” (city), “*Drogo*” (male Dothraki name), “*Barbo*” (male Dothraki name), and “*jaqqa*” (executioner; person responsible for someone’s death). Peterson [7] likens this task to completing a partially assembled puzzle, requiring both interpretation and creative expansion. In a personal interview with Peterson, we explored the functional scope of his constructed languages for “Game of Thrones”. Specifically, we inquired whether, during the development of Dothraki and High Valyrian, he envisioned these languages as capable of functioning comparably to natural languages in terms of practical utility, or if their design was primarily driven by the objective of fulfilling cinematic requirements. Peterson responded that the languages were created for ordinary human speakers and thus needed to operate as natural languages to effectively serve their cinematic purpose. He emphasized that the only fictional aspect lies within the lexicon, which is intentionally limited to the cultural and technological context of the “Song of Ice and Fire” universe—a world less technologically advanced than the modern era and containing fantastical elements. Consequently, both languages deliberately exclude modern vocabulary; however, grammatically, they are structured to fulfill the communicative functions expected of any natural language.

Peterson’s deliberate omission of modern terminology highlights the extent to which Dothraki vocabulary reflects the cultural realities and worldview of its speakers. Notably, Dothraki lacks equivalents for contemporary concepts such as “telephone,” “television,” “computer,” “bank,” or “vehicle,” while exhibiting a rich lexicon pertaining to horses, underscoring their central role within Dothraki society [3]. The very name “*Dothraki*” signifies “rider,” illustrating the cultural significance embedded within the language. The following sections provide examples of Dothraki lexical items and expressions that further demonstrate the profound importance and reverence accorded to horses by the Dothraki people.

Peterson’s [3] Dothraki vocabulary extensively reflects the culture’s equestrian focus, encompassing terms for horse types, related equipment, actions, and idiomatic expressions:

- **Horse-related nouns include various breeds and types:**  
“*Cheyao*” (dark bay), “*Hrazef*” (horse), “*Hrazef chafi*” (mustang), “*Jedda*” (pony), “*Lame*” (mare), “*Manin*” (young male horse), “*Messhih*” (perlino), “*Nerro*” (foal), “*Nozho*” (chestnut), “*Ocha*” (dun), “*Qahlan*” (palomino), “*Sajo*” (steed), “*Vezh*” (stallion).
- **Equipment and rider-related nouns include:**  
“*Darif*” (saddle), “*Dothrak*” (rider), “*Eve*” (tail), “*Javrath*” (reins), “*Rhiko*” (stirrup), “*Sajak*” (mounted rider).
- **Verbs associated with horse-riding encompass:**

“*Chetirat*” (to canter), “*Dothralat*” (to ride), “*Drogat*” (to drive an animal), “*Gorat*” (to charge a horse), “*Hezhahat*” (to travel), “*Javrathat*” (to guide with reins), “*Vidrogerat*” (to ride), “*Karlinat*” (to gallop), “*Sajat*” (to mount).

- **Common interjections used in horsemanship are [3]:**  
“*Soroh!*” (“Halt!”), “*Hosh!*” (“Giddyup!”), “*Affa!*” (“Woah!”)
- **Idiomatic expressions employing the verb “*dothralat*” (to ride) [3]:**
  - “*Hash yer dothrae chek?*” (“How are you?” / lit. “Do you ride well?”)
  - “*Anha dothrak chek*” (“I’m fine” / lit. “I ride well”)
  - “*Dothras chek*” (“Be cool” / lit. “Ride well”)
  - “*Anha dothrak she vaesoon*” (“I’m from the city” / lit. “I ride from the city”)
  - “*Khalakka dothrae mr’anha*”<sup>4</sup> (approximate personal translation: “I have a baby inside me” / “I’m pregnant” - lit. “A prince rides inside me”)
  - “*Anha dothrak adakhataan*” (“I’m about to eat” / lit. “I ride eating”)
  - “*Anha dothrak adakhatoon*” (“I just ate” / lit. “I ride from eating”).

The extensive range of equine-related vocabulary in Dothraki, as developed by Peterson, highlights the depth and cultural specificity of the language. Beyond foundational terms such as “stallion,” “mare,” and “young male horse,” the linguist includes nuanced distinctions relating to breed, color, and size—for example, terms for “bay,” “pony,” “perlino,” “palomino,” and “chestnut.” While such lexical richness is consistent with the Dothraki’s deep cultural connection to horses, it is particularly noteworthy within the framework of a constructed language, challenging the assumption that conlangs lack lexical depth.

