

CONSTRUCTED LANGUAGE HISTORY

The Story of Klingon

How a few invented sounds for a film grew into a living language, a community and a culture.

10 Chapters | Philip Osztromok | Generated with Claude

THE STORY OF KLINGON

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The Story of Klingon

Course 1 · Chapter 1 · Before the Language

Klingon is one of the best known invented languages, but it did not arrive with the Klingons. For years the species spoke English on screen. This chapter follows the language's earliest traces, from a name in a 1960s episode to a few shouted words in 1979, and ends where the next chapter begins: with a linguist being asked to do the job properly.

Klingons Who Spoke English

The Klingons first appeared in the original *Star Trek* series in the 1960s. In all their appearances before 1979 they spoke English, even to each other. The language itself is first mentioned in the episode "The Trouble with Tribbles" (1967), in which a Klingon character pronounces the name as "Klingonee", but it is not heard until the first film.

> **A Small Date Conflict**
>
> One source dates the Klingons' first television appearance to 1968, while another dates the "Tribbles" episode to 1967. I have used the 1967 episode date and the phrase "the 1960s" for the first appearance, and the exact date is listed under "Not yet verified" below.

1979: The First Klingon Sounds

The language was heard for the first time in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979). According to Wikipedia's account, the actor James Doohan (who played Scotty) and the producer Jon Povill devised the language's basic sound and about a dozen words. Doohan recorded the lines he had written on tape, and the actor Mark Lenard, who spoke them on screen, wrote them out in a form he found useful for learning them.

A second source describes the scene differently: viewers heard "guttural shouts" from the crew of a doomed Klingon ship, and only the subtitles carried the meaning. The actors, it says, "put emotion into what were then meaningless sounds." Both descriptions agree on the main point: in 1979 there was a sound, and a few words, but not yet a language.

When	What the Klingons spoke	Who shaped it
1960s	English, even among themselves; the language is only mentioned ("Klingonee", 1967)	Television writers
1979	A few shouted words, with subtitles	James Doohan and Jon Povill; spoken by Mark Lenard
1984	A structured language, built to order	Marc Okrand (Chapter 2)

Why Not Leave It as Gibberish?

For *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (1984), the director Leonard Nimoy and the writer-producer Harve Bennett wanted the Klingons to speak a structured language rather than "random gibberish". That decision is what the whole later story rests on. It turned a few noises into a task: someone had to build a language that sounded alien, that actors could say, and that would be consistent from one film to the next. The producers asked a linguist, Marc Okrand, who had earlier written four lines of Vulcan dialogue for *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*.

The Constraint

Whatever Okrand built had to fit the sounds and words already heard in 1979. The language had to grow from that small seed instead of replacing it.

The Goal

A language that sounds as alien as the Klingons look, but that actors can pronounce on set.

The Result

A grammar and dictionary, and eventually a community of learners. That is the rest of this course.

Two Names for "Klingon"

The 1967 episode's "Klingonee" is not the same as the name the community uses for the language. Among Klingon speakers, "Klingonese" is often taken to mean a different

language, Klingonaase, introduced in John M. Ford's 1984 novel *The Final Reflection*. This course uses "Klingon" for the language Okrand built.

What We Can Say, and What We Cannot

The sources agree that the Klingons spoke English at first, that a few words and a sound arrived in 1979, and that a real language was commissioned for 1984. They differ on who deserves the credit for the early words, so this course credits Doohan and Povill for the 1979 sound and a dozen words, and Okrand for everything that followed.

Not Yet Verified

I have not checked the exact date of the Klingons' first television appearance, whether the 1979 words were later changed to fit Okrand's language, or how Okrand was approached for the third film. These come up in Chapter 2.

Sources for This Chapter

- Wikipedia, "Klingon language" (history and origins section).
- The Klingon Language Institute, "Development and Use of the Klingon Language" (kli.org).

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Make a timeline with three entries (1967, 1979, 1984) saying what the Klingons spoke in each and who shaped it.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

The chapter gives two different descriptions of the 1979 scene. Say what each stresses and what they agree on.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain why "random gibberish" was a problem for the producers of the third film, and name the three requirements the new language had to meet.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **1960s:** Klingons speak English on television; the language is mentioned in 1967 ("Klingonee").
- **1979:** a sound and about a dozen words by James Doohan and Jon Povill, spoken by Mark Lenard.
- **1984:** the third film commissions a structured language from Marc Okrand.
- **Constraint:** sound alien, be pronounceable, stay consistent with 1979.

Coming Next

The Story of Klingon, Chapter 2 meets Marc Okrand: who he was, how he came to the job, and how he set about inventing the language.

The Story of Klingon

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · Marc Okrand

The person who turned a few shouted words into a language was not a science-fiction writer but a working linguist. This chapter looks at who Marc Okrand is, how a captioning job led to Star Trek, and what he was asked to do. It follows The Story of Klingon, Chapter 1, which ended with the producers wanting more than gibberish.

A Linguist, Not a Fan

Year	Step
1948	Born in Los Angeles (3 July, according to Wikipedia).
1970	B.A. in linguistics, University of California, Santa Cruz.
1977	Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley. His dissertation was a grammar of Mutsun, an extinct language of the Ohlone (Costanoan) group.
1975 to 1978	Taught undergraduate linguistics at the University of California, Santa Barbara.
From 1978	Postdoctoral fellow at the Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.
Later	Joined the National Captioning Institute, working on closed captions and live captioning for television; he retired from it in 2013.

His training matters for the story. Okrand knew how real languages are put together, especially Native American ones, so he knew which features a made-up language could borrow and which would give itself away as invented.

Vulcan First: Star Trek II

In 1982, while coordinating captions for the Academy Awards, Okrand met a friend who was working with the producer Harve Bennett on *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*. He was hired to write Vulcan dialogue: four lines, dubbed over the English that Leonard Nimoy and Kirstie Alley

had already filmed. Okrand later remembered thinking, "Oh, my God, I just taught Mr. Spock how to speak Vulcan!"