In addition to a comprehensive noun set, Peterson devised a range of verbs and interjections linked to equestrian practices. The verb “*dothralat*” (to ride) plays a central role in idiomatic expressions, extending metaphorically to everyday actions, such as eating—e.g., “*Anha dothrak adakhataan*” (I’m about to eat; lit. I ride eating). This metaphorical use reflects how deeply horsemanship permeates Dothraki life and worldview.

Furthermore, the Dothraki diet reinforces this symbiotic relationship. As Peterson [3] notes, while Dothraki horses graze on the plains of the Dothraki Sea, the Dothraki themselves consume horse meat (“*gavat*”; “*zhifikh*” for the dried, salted version), fermented mare’s milk (“*lamekh*”), blood sausages (“*ninthqoyi*”), and blood pie (“*fosokhqoyi*”), all of which are culinary staples.

## PHONOLOGICAL AND ORTHOGRAPHIC FEATURES OF DOTHRAKI

Following grammatical considerations, Peterson’s next step in constructing Dothraki involved establishing its phonological system and orthographic conventions. Due to the absence of a pronunciation guide in George R. R. Martin’s original texts, fans and producers relied on their own interpretations. Acknowledging this, and considering the predominantly American English-speaking audience, Peterson aligned Dothraki pronunciation with American English norms while incorporating non-English phonemes when Martin’s spellings deviated significantly from English conventions [7].

<sup>4</sup> Author’s note: The Dothraki word “*khalakka*” translates as “prince”. This sentence refers to Daenerys Targaryen’s statement when she informs Khal Drogo of her pregnancy by uttering the Dothraki phrase “*Khalakka dothrae mr’anha*”, which translates to “a prince rides inside me”. This scene occurs in Season 1, Episode 2 of “Game of Thrones”, titled “The Kingsroad”, and it marks a significant turning point in their relationship and sets the stage for subsequent events in the series.

Peterson [3] notes that Dothraki is “a lightly inflectional language” without a native writing system. Consequently, he employs a Romanized orthography but emphasizes the language’s inherently oral nature—stating that it is meant to be spoken aloud and with force for full effect.

Key phonological features include:

- The vowel *u* only appears in the cluster *qu*.
- The consonants *p* and *b* are generally absent, except in proper names.
- All vowels are pronounced separately, even in clusters.
- Vowels are pronounced with cardinal values.
- Most consonants are pronounced as spelled; *r* behaves similarly to Spanish, and coronal consonants (*t, d, n, l*) are dental, lending the language a foreign quality [7].

Pronunciation may vary, especially between native and non-native speakers. For instance, Khaleesi can be rendered as “*khal-eh-si*”, “*khal-ee-si*”, or “*kal-ee-si*” [3]. Such variation underscores the oral flexibility of the language.

### Alphabet and pronunciation guide

Peterson [3] presents an alphabetical pronunciation guide with corresponding examples in both English and Dothraki. Selected highlights include:

- **A:** between hat and hot – “*astat*” (to say)
- **CH:** as in mischief – “*chare*” (ear)
- **KH:** as in German Bach – “*khefat*” (to sneeze)
- **R:** rolled or tapped as in Spanish – “*rhaesh*” (land)
- **TH:** as in thin – “*athrokar*” (fear)
- **ZH:** as in measure – “*zhavvorsa*” (dragon)

Vowel clusters are fully pronounced, creating syllabic separation. For instance, *krazaaj* (mountain) is articulated as “*kra-za-aj*”, with all vowels voiced distinctly [3]. Other examples include:

- **ae** – “*vaes*” (city)
- **io** – “*chiori*” (woman)
- **oo** – “*m’athchomaroon*” (hello)

### Gemination and its role

Double consonants in Dothraki are pronounced distinctly—a phonetic phenomenon known as gemination. For example:

- **dd** – “*addrivat*” (to kill)
- **ss** – “*disse*” (only, just)
- **ll** – “*jelli*” (cheese)

This contrasts with single consonants that may carry different meanings, as in “*jelli*” (cheese) versus “*jeli*” (lemon) [3].