> **One Version of the Story**
>
> The detail about the Oscars comes from two accounts that agree on the main facts but differ in small ones: one says he met "a friend working with Bennett", the other says "a producer", and neither names the person. Treat the exact route into the job as loosely told.

The Klingon Commission: Star Trek III

Two years later, Bennett asked Okrand to create a language for the Klingons. He had a head start and a constraint: James Doohan had coined a few Klingon words for the 1979 film, and Okrand built on their sounds (see The Story of Klingon, Chapter 1). Paramount hired him both to develop the language and to coach the actors in it for *Star Trek III* and, later, *Star Trek V* and *Star Trek VI*.

Make It Alien

A source from the Klingon Language Institute says his task was to make the language as alien as the Klingons' ridged foreheads.

Make It Speakable

Actors had to be able to say it on set, and it had to stay consistent with the battle cries of the first film.

Make It Stick

On set he coached the cast and had veto power over any take in which a line was mispronounced, though he is reported to have used it sparingly.

How He Built It

The sources say little about the design in detail, but three points are clear:

- **No model language.** The KLI says he did not base Klingon on any existing language.
- **Influences by accident.** Wikipedia says Okrand studied some Native American and Southeast Asian languages and that their features "worked their way into Klingon, but for the most part, not by design". The linguist Robert Jago has pointed out similarities with Halkomelem, though Wikipedia does not say whether this is accepted.
- **The language bent to the actors.** Okrand amended the language to match actors' mispronunciations and changes made to the subtitles, so some of Klingon is a record of what was said on set.

Why That Last Point Matters

An invented language usually has a plan on paper before anyone speaks it. Klingon was shaped in part in the studio, line by line, with an expert correcting actors and sometimes the language correcting itself. That is part of why Klingon has odd corners that a purely planned language would not have.

Beyond Klingon

Okrand later worked on other invented languages: an alien language for the Intel film *The Journey Inside* (1994), Atlantean for Disney's *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001), some lines for the 2009 *Star Trek* film and Kelpien lines for *Star Trek: Discovery* (2018). He wrote three Klingon books (*The Klingon Dictionary*, *The Klingon Way*, *Klingon for the Galactic Traveler*), recorded audio courses and co-wrote the libretto of a Klingon opera, '*u*', first staged in The Hague in September 2010. The next chapters follow those books.

Not to Be Confused With

Okrand is not a fan who learned Klingon; he is the person who made it, and he says other people speak it more fluently than he does.

Not Yet Verified

I have not checked the sound inventory and grammar choices he made, which belong to Klingon Grammar 1. The specific Native American languages he drew on are not named in these sources. The dates for his Kelpien and 2009 work are from a single reference

summary. His job title at the captioning institute is given as "Director of Live Captioning" in one source and "a director of live captioning" in the other.

Sources for This Chapter

- Wikipedia, "Marc Okrand" and "Klingon language".
- The Conlang Library, "Conlangers Extraordinaire #3: Marc Okrand".
- The Klingon Language Institute, "Development and Use of the Klingon Language".

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

List the steps that took Okrand from a university degree to the Klingon commission, in order, with the year or period of each.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

The chapter says the language was shaped in the studio as well as on paper. Give two pieces of evidence from the sources.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

One source says Klingon was not based on any existing language. Another says features of other languages appeared in it "not by design". Explain how both can be true.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Who:** Marc Okrand, linguist (Ph.D. Berkeley 1977, Mutsun grammar), later in television captioning.
- **1982:** hired to dub four lines of Vulcan for *Star Trek II*.
- **1984:** asked by Harve Bennett to create Klingon for *Star Trek III*, building on Doohan's few words.
- **Method:** no model language; some features crept in by accident; the language bent to the actors' pronunciation.

Coming Next

The Story of Klingon, Chapter 3 looks at the book that made the language usable: *The Klingon Dictionary* of 1985.

The Story of Klingon

Course 1 · Chapter 3 · The Dictionary

Marc Okrand built the language for the screen, but a language only becomes a language when it is written down so that anyone can check it. In 1985 he did that. The Klingon Dictionary is the single most important document in this story, because it is where Klingon stopped being something an actor said and became something anyone could learn.

The Book in Numbers

Fact	Detail
Author	Marc Okrand
Publisher	Pocket Books (United States)
First published	1985
Expanded	an addendum in 1992
Length	paperback, 191 pages
Vocabulary	about 1,500 words, followed by a list of useful phrases
Sales	more than 300,000 copies, according to a 2009 book by Arika Okrent

A Book Not Written for Learners

The surprising fact is how the book was meant to be used. Wikipedia describes it as "never intended as a learning book": it has no exercises and was originally a guide for scriptwriters and actors. The merchandising for *Star Trek* fans came later. That helps explain why it is a reference (what the language does) and not a course (how to practise it), and why a whole community later grew up to write the lessons the book never contained.

What Is Inside

Pronunciation

The sounds are written with Latin letters, not phonetic symbols. Upper-case letters mark special sounds: for example *q* is a voiceless uvular affricate and *Q* a voiceless uvular plosive.

Grammar

The largest section, organised by word type, with a few examples for each rule. This is the part later covered by Klingon Grammar 1.

Vocabulary and Phrases

Around 1,500 words, then a list of useful phrases. Learners usually met the language through these phrases first.

The 1992 Addendum

By 1992 more Klingon had been spoken in the films and in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* than the first edition covered. The addendum added new points of grammar and about 200 words from those sources. This is the first example of a pattern that runs through the rest of the course: Okrand adds to the language, and the community keeps track.

Spreading the Book

Year	Edition
1995	Portuguese (Brazil), *Dicionário da língua klingon*
1996	German; it contained many typos and errors, and a corrected version by Lieven Litaer followed in 2013
1998	Italian (Fanucci Editore)
2008	Czech; e-book versions began the same year
2009	iPhone app from Simon & Schuster, part of a "Klingon Language Suite"
2024	Arabic, the first edition to use the Klingon script

Year	Edition
2025	Japanese, with a QR code linking to an online list of newer words

In popular culture, the dictionary appears in an episode of *The Big Bang Theory* in a game of Klingon Boggle.

Why the Book Mattered

Before 1985, Klingon was something said on screen. After it, Klingon was something a stranger could look up. The dictionary set a baseline: a word or a rule either appears in Okrand's work or it does not. That test, used by the Klingon Language Institute, is what the community later calls *canon* (Chapter 5).

A Counting Problem

The Wikipedia article's opening says the book has been translated into "five languages", but its own list shows six (Portuguese, German, Italian, Czech, Arabic, Japanese). The chapter lists all six and leaves the discrepancy flagged, since I have not checked which is right.

Not Yet Verified

The 300,000 copies is a figure from a 2009 book, reported by Wikipedia, and I have not checked it. The sources say little about how long the book took to write or how critics received it, so this chapter does not claim anything about either. The pronunciation letters (*q* and *Q*) are quoted as Wikipedia describes them.

Sources for This Chapter

- Wikipedia, "The Klingon Dictionary" and "Klingon language".

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Give five facts about the 1985 book (author, publisher, year, length, vocabulary size) and say which one you would double-check before quoting.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain why a book that "was never intended as a learning book" ended up being how people learned Klingon.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Describe the three parts of the book and what the 1992 addendum added. Then say what pattern the addendum starts.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **1985:** *The Klingon Dictionary*, Pocket Books, 191 pages, about 1,500 words.
- **Origin:** a guide for scriptwriters and actors; no exercises.
- **1992:** addendum with new grammar and about 200 words.
- **Reach:** over 300,000 copies (reported); translated into Portuguese, German, Italian, Czech, Arabic and Japanese.

Coming Next

The Story of Klingon, Chapter 4 follows the people who gathered around the book: the Klingon Language Institute and its first learners.

The Story of Klingon

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · A Community Forms

A language needs speakers. By the early 1990s, Klingon had a dictionary (The Story of Klingon, Chapter 3) and a few fans who took it seriously. This chapter follows how those fans found each other, and how an organisation grew around them that still looks after the language.

Finding Each Other

The Klingon Language Institute (KLI) describes the start of the community like this: "Human students of the Klingon tongue found each other and began to communicate using the Internet." After the 1985 book, a few fans took the vocabulary and grammar seriously and set out to learn it. Most of them write Klingon in the Latin letters of Okrand's system; some use a script called *pIqaD*.

The Klingon Language Institute

Fact	Detail
Founded	1992, in Flourtown, Pennsylvania
Founder	Lawrence M. Schoen
Type	independent, volunteer-based nonprofit (501(c)(3))
Moved	main operations moved to Kentucky in 2022
Motto	*qo'mey poSmoH Hol*, "Language opens worlds"
Members	"from all over the world"; certification testing is free for active members

The Journal: HolQeD

The KLI published a quarterly journal called *HolQeD*, a Klingon word meaning "linguistics". Okrand's new vocabulary first appeared in it, and it recorded the language as the community understood it. The journal later stopped paper mailings, went electronic and then ceased.

When Did HolQeD End?

Wikipedia says the journal ran for about 13 years, but also says it "ceased publication in 2003". Starting in 1992, those two figures do not agree, so the chapter gives no end date. A separate page on the dictionary says new material appeared in HolQeD from 1992 to 2004, which fits neither number exactly.

The Meeting: qep'a'

The KLI holds an annual gathering called *qep'a'*, usually in midsummer, lasting about five days and normally in the United States. Okrand attends and answers a wishlist of requested words. The eighth, in 2001, was held in Brussels, organised by Lieven Litaer, and was the only one held outside the US (as of the Wikipedia article).

Words

New vocabulary from Okrand, answering the community's wishlist. The first batch appeared in HolQeD, then on the KLI website.

Tests

Certification has four levels from Beginner to Grammarian. Only the first three have tests, and no one had earned the top level as of 2023.

Ideas

The KLI's translation work (Chapter 7) grew out of this community, including Klingon editions of *Hamlet* and *Gilgamesh*.

What a Community Changes

A language with one dictionary is a set of rules. A language with a society around it becomes a set of habits. The KLI gave learners somewhere to be tested, to publish and to meet Okrand himself, and that is what makes later chapters on translation and canon possible.

A Documentary Along the Way

A documentary about the community, *Earthlings: Ugly Bags of Mostly Water*, was unveiled at the 2003 qep'a'. The article gives 2003 for its showing at Cannes in one place and 2004 in its references, so the date is unsettled.

Not Yet Verified

Several parts of the KLI's Wikipedia article are tagged as lacking sources. I have not checked the board's current members, the permission from CBS Studios to use the names "Star Trek" and "Klingon" (marked "citation needed"), or the claim that twelve people have received the "Friend of Maltz" award (the list names eleven). The name of the journal's later online form is not given in the article, so I have not named one.

Sources for This Chapter

- Wikipedia, "Klingon Language Institute".
- The Klingon Language Institute, "Development and Use of the Klingon Language" (kli.org).

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Give the year, place and founder of the Klingon Language Institute, and say what kind of organisation it is.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

The chapter finds a conflict in the sources about when HolQeD ended. State the conflict and explain what a careful writer should do.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Describe three things the KLI gave learners (words, tests, a place to meet) and which part of the chapter mentions each.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **1992:** KLI founded in Flourtown, Pennsylvania, by Lawrence M. Schoen.
- **HolQeD:** the journal ("linguistics"); end date uncertain.
- **qep'a':** yearly meeting, about five days; Brussels 2001 was the only one outside the US.
- **Certification:** four levels, three with tests.