### Cross-linguistic comparisons

The Dothraki pronunciation system aligns with patterns familiar to speakers of Romance languages. For instance, Romanian similarly preserves vowel distinctiveness in clusters (“*idee*” [i-de-e], “*zoologică*” [zo-o-lo-gi-că]) and consonant gemination (“*accepta*” [ac-cep-ta], “*înnorat*” [în-no-rat]). As such, native Romanian speakers may find Dothraki pronunciation relatively intuitive.

### Stress

Peterson [3] outlines the primary stress patterns in Dothraki as follows: for words ending in a vowel, stress typically falls on the first syllable (e.g., “*ātaki*”, “*hāvzi*”), whereas for words ending in a consonant, the final syllable is stressed (e.g., “*lajāk*”, “*m’athchomaroōn*”). Additionally, when a word ends in a vowel and the penultimate syllable is heavy—defined as a consonant-vowel-consonant structure followed by another consonant—stress shifts to that penultimate syllable (e.g., “*zhavōrsa*”, “*vosēcchi*”). These regular and transparent stress rules facilitate pronunciation and are particularly accessible to speakers of Romance languages, as previously discussed.

### Word creation

Following the establishment of the orthographic system, Peterson [7] aimed to generate new lexical items that conformed aesthetically and phonologically to the existing Dothraki vocabulary. As he explains, ‘part of what will give a language its character is having a bunch of words that look like they obviously fit together. That’s what I did with Dothraki.’ This systematic approach to word formation ensured internal consistency and linguistic cohesion within the constructed lexicon.

The table below (**Fig.1**) illustrates the word-building patterns employed by Peterson, mapping attested words from the source material onto phonological templates and showing examples of newly created vocabulary based on those patterns [7]:

Book words	Pattern	Created words
<i>Khal, haj, dosh</i>	CVC	<i>Rek, qov, nith, maj, jin, has, fir, dim, etc.</i>
<i>hranna</i>	C(C) V( C) CV	<i>Shilla, mhotha, qwizha, rhiko, vroza, etc.</i>
<i>rhaesh</i>	C( C) VV ( C)	<i>Rhoa, noah, leik, khaor, daen, fiez, koal, etc.</i>
<i>Aggo, jaqqa</i>	( C) VC:V	<i>Lorra, ricchi, ville, yalli, zajja, zhille, khirra, etc.</i>
<i>tolorro, Cohollo</i>	CVCVCCV	<i>Zhokakkwa, najahhey, movekkha, inavva, etc.</i>

Fig. 1 - Word-building in Dothraki

### Harsh sounds

After establishing the orthographic and phonological systems of Dothraki, Peterson’s final objective was to embed certain “harsh” phonemes into high-frequency lexical items to enhance the language’s distinctiveness [7]. At this stage, he introduces the concept of “brand identity” in language creation, emphasizing the importance of phonological features that render a constructed language instantly recognizable. According to the author [7], the phonetic characteristics that contribute to Dothraki’s unique identity include doubled vowels, the voiceless velar fricative [x], geminate consonants, the trilled [r], the uvular [q], and the emphatic [h] [7].

The perception of Dothraki’s phonological identity was further reinforced by key cast and production members of “Game of Thrones”. David Benioff, co-creator of the series, described Dothraki as ‘a very guttural kind of language – it’s not an easy one to pronounce’

[5]. Emilia Clarke (Daenerys Targaryen) characterized it as “an incredible language,” noting the expressive challenge of articulating its sounds [5]. Jason Momoa (Khal Drogo) praised its rhythm and tone, likening it to a blend of Arabic and German [5]. Dar Salim (Qotho) emphasized the need for naturalness in delivery, observing that ‘you have to be very careful with these strong characters not to speak strongly as well all the time’ [5.] Finally, Iain Glen (Ser Jorah Mormont) highlighted the importance of authenticity in pronunciation, noting that improper articulation undermines the credibility of the language on screen [5]. Peterson echoes these views, stating that Dothraki ‘had to be real, for a show that has the demands for authenticity that this one does’ [5].

### GRAMMAR

Up to this point, the analysis has focused on the foundational strategies employed by Peterson to develop Dothraki as a linguistically coherent yet phonetically “harsh” and foreign-sounding language. This subsection shifts attention to key aspects of Dothraki grammar. It is important to first acknowledge that Dothraki operates as a case-marking language. As Peterson [3] explains, ‘this means that the nouns and adjectives change depending on their use in the sentence.’