Coming Next

The Story of Klingon, Chapter 5 looks at how the language grew after the dictionary, and at the argument over what counts as "real" Klingon.

The Story of Klingon

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · A Language Grows

Most invented languages are finished by their makers and then left alone. Klingon was different: Marc Okrand kept adding to it for decades, and the community had to decide which additions were really "Klingon". This chapter follows the growth and the rule that was adopted to manage it.

Okrand Keeps Adding

Year	Work	What it added
1985	*The Klingon Dictionary*	The base language (Chapter 3)
1992	Dictionary addendum; *Conversational Klingon* (audio course)	New grammar and about 200 words from the films and *The Next Generation*
1993	*Power Klingon* (audio course)	Spoken practice
1996	*The Klingon Way*	157 proverbs and sayings with explanations
1997	*Klingon for the Galactic Traveler*	A companion phrasebook

The Klingon Way

This book (Pocket Books, with an audiobook read by Michael Dorn and Roxann Dawson) collects 157 proverbs and locutions, each with the Klingon text, an English "Federation Standard" translation and a short story about how it is used in Klingon culture. Some entries also explain grammar or word use. Wikipedia describes it as the second major expansion of the language after the dictionary. It is also the first place where the language grows by showing culture rather than just rules.

> **A Date Wobble**
>
> Wikipedia gives 1996 for *The Klingon Way* in its main text but cites "(1995)" in one place. I used 1996 and left the question open.

The Problem of "What Counts"

As more words appeared, an argument grew: if a fan invents a new Klingon word, is it Klingon? The community settled on a clear rule, and the Klingon Language Institute applies it: only the words and grammatical forms introduced by Okrand count as canonical. Everything else, however well made, is a proposal.

Canon

Words and grammar that come from Okrand himself, in books, tapes, interviews, qep'a' sessions or the screen. The KLI and most Klingonists treat these as the language.

Neologism

A word a fan coins. Wikipedia notes that "it is often unclear as to what level of neologism is permissible", so even the rule leaves a grey area.

The Word List

The KLI kept a list of new vocabulary until 2005. Lieven Litaer then maintained it until the KLI's website was renewed in 2015, and published "New canonical Klingon words" on 20 August 2013.

Who Owns It?

CBS Studios owns the copyright on the official dictionary and other canonical descriptions of the language. So "canon" is a community rule, but the text behind it belongs to a studio.

A More Everyday Language

The early vocabulary leaned heavily on *Star Trek* themes: ships, weapons, battle. Wikipedia says this changed after the 2011 EuroTalk course and Okrand's contact with learners, when everyday words were added. A telling example is the word for a "bridge" over water, *QI*, which was unknown until August 2012. The language kept growing in the 2010s, long after its first screen use.

The Pattern

Klingon grew in answer to questions. A fan asks for a word at the qep'a' (Chapter 4), Okrand supplies it, the KLI records it and the community begins to use it. Because Okrand stayed involved, the language never had to be reconstructed from fragments; it could simply be asked.

Stranger Corners

- **Case matters.** In the Latin spelling, upper- and lower-case letters stand for different sounds. Wikipedia says the only minimal pair is *Q*/*q*, and that software problems with upper- and lower-case letters and the apostrophe delayed promotion of Duolingo's course from beta.
- **Exceptions to the stress rules.** The stress rules for nouns and verbs have exceptions, the article says: "some words which should fall under the rules above, but do not".
- **Other "Klingons".** A different language called Klingonaase appeared in John M. Ford's 1984 novel *The Final Reflection*, and the 1984 novelisation of *Star Trek III* hints at two non-canonical dialects, *Rumaiy* and *Kumburan*.

Not Yet Verified

The Wikipedia article does not describe any particular argument between Okrand and fans beyond the canon debate and the Duolingo issues, so this chapter does not invent one. I have not checked what the contents of *Conversational Klingon*, *Power Klingon* or *Klingon for the Galactic Traveler* actually add. They are listed from Okrand's biography, not from the books. The KLI's current canon policy was not on the pages I read.

Sources for This Chapter

- Wikipedia, "The Klingon Way", "Klingon language", "Marc Okrand" and "The Klingon Dictionary".

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Make a table of Okrand's books and audio courses from 1985 to 1997, with the year and one thing each added.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

State the canon rule in one sentence, then give one case where the rule leaves a grey area.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain why Klingon could grow by "asking" in a way that most invented languages cannot, and what the word *QI* shows about its later growth.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Books and tapes:** dictionary (1985), addendum and *Conversational Klingon* (1992), *Power Klingon* (1993), *The Klingon Way* (1996), *Klingon for the Galactic Traveler* (1997).
- **Canon:** only Okrand's words and forms count, for the KLI and most Klingonists.
- **Word list:** KLI to 2005, then Litaer to 2015.
- **Later growth:** everyday words after 2011; *QI* "bridge" known from August 2012.

Coming Next

The Story of Klingon, Chapter 6 listens to the language: its sounds, and how people actually speak it.

The Story of Klingon

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · Speaking It

Klingon was built to be heard, so its sound is the first thing most people notice. This chapter looks at why it sounds the way it does, and then at the harder question of who actually speaks it. The numbers are small, and the stories about them are better known than the facts.

Why It Sounds the Way It Does

Wikipedia reports that the film studio wanted the language "guttural and harsh" and that Okrand wanted it "unusual". The result is a sound system with twenty-one consonants and five vowels, and a deliberately odd mix:

Retroflex and Uvular

Much of the harshness comes from retroflex consonants (made with the tongue curled back) and uvular ones (made far back in the throat), such as *Q* and *S*.

What Is Missing

No velar stops and only one kind of "s": common sounds such as /k/, /g/, /f/, /h/ and /s/ are absent from the language.

Open Vowels

The vowels *e* and *I* are "more open and lax" than an English speaker expects. That makes the consonants stand out, so the language sounds clipped.

Letter	Sound (as described on Wikipedia)
q / *Q*	the only minimal pair: *Qat* "be popular" vs *qat* "accompany"; *Q* is an uvular affricate
H	a velar fricative, like the "ch" in German "ach"
gh	a voiced velar fricative
tlh	a voiceless lateral affricate

Letter	Sound (as described on Wikipedia)
ng	a velar nasal
'	a glottal stop, counted as a letter, not punctuation

Syllables and Stress

A syllable must begin with a consonant (the glottal stop counts) and have one vowel. After the vowel it may take one consonant or one of three codas: *-w'*, *-y'* or *-rgh*. So *ta*, *tar* and *targh* are legal, but *tarD* and *ar* are not. Stress is usually on the verb stem and the final syllable of a noun stem, and syllables ending in ' attract it.

> **The Capital I**
>
> Spelling is case-sensitive: capitals stand for sounds unlike English ones. The capital *I* is a vowel, and in some fonts it looks like a lower-case *l*. Software that ignores case therefore breaks the spelling.

Who Speaks It?

Source	Estimate of fluent speakers
Wikipedia infobox	none as a first language; around a dozen fluent speakers cited in 1996
Arika Okrent, 2009	"twenty or so. Maybe thirty"
A KLI mailing-list teacher (via a search result)	perhaps about 100, by experience and not statistics

There is no official count; the KLI does not publish membership numbers. Wikipedia says skilled speakers can hold "mundane conversations", but the vocabulary leans on *Star Trek* ideas, so everyday talk is awkward (see The Story of Klingon, Chapter 5).

> **Readers Are Not Speakers**

The same mailing-list source argues that many more people can read and write simple Klingon than can speak it, for example through Duolingo. One paper reports almost half a million active learners on the Duolingo Klingon course while it was still in beta. A learner is not a fluent speaker.

The Boy Raised in Klingon

The best-known experiment is that of d'Armond Speers of the Klingon Language Institute, who raised his son Alec to speak Klingon. Wikipedia says Alec's pronunciation was "excellent", but after his fifth birthday he stopped answering in Klingon, and his father switched to English. The story is often retold as a failure, but it is also a rare test of whether the language can carry a child's everyday world, and it could not, in part because the vocabulary was too narrow.

On Stage and in Music

- **Theatre.** *A Klingon Christmas Carol* is described as the first production primarily in Klingon, with only the narrator speaking English. The Washington Shakespeare Company performed selections from *Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* in Arlington County, Virginia, on 25 September 2010, with a reprise on 27 February 2011 featuring Stephen Fry as Osric.
- **Opera.** '*u*' is "entirely in Klingon".
- **Music.** The EP *NuqneH* (2020) by Hans Solo (Äi-Tiem) is rapped in Klingon, and the death metal band Stovokor writes its lyrics in Klingon. Rebecca Romijn is also said to sing "Total Eclipse of the Heart" in Klingon in an episode of *Strange New Worlds*.
- **Public life.** In 2007, Multnomah County, Oregon, reportedly hired Klingon translators as a precaution for its mental health programme, to be paid only if needed.

What the Numbers Mean

Klingon is a living hobby language: it is used in conversation, on stage and in songs, and it is learned by thousands. But its fluent speakers can be counted in tens, and none learned it as a first language. That is a different thing from a community language, and Chapter 9 returns to the question of what counts as a "language" at all.

Not Yet Verified

The Hague performance of '*u*' (September 2010), which Chapter 2 gave from the Okrand article, did not turn up in a separate search, so treat that date and place as unconfirmed. The Multnomah County story is marked "reportedly". The *Strange New Worlds* detail is from Wikipedia, and I have not checked the episode. I have not heard the language spoken for this chapter, so the sound descriptions are Wikipedia's.

Sources for This Chapter

- Wikipedia, "Klingon language" (phonology, speakers and uses).
- A web search, for the range of speaker estimates (a Nerdist article, a Tampere University thesis and a KLI mailing-list post).

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Give three features of Klingon's sound system that make it sound harsh, and one set of common sounds the language lacks.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

The chapter gives three different estimates of how many people speak Klingon fluently. List them and explain why no single number can be trusted.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Describe what happened to Alec Speers's Klingon and what the story does and does not show about the language.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Sounds:** 21 consonants and 5 vowels; retroflex and uvular consonants; no /k/, /g/, /f/, /h/, /s/.
- **Case matters:** *q* and *Q* differ; the glottal stop is a letter.
- **Speakers:** none as a first language; estimates run from about a dozen (1996) to perhaps 100.
- **Uses:** conversation, theatre, opera, music.

Coming Next

The Story of Klingon, Chapter 7 turns to translation: *Hamlet*, *Gilgamesh* and other works put into Klingon.

The Story of Klingon

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · Translating the Classics

A real language eventually gets translations of famous books. Klingon got them too, and the first one began as a joke in a film. This chapter follows the Klingon Hamlet from that joke to the shelf, and then looks at the other works the community has put into Klingon.

The Joke in the Film

In *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991), the Klingon Chancellor Gorkon says that one has not experienced Shakespeare until reading him "in the original Klingon". He does not quote any Klingon text, but another character, Chang, quotes the Klingon words *taH pagh taHbe'*, which Wikipedia glosses as "To be, or not to be". The director, Nicholas Meyer, said the Klingon claim to Shakespeare parodied Nazi Germany's pre-war attempt to claim him as German.

The Klingon Hamlet

Fact	Detail
Full title	*Hamlet Prince of Denmark: The Restored Klingon Version*; in the trade edition, *The Klingon Hamlet, or The Tragedy of Khamlet, Son of the Emperor of Qo'noS*
First edition	Klingon Language Institute, 1996, a limited edition of 1,000 numbered copies
Trade edition	Pocket Books, February 2000, 219 pages
Translators	Nick Nicholas and Andrew Strader, over several years, as the "Klingon Shakespeare Restoration Project"
Helpers	Mark Shoulson, d'Armond Speers and Will Martin gave feedback and editorial help
Cover	Phil Foglio

A Joke That Is Also a Translation

The book prints the English beside an "original Klingon" text. In a mock-academic introduction it claims that Shakespeare was really a Klingon named "Wil'yam Sheq'spir", and that the human Shakespeare was an invention of Federation propaganda. The Klingon text deliberately differs from the English in ways meant to look Klingon in origin. So the book is a real translation of a real play and, at the same time, a performance of the joke.