The following discussion presents examples of Dothraki personal pronouns, as well as the conjugation of the verb “*dothralat*” (“to ride”) in the present tense. Verbal morphology in Dothraki is sensitive to both person and number, with verb endings changing accordingly to reflect agreement with the subject. These features are illustrated in **Figures 2** and **3** below [3]:

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
First person	-k	-ki
Second person	-e	-e
Third person	-e	-e

Fig. 2 - Verbs ending in “-lat” in the Present Tense

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
First person	dothrak	dothraki
Second person	dothrae	dothrae
Third person	dothrae	dothrae

Fig. 3 - Example: verb ending in “-lat”, “dothralat” (stem: “dothra-”) = to ride [3]

### Case marking in Dothraki

This section examines a notable grammatical feature of the Dothraki language: its system of morphological case marking. According to Peterson [3], the inclusion of case forms distinguishes Dothraki from other constructed languages designed for television or film. As he states, ‘I wanted to include a number of cases for Dothraki since, as far as I knew at the time, I hadn’t encountered another language produced for television or film with cases.’

In linguistic terms, a case is a nominal marker that indicates the grammatical role a noun plays within a sentence [3]. Dothraki employs five distinct cases: Nominative, Accusative, Genitive, Allative, and Ablative. While mastery of all five is not necessary for basic communicative competence, a general understanding of their functions enhances one’s

appreciation of the language's structure. A concise overview of each case is presented below, drawing on Peterson's descriptions [3].

### a) Nominative Case

The nominative case marks the subject of a sentence and represents the base or dictionary form of a noun. It is the form under which nouns appear in vocabulary lists [3].

Examples:

- "*arakh*" (sword/swords)
- "*jano*" (dog/dogs)
- "*rizh*" (son), "*rizhi*" (sons)

### b) Accusative Case

The accusative case typically marks the direct object of a verb. As Peterson [3] notes, this case functions similarly to English object pronouns (e.g., "he" becoming "him"). For inanimate nouns, the accusative is formed by:

- keeping the nominative form for nouns ending in a consonant,
- removing the final vowel for nouns ending in a vowel [3].

Examples:

- "*arakh*" (sword) → "*arakh*" (accusative, inanimate)
- "*jano*" (dog) → "*jan*" (accusative, inanimate)

Some inanimate nouns take -e in the accusative, particularly those ending in **g**, **w**, **q**, or in specific consonant clusters [3].

For animate nouns, accusative formation is more systematic:

Singular: add -es to the noun stem

Plural: add -is to consonant-final stems, -es to vowel-final stems

Examples:

- "*rizh*" (son) → "*rizhes*" (accusative)
- "*rizhi*" (sons) → "*rizhis*" (accusative)

### c) Genitive Case

The genitive case marks possession, comparable to the English possessive 's construction (e.g., "the khal's sword"). For inanimate nouns, the genitive is formed by adding -i to the noun stem [3].

Examples:

- "*arakh*" → "*arakhi*" ("of the sword")
- "*jano*" → "*jani*" ("of the dog")

For animate nouns, the genitive is formed by adding -(s)i, regardless of whether the noun is singular or plural.

Examples:

- "*rizh*" (son) → "*rizhi*" (genitive, singular)

- “*rizhi*” (sons) → “*rishi*” (genitive, plural)

#### d) Ablative Case

The ablative is a locative case used primarily to indicate motion away from a place or source. Additionally, it is used to express inalienable possession—a relationship in which the possessor and the possessed entity are perceived as inseparable [3]. Examples include body parts of animals, the roof of a house, or the hilt of a sword. To form the ablative of inanimate nouns, the suffix *-oon* is added to the noun stem.

Examples:

- “*arakh*” → “*arakhoon*” (“from the sword”)
- “*jano*” → “*janoon*” (“from the dog”)

Example:

“Mahrazhi dothrash vaesoon” [ma.hra.ʒi do.θraʃ va.e.so.on/] (*mahrazhi* = the men; *dothrash* = rode; *vaes* = city → *vaesoon* = from the city) → “The men rode away from the city.”

According to Peterson [7], local cases in Dothraki fulfill spatial functions that, in English and other non-case-marking languages, are typically expressed through prepositions or adpositions. However, in many languages, spatial relationships are instead encoded morphologically, through modifications to the noun itself. As per the linguist, Dothraki employs such morphological strategies to convey spatial orientation—indicating, for instance, whether an action is directed toward a noun or away from it.