> **Why That Is Clever**
>
> By pretending the Klingon came first, the translators avoided the usual measure of a translation: faithfulness to the English. They could instead make the Klingon read as an original, and show how much of the language's grammar and vocabulary could carry a long literary text.

Other Works in Klingon

The KLI lists a number of other translations, from its own work and from members:

Epic and Classic

ghIlghameS (the Epic of Gilgamesh), the *Tao Te Ching* and the Rime of the Ancient Mariner.

Shakespeare and Stage

paghmo' tIn mIS (Much Ado About Nothing), and the stage work described in Chapter 6.

Children's and Popular

The Wizard of Oz. Work on books of the Bible and further Shakespeare is described as ongoing.

Wikipedia also records a 2021 novel, *cha' monmey*, which it describes as the first novel originally written in Klingon. That is a different kind of milestone: not a translation, but a work that began in the language.

What Translating Teaches

- **The vocabulary is the limit.** The language began with *Star Trek* themes (Chapter 5), so a text full of kings, battles and death fits it well, while a novel about ordinary life strains it. Every translation project therefore needs new words, and only Okrand's count as canon.
- **Translators become coiners.** The Klingon *Hamlet* drew feedback from future leaders of the KLI, which links this chapter to the community of Chapter 4.
- **The target is also a joke.** Because the audience knows Klingon is an invented language, a serious translation is always partly a performance. The project works in both modes at once.

Not Yet Verified

The sources I used did not describe specific translation problems, such as missing words, or how critics received the Klingon *Hamlet*, so this chapter does not. I have not seen the Klingon text of the play. The gloss of *taH pagh taHbe'* is Wikipedia's. The dates and publishers of the other translations were not given in the sources, and I have not checked which are published and which are online. One catalogue record dates the first KLI edition to 1996 and Wikipedia agrees.

Sources for This Chapter

- Wikipedia, "The Klingon Hamlet", "Klingon Language Institute" and "Klingon language".
- A web search for the translators and the film line (library and publisher records).

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Trace the Klingon *Hamlet* from the film line to the book: what the film said, who translated it, and the two editions.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain the book's joke ("the restored Klingon version") and say what it lets the translators do that a plain translation would not.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Name three other works put into Klingon and one thing that makes translating into an invented language harder than into a natural one.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **1991:** film line about Shakespeare "in the original Klingon"; Chang quotes *taH pagh taHbe'*.
- **1996 and 2000:** the KLI edition (1,000 numbered copies) and the Pocket Books edition of *The Klingon Hamlet*.
- **Translators:** Nick Nicholas and Andrew Strader.
- **Others:** *Gilgamesh*, *Tao Te Ching*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Wizard of Oz*; *cha' monmey* (2021) written in Klingon.

Coming Next

The Story of Klingon, Chapter 8 follows Klingon beyond fandom: screen, software, courses and Duolingo.

The Story of Klingon

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · In the Wider World

By the 2000s Klingon was no longer only a fandom language. It was on screen in new series, built into software, taught by apps and mentioned by officials. This chapter follows Klingon out of the fan community and asks how real each of those appearances was.

On Screen

- **The Next Generation.** The character Worf is Klingon, and in the episode "A Matter of Honor" Klingon crew members speak untranslated Klingon. Picard and Dax are depicted as having learned Klingon.
- **Discovery (2017).** Netflix announced Klingon subtitles for the whole first season. They were translated by Lieven Litaer and used romanised spelling, not Klingon script. When the series moved to Paramount+ in 2021, the subtitles were lost.
- **Strange New Worlds.** In season 4, episode 3 ("Human Best Friend"), the character Number One, played by Rebecca Romijn, sings a song in Klingon.

The sources I read said nothing specific about *Enterprise* or *Deep Space Nine*, nor about the design of Klingons in *Discovery*, so this chapter does not cover them.

In Software

Where	What Wikipedia says
Bing Translator	Microsoft's translator supports Klingon, but handled words and phrases in its training data and was "not well tuned" for Klingon's prefixes and suffixes
Wikipedia logo	The 2003–2010 puzzle-globe logo included a Klingon character; it was replaced in 2010 with a Ge'ez script character
Minecraft	The Java edition has a Klingon language setting
Fonts	The pIqaD script lives in Unicode's private-use area, with fonts such as Constructium and Unifont CSUR; a proposal by Michael Everson is cited

Where	What Wikipedia says
Nokia, 2013	An April Fools' joke claimed the Nokia Pure font had been localised for Klingon

Duolingo

The most visible step was Duolingo's Klingon course. A beta opened on 15 March 2018 and was built over about three years by volunteers led by Felix Malmenbeck, with development starting in 2015. Duolingo spokesperson Michaela Kron said that there were only an estimated 30 to 50 fluent Klingon speakers and that the course was not designed to produce fluency. The lead creator credited *Star Trek: Discovery* with renewing interest.

Why It Stayed in Beta

Duolingo offered to promote the course from beta, but its developers declined until the software could handle Klingon properly. The problems were the case-sensitive spelling and the apostrophe, which Duolingo's software treated as punctuation instead of a consonant (Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 gave the language-side reasons).

2009

Simon & Schuster and Ultralingua release electronic Klingon software, including the iPhone app (Chapter 3).

2011

EuroTalk's "Learn Klingon", approved by CBS and Okrand, the first course written in pIqaD.

2018

Duolingo's beta course opens on 15 March, and is the one most learners meet today.

Stories of Official Use

- **Multnomah County, Oregon (2007).** A report said the county was hiring Klingon translators for its mental health programme. Wikipedia adds that the county later called its

release a "mistake", so the story is better described as a news item that went wrong than as a real service. (Chapter 6 called it "reportedly"; this is the follow-up.)

- **Welsh Government (July 2015).** It issued a written statement in Klingon in reply to a question about UFO sightings.
- **Copyright.** CBS Studios owns the copyright on the official dictionary and other canonical descriptions. The Wikipedia article notes that dictionary entries as facts are not copyrightable, but the formatting, examples and instructions are.

Real, Joke, or Both?

Many of these appearances are playful: a puzzle-globe character, an April Fools' font, a UFO reply. But the course, the software and the subtitles are practical work. Klingon is an unusual case of a language where fun and real use stay mixed together, and each appearance has to be judged on its own.

Not Yet Verified

The sources did not cover Klingon in courts or schools, so this chapter does not. A search I made for Google Translate and Unicode rejection returned nothing, so I have made no claim about either. The Wikipedia text I read did not describe a Unicode proposal being rejected. The date of one news item on the Duolingo launch conflicted with the rest (2022 against 2018); I used 2018, which several sources agree on.

Sources for This Chapter

- Wikipedia, "Klingon language".
- News reports on the Duolingo course (CBS News, Space.com, The Next Web and others), via a web search.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Give three places where Klingon appears on screen or in software, with one fact about each.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain why Duolingo's Klingon course stayed in beta, and what the reason shows about the language.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Sort the "official use" stories into those that look real and those that look like jokes or mistakes, and give a reason for each.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Screen:** Worf and "A Matter of Honor"; Discovery's Klingon subtitles (2017, later lost); Strange New Worlds song.
- **Software:** Bing Translator, Minecraft, pIqaD fonts in Unicode's private-use area.
- **Courses:** Simon & Schuster (2009), EuroTalk (2011), Duolingo beta (15 March 2018).
- **Official use:** Multnomah County (called a mistake); the Welsh Government reply (2015).

Coming Next

The Story of Klingon, Chapter 9 asks how far the language reflects the Klingon people, and how much of it is invented society.

The Story of Klingon

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · Language and Culture

Klingon is more than a set of rules; it is meant to sound like the people who speak it. This chapter looks at how the vocabulary, the greetings and the sayings carry a picture of the Klingon warrior, and at the places where the picture slips and a very human joke shows through.

A Vocabulary of Conflict

Wikipedia says the Klingon lexicon is closely tied to Klingon culture. There are several words for "to fight" or "to clash", each of a different intensity, and many words for warfare and weapons. The same article says that cursing is treated as a fine art, which "helps lend a particular character to the language".

Fighting Words

Several verbs for fighting, graded by intensity, rather than one general word.

The Art of Cursing

Curses are a skill. A discussion of the dictionary's addendum divides them into epithets (name-calling, such as *petaQ*) and general invectives (such as *baQa'*), and describes *Qu'vatlh* as the curse for extreme anger.

Warrior Sayings

Heghlu'meH QaQ jajvam is glossed "Today is a good day to die", and Chapter 5 described the proverbs collected in *The Klingon Way*.

What Is Missing

English idea	Klingon	What it shows
"Hello"	no direct word; the nearest is *nuqneH*, "What do you want?"	Greeting is a challenge to state your business
"Goodbye"	*Qapla'*, "Success!"	Parting is a wish for victory
Revenge	a proverb matching "Revenge is a dish best served cold", as used in *Kill Bill*	Revenge is an accepted moral idea

How the Sentence Is Built

The most common word order is object, verb, subject, usually the reverse of English. There is also a "clipped" style, *tlhIngan Hol poD* or *Hol poD*, which drops superfluous grammar when speed matters. And there is a word, *pabHa'*, meaning "to misfollow the rules", which Wikipedia says shows that deliberate ungrammaticality is part of the culture. These are the places where grammar and character meet: a people in a hurry, who turn even breaking the rules into a skill.

Where the Culture Slips

Not all of the culture is solemn. Wikipedia lists a series of in-jokes in the vocabulary:

- *chang'eng* ("pair") refers to the conjoined twins Chang and Eng Bunker.
- *tlhaq* ("chronometer") sounds like "clock".
- *Sa'Hut* ("buttocks") is the Yiddish *tuches* spelled backwards.

These words show that behind the warrior façade there is a linguist with a sense of humour.

> **Language or Invented Society?**
>
> Two things are being done at once. Some features are language: word order, sounds, the rules for word-building. Others are society: how you greet, what you curse, what you say before you die. Okrand designed vocabulary to reflect Klingon culture, but the culture itself comes from the television Klingons that existed before the language. The language is therefore a portrait of a character, and portraits are made, not found.

Does the Language Shape the Thinker?

There is a famous idea that a language shapes the thoughts of its speakers (the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis). The Wikipedia article I read does not discuss it for Klingon, so this chapter does not claim it. What can be said is smaller: a language written to sound warlike makes a warlike speech easy and a gentle one harder.

Not Yet Verified

The curse details come from a web search that returned fan mailing-list posts quoting the dictionary's addendum, and the sources say that fan notes on curses are unofficial and that some curses were never used in canon. I have not checked the glosses of *petaQ*, *baQa'* or *Qu'vatlh*, so the chapter does not give any. The "revenge" proverb is Wikipedia's claim. I did not find *tlhIngan maH* or *qa'* in the pages I read and so made no claim about them.

Sources for This Chapter

- Wikipedia, "Klingon language".
- A web search on Klingon curses (mailing-list archives of the Klingon Language Institute and a book description of *Klingon for the Galactic Traveler*).

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Give two features of the Klingon vocabulary that reflect a warrior culture, and one everyday word or greeting that is missing or unusual.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain what *nuqneH* and *Qapla'* tell us about how Klingon speakers meet and part.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Use the in-jokes in the vocabulary to argue that Klingon is both a language and a made object. Which parts are language, and which are invented society?