Examples:

“*Anha dothra krazaajaan*” (I rode to the mountain).

[ʼan.ha.ʼdo.θra kra.za.a.dʒa.ʼan]

“*Anha dothra krazaajoon*” (I rode away from the mountain).

[ʼan.ha.ʼdo.θra kra.za.a.dʒo.ʼon]

#### e) Allative Case

The allative case is another locative case; it indicates motion towards a noun. For many verbs, it also indicates an indirect object, recipient, or goal. To form the allative case of an inanimate noun, add *-aan* to the noun stem [3].

Examples:

- “*arakh*” (sword/s) – nominative
- “*arakhaan*” (to the sword/s) – allative
- “*jano*” (dog/s) – nominative
- “*janaan*” (to the dog/s) – allative
- “*Mahrazhi dothrash vaesaan*” (“*vaes*” – city, nominative)  
[ʼma.hra.ʒi do.ʼθraʃ va.e.saʼan] - (The men rode to the city).

As per Peterson [3], the allative case for animate nouns is formed by adding *-(s)aan* to singular nouns and *-(s)ea* to plural nouns. For example: “*rizh*” (son) becomes “*rizhaan*” (“to the son” - allative), and “*rizhi*” (sons) becomes “*rizhea*” (“to the sons” - allative). Peterson also notes that certain prepositions determine case selection, although such details typically arise in more advanced stages of Dothraki language acquisition.

To conclude, Dothraki exemplifies a richly constructed language shaped by both cultural narrative and linguistic precision. Through its detailed phonological system, case-marking grammar, and culturally embedded vocabulary—particularly its equine lexicon—Dothraki achieves a high degree of internal consistency and realism. While the examples discussed offer only a glimpse into its complexity, they highlight the language’s potential for both functional use and immersive storytelling. With this foundational understanding, we now turn to High Valyrian, a markedly different constructed language within the “Game of Thrones” universe, characterized by its inflectional richness and historical depth.

## **HIGH VALYRIAN – CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS AND CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND**

This section provides a succinct overview of High Valyrian, the second constructed language developed by David J. Peterson for HBO’s “Game of Thrones” television series. According to Peterson [7], he was commissioned in 2012 to construct High Valyrian for the show’s third season. At that time, the language was limited to a collection of proper names and six lexical items: “*valonqar*”, “*valar*”, “*morghulis*”, “*dohaeris*”, “*dracarys*”, and “*maegi*.” Despite this limited foundation, he was able to develop a comprehensive linguistic system, aided by two fully formed and translated phrases supplied by author George R.R. Martin: “*Valar morghulis*” (“All men must die”) and “*Valar dohaeris*” (“All men must serve”) [7].

Within the fictional universe, High Valyrian contrasts with the guttural, consonant-heavy Dothraki language. It functions as the ancestral tongue of the Valyrian language family, spoken across the continent of Essos [8]. According to the Wiki of Westeros [9], a major fan-driven encyclopedic resource, High Valyrian—also referred to as Old Valyrian or simply Valyrian—originated in the Valyrian Freehold, a once-powerful empire located in eastern Essos. For centuries, the Valyrians exerted political and cultural dominance over much of the continent, compelling subjugated peoples to adopt, or at least comprehend, the Valyrian language.

Following the cataclysmic event known as the Doom of Valyria [10], High Valyrian ceased to function as a vernacular and was relegated to the status of a scholarly or ceremonial language throughout both Essos and Westeros [9]. Nevertheless, its legacy persisted. As Peterson [7] explains, ‘the Valyrians conquered many lands [...], and their influence stretched all the way to the Isle of Dragonstone across the Narrow Sea. [...] Many languages descended from the old High Valyrian language. These came to be known as the Bastard Valyrian tongues.’

High Valyrian also serves a communicative function among red priests [11], though this appears to stem less from its liturgical status and more from its practical role as a shared language among Essosi speakers [9]. Martin and Nakayama [12] argue that language is a form of social practice and institutional power. Peterson [7] notes that the conceptual development of Valyria was partially inspired by the historical Roman Empire. Accordingly, High Valyrian was designed to occupy a sociolinguistic position analogous to that of Latin, while its descendant varieties paralleled the Romance languages. As he clarifies, ‘I wanted to honor this intention with High Valyrian without simply copying Latin, so I decided to take some cues from it without actually using it as a model’ [7].

In “Game of Thrones”, Daenerys Targaryen stands out as one of the most emblematic figures, who is portrayed as a native speaker of High Valyrian. As the series progresses, she evolves from a vulnerable and uncertain young woman into a strong and determined leader. Another fascinating aspect of Daenerys’s character is her linguistic prowess. She initially emerges as the heir to the Targaryen legacy with a command of High Valyrian, the ancient language of her ancestors. As the series progresses, she also learns and speaks Dothraki [2]. Daenerys’s linguistic journey reflects the broader theme of cultural diversity and diplomacy in

the series. The ability to communicate in different languages becomes a tool for forging alliances, understanding local customs, and ultimately exercising power in a world characterized by intricate political intrigues and complex relationships [2]. These languages serve as the foundation for comprehending her cultural identity and its impact on her acquisition of power [2]. As per Fairclough [13], ‘communication acts as the primary locus of a sociocultural system.’ Culture and language are parallel identities, where culture serves as the foundational metaphor for communication, and communication serves as the foundational metaphor for culture. Culture plays a significant role in shaping behavior and thinking in all contexts [14]. In Daenerys’s case, her cultural identity is constructed through the languages of Dothraki and High Valyrian [2]. It becomes an essential aspect of her journey towards becoming the *Mother of Dragons* and the *Khaleesi* who unites disparate tribes under a common cause, and precisely the identity she gains as Mother of Dragons ‘provides her the power she needs to emerge as a leader’ [15]. According to Schroeder [15], ‘the Dothraki respect the tangible physical force of the dragons’<sup>5</sup> real power and the Westerosi respect their connection to the Targaryen line’. These two important aspects make Daenerys ‘able to assume her public authority’ [16]. The “Game of Thrones” series comes with a rich linguistic landscape that has gone largely unexplored. Many languages are spoken throughout the series and create an intricate web that mirrors the sociopolitical climate of the world created by George R.R. Martin [2].

In conclusion, High Valyrian illustrates the deep connection between language, culture, and power in “Game of Thrones.” Through characters like Daenerys Targaryen, the language serves as a symbol of identity and authority, highlighting how linguistic diversity shapes cultural legitimacy and political influence within the series.

## LEXICON

Regarding the previously cited High Valyrian expressions—“*Valar morghulis*” (“All men must die”) and “*Valar dohaeris*” (“All men must serve”)—Peterson [7] acknowledges that Martin’s contributions were instrumental in establishing the linguistic foundation of the language. As Peterson explains, ‘however the details worked out, I knew that “*valar*” would correspond to “*all men*”, “*morghulis*” would correspond to “*must die*”, and “*dohaeris*” would correspond to “*must serve*”. It’s possible to come up with other interpretations, but they require some trickery, and this interpretation seemed to me to be the most obvious. Tying “men” to “*valar*”, “die” to “*morghulis*”, and “serve” to “*dohaeris*” was simple; figuring out what to do with “all” and “must” would require more thought’ [7].

In summary, the creation of High Valyrian for the “Game of Thrones” television series was initiated using two phrases originally coined by Martin in his “A Song of Ice and Fire” novels. These expressions served as a springboard for further linguistic development, particularly in constructing the grammatical framework of the language. The next section will outline selected features of High Valyrian grammar.

## GRAMMAR

This section begins by revisiting the well-known High Valyrian phrases “*Valar morghulis*” (“All men must die”) and “*Valar dohaeris*” (“All men must serve”), previously discussed in both literary and televisual contexts. As Peterson [7] explains, the challenge lay in

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<sup>5</sup> Author’s note: Dragons are central to Daenerys Targaryen’s identity and heritage. As descendants of Valyria, the Targaryens used dragons to conquer Westeros and establish their rule. Daenerys, as the last known Targaryen, revives this legacy through her three dragons, which symbolize both her ancestry and her claim to power.

rendering the concept of “*all men*” rather than simply “*men*.” Instead of using adjectival suffixes, he opted for a system of number marking. By introducing a collective grammatical number—alongside the singular and plural—Peterson was able to convey the meaning of “all” through morphological means. Thus, “*valar*” was constructed as the collective form of the singular noun “*vala*”. To complete the paradigm, a paucal number was also added to represent “a few,” thereby creating a more balanced number system.