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Vocabulary:** many fighting and weapon words; cursing treated as a fine art.
- **Greetings:** no "hello" (*nuqneH* means "What do you want?"); *Qapla'* "Success!" for parting.
- **Grammar and style:** object-verb-subject; clipped speech; *pabHa'* misfollowing the rules.
- **In-jokes:** *chang'eng*, *tlhaq*, *Sa'Hut*.

Coming Next

The Story of Klingon, Chapter 10 reviews where Klingon stands now: what is known, what is disputed, and what comes next.

The Story of Klingon

Course 1 · Chapter 10 · Where Klingon Stands

The last chapter pulls the story together. It looks back over nine chapters of history, separates what is well documented from what is disputed, asks how many people really speak the language, and ends with the question every invented language faces: what happens next?

The Story in Short

Stage	What happened
Before the language	Klingons spoke English on television in the 1960s; the film *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979) added a few words and sounds
The maker	The linguist Marc Okrand was hired for *Star Trek III* (1984) because the film-makers wanted a structured language, not gibberish
The book	*The Klingon Dictionary* (Pocket Books, 1985) fixed the sounds, grammar and about 1,500 words
The community	The Klingon Language Institute was founded in 1992; its journal, annual meeting and certification gave learners a structure
The growth	Okrand's later books and the rule that only his words are canon let the vocabulary grow slowly
The use	Speaking, theatre, opera, translations of the classics, and appearances in screen, software and government stories

What Is Well Established

Some facts appear in every source this course used. Klingon has a documented sound system and grammar written down by a trained linguist, and a dictionary that has been in print since 1985. It has an organised community, regular meetings and a way of testing learners. People have written plays, songs and book-length translations in it. These are things that can be checked in books and archives.

What Is Disputed or Unclear

Dates

Sources disagree about small details, such as when Klingon first appeared on television, when the Institute's journal ended, and when one documentary was made. Earlier chapters flagged each case.

Speaker numbers

There is no census. Estimates range from a dozen in the 1990s to "twenty or so, maybe thirty" in a 2009 book, 30 to 50 from a Duolingo spokesperson in 2018, and perhaps 50 to 60 for 2021 in one Wikipedia snapshot.

What counts as Klingon

Only words from Okrand are canon. Fans coin many more, and whether a word is "real" depends on which definition a speaker uses.

How serious a speaker is

People use Klingon for sincere work, for play and for publicity stunts, and the line between them is not always clear (Chapter 8 sorted the cases).

How Many People Speak It?

A search for a current figure found no official count. A 2024 mailing-list post by a German Klingon teacher guessed about 100 fluent speakers, but said plainly that the number is "based on experience, not statistics". The same post made two useful points: the number who can read and write the language is probably much larger than the number who speak it, because of programs such as Duolingo, and there are no native-level speakers.

Putting the estimates side by side, the safest statement is that fluent speakers are probably in the dozens to low hundreds. The Institute's membership figure is undisclosed, and an old (2009) post citing Wikipedia gave roughly 2,500 members.

A Language Without Native Speakers

Every large language is passed from parent to child. Klingon is not, and so its future depends entirely on adults choosing to learn it. That makes it fragile in one way (it needs a

steady stream of new learners) and strong in another: nobody can lose it by migrating, being forced to switch languages, or simply not teaching it to children.

Where It Might Go

- **New screen uses.** Chapter 8 recorded Klingon in *Star Trek: Discovery* and *Strange New Worlds*. Each new series raises interest and produces new dialogue that learners study.
- **New words.** Okrand's own books and the Institute's word lists were the main sources of new vocabulary; the vocabulary still grows only as fast as he supplies words.
- **New translations.** The novel *cha' monmey* (2021, from Chapter 7) shows that book-length work is still being done.
- **New learners.** Online courses and software lower the cost of starting, so the learner population may shift towards casual study.

The Lasting Lesson

A language does not become real because a linguist designs it. It becomes real because people use it, argue about it and teach it to others. Klingon began as a few invented sounds for a film; its present life is the work of everyone who learned it.

Not Yet Verified

The speaker figures are estimates from different years and sources, and the 2024 figure comes from a single informal mailing-list post, not a survey. I did not find any current news about the Institute's status, so this chapter makes no claim about it. Statements about the future are my reading of the trends in earlier chapters, not sourced predictions.

Sources for This Chapter

- Wikipedia, "Klingon language" (as returned by a web search).
- A July 2024 post to the Klingon mailing list (lists.kli.org), estimating the number of fluent speakers.
- The sources of Chapters 1 to 9, as listed there.

Course Recap

Across ten chapters this course followed one language from a television gap to a small, active community. The Story of Klingon, Chapter 1 showed the gap; Chapters 2 and 3 introduced the maker and his book; Chapters 4 to 6 followed the community, the growth of the vocabulary, and the first people to speak it; Chapters 7 to 9 looked at translation, the wider world and the culture inside the language; and this chapter weighed what is known.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Write a six-sentence timeline of Klingon, one sentence for each stage in the table at the top of this chapter, naming one person or organisation for each.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain why nobody can give an exact number of Klingon speakers, and say what kind of evidence would make an estimate more reliable.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Argue for or against the statement "Klingon is a real language". Define what you mean by "real" first, and use at least two facts from this course.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Established:** documented grammar and dictionary, an organised community, original works and translations.
- **Disputed:** some dates, the speaker count, what counts as canon, how serious some uses are.
- **Speakers:** probably dozens to low hundreds of fluent speakers; no native speakers; no official count.
- **Future:** depends on adult learners, new screen appearances and new words from Okrand.

Course Complete

This is the last chapter of The Story of Klingon. For related reading, see Tolkien's Languages and Sindarin Grammar 1, which look at invented languages made by a single author with very different aims.