This example highlights the level of precision involved in the creation of High Valyrian and Dothraki, underscoring that these constructed languages are far from arbitrary. They follow internally consistent grammatical rules that enable meaningful and structured communication. As Peterson notes, “*valar*”—despite referring to a group—is treated grammatically as third-person singular because the collective is conceptualized as a unified whole: “The argument *valar*, then, would be treated as third person singular. All men are being treated as a cohesive, indivisible unit [...], which ended up looking like this: paucal → number (a few) → verb agreement (plural) → logic (small number of actors not treated as a cohesive unit)” [7].

Peterson [7] further emphasizes that grammatical number plays a central role in noun formation: ‘All grammatical number refers to is how many of a particular noun there are, and how that is marked (or not marked) on the noun.’ The paucal number, he adds, denotes an indefinite few, comparable to “several” or “a few” in English. High Valyrian therefore distinguishes between four grammatical numbers: singular (*vala*, “man”), plural (*vali*, “men”), paucal (*valun*, “some men”), and collective (*valar*, “all men”) [7].

### Word order

Concerning word order, Peterson [7] states that ‘in a language like High Valyrian, the form of the noun more than the word order determines who does what to whom’, unlike in English, in which ‘word order determines who does what to whom most of the time, but we can see distinctions with the pronouns when they occur as objects’ [7]. Peterson [7] provides two examples:

*‘Vala abre vījitas.* [‘va.la ‘a.bre‘vu:li.tas]

“The man kissed the woman.

*Vale abra vījitas.* [‘va.le ‘a.bra‘vu:li.tas]

“The woman kissed the man’ [7]).

Peterson [7] argues that, in the above-illustrated examples, ‘the word order stays the same (man→woman→kissed), but the meanings change thanks to the ending on the nouns “*vala*”- “man”, and “*abra*”- “woman”. Using just the first word, if “*vala*” is used, it’s the subject of the sentence (the one that does the kissing); if “*vale*” is used, it’s the object (the one that gets kissed). The difference between “*vala*” and “*vale*” is roughly the same, as the difference between “I” and “me” [7].

### PRONUNCIATION

With regard to pronunciation, Peterson [7] states that High Valyrian was designed to feature ‘a weight-sensitive stress system that would default to the penultimate syllable.’ In the case of “*morghulis*”, he explains that ‘outside of resorting to some clever trickery, there was no way I could argue that the syllable “*mor*” was light.’ Consequently, in order to place stress on the syllable *ghu*, he had to lengthen the vowel in that syllable. Technically, therefore, the phrase “*valar morghulis*” should be rendered as “*valar morghūlis*” [7].

In conclusion, this section has provided a concise overview of High Valyrian, the second constructed language developed by David Peterson for the “Game of Thrones” television series. While a comprehensive exploration of its vocabulary and grammatical structures falls beyond the present scope, the discussion has addressed key foundational elements: the initial lexicon, select grammatical features (including word order and number), and aspects of phonology and stress placement.

## CONCLUSION

This article has explored the intricate processes involved in the construction of the Dothraki and High Valyrian languages, both developed by David J. Peterson for the “Game of Thrones” television series. Far from being arbitrary linguistic inventions, these languages demonstrate systematic grammatical structures, internally consistent phonologies, and well-considered lexicons shaped by their fictional socio-cultural environments. In Dothraki, for example, phonological choices were deliberately made to evoke a harsh, guttural aesthetic consistent with the portrayed warrior culture, while High Valyrian was designed to convey antiquity, elegance, and prestige, aligning with its role as a classical and liturgical language in the fictional world.

Key linguistic elements such as case systems, number distinctions, verb conjugations, and pronunciation patterns illustrate the depth of thought invested in these conlangs. The use of collective and paucal numbers in High Valyrian, as well as the application of weight-sensitive stress rules, underscores the language’s complexity and sophistication. Additionally, the cultural and narrative functions of both languages—ranging from fostering authenticity on screen to strengthening fan engagement—highlight the important role of language in world-building and storytelling.

By analyzing both the structural features and the functional roles of Dothraki and High Valyrian, this study affirms that constructed languages, especially when embedded in transmedia franchises such as “Game of Thrones”, are not only linguistically rich but also culturally meaningful. Their careful design supports immersive storytelling while offering valuable insights into the creative intersections of linguistics, media production, and fan culture.

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## INTERVIEWS

**Personal Interview** with linguist and conlanger David J. Peterson, conducted on 05.06. 2023