

# **Art & Anxiety: Conlanging through imposter syndrome**

by Jessie Sams

Conlanging is one of my happy places.

I love to create, whether I'm crafting something with my hands, baking treats in the kitchen, drawing little animals on my iPad, or putting words together on a page—I love creating and having outlets for creative expression. I also love linguistics. Languages fascinate me, and my analytic brain has so much fun diving into patterns that are definitely there but also in constant fluctuation. So of course I love conlanging, where creativity and linguistics meet in the most amazing kind of art.

And yet, the fun—the beauty—of it all can get lost in the details when I'm actually conlanging. Three of my biggest hurdles are imposter syndrome, overthinking, and not having someone else in charge of the process. After talking through those hurdles, I'm going to shift gears and talk about the personal conlang I'm working on right now. The reason I'm exploring this topic is because I know I'm not alone, and I really hope that by talking more openly about my own struggles, it might help someone else who is feeling some (or all!) of what I'm feeling.

## **Personal Hurdles**

Struggling with imposter syndrome means I have difficulties seeing myself the same way other people see me and my work. People looking in on my life probably say that I've done all the things I needed to do to be in the place I am today. I have a PhD in Linguistics, which means other people—professionals—have validated that I've done the things I need to do to be qualified to talk about language and linguistics. I earned the Full Professor title at a university, which means colleagues and administrators validated my work as they promoted and tenured me. Twice! Other people—people I trust—say I'm doing good things. Great things, even, which is why I've won awards and why I'm in a position where people are willing to pay me to do something I love. From the outside, it looks like I have everything together and am a power house. I know because people literally tell me that.

Imposter syndrome creates a false sense of inadequacy that no amount of external accomplishments can cure. All those things I mentioned? None of them are needed to be a conlanger, and having them doesn't magically provide confidence for a person struggling with imposter syndrome.

That's because, from the inside, I feel small. I feel like people must not be able to see the real me if they think I'm doing great. I feel like they must not see how much better all these other people are at doing the same things I do. I feel like, at any moment, it could all burst and come crashing down on me when they realize I don't actually belong. It's like I have the chorus of Radiohead's song "Creep" playing on repeat in my mind:

*But I'm a creep  
I'm a weirdo  
What the hell am I doin' here?  
I don't belong here...*

It isn't that I think I'm a *creep* creep; it's that I think I'm a creeper who has snuck into something better than I deserve. Not feeling like I belong—not feeling like I'm good enough to be where I am and doing what I do—leads to the second hurdle.

I overthink everything. EVERY. LITTLE. DECISION. Then I judge everything I do harshly. I'm talking about everything from work and professional things to personal life situations. It's why I have never mastered social media (and probably never will). I stress out so much about what I should say and how I should say it that I end up stalling and usually not doing anything.

Most people never see this struggle because I'm very good at wearing my "public" mask. I may be wrong about this, but I have a feeling that a lot of empaths and introverts are adept at putting on a "public face" to make it through social interactions without being too awkward or aloof. And I'm definitely both. I don't want other people to see that I'm almost constantly running circles around myself in my head as I try to make sure I see all the flaws of what I'm doing and saying before other people do. It's the classic duck-on-water situation when I'm in public: They see a much more composed side of me while my mind is a total whirlwind.

My constant overthinking creates a great deal of anxiety and a difficult working situation, but what makes it even worse is that third hurdle—I don't have anyone to answer to when I'm creating for myself.

If someone else gives me a hard deadline, I meet it. I make sure of it. It gives me an end date to a project that guarantees I'll have to stop questioning all my decisions by a particular time. The work has to be done, so it will get done. Not having a deadline means I just keep going in my mental warfare on myself.

Not only is there no end point for a personal project, but there are also no goals that other people have set for me to meet other than to make myself happy with my work. That means I get stuck in a loop of making decisions followed by questioning them followed by changing the initial decisions followed by more questioning... It's a struggle. And it's why so many creative projects I've started that mean a lot to me never get finished.

But like I said at the beginning, conlanging is one of my happy places. Even as I question what I'm doing and doubting that my work is good enough, I still love creating and language and linguistics. I still love the art of what I'm doing.

And so I have these brave moments where I come up with an idea for a conlang that's solid enough for me to actually pursue it. My current personal conlang project was borne out of such a moment.

### **Zhwadi: The Inspiration**

I know the precise moment I decided I wanted to start a new conlang for myself because I journaled about it. It was August 4, 2019. And I was really struggling—for good reasons.

Trump was president, and, for me, his presidency felt like a four-year term of warfare on everything decent and hopeful and good. It felt like so many people filled with rage and hate came out into the open and showed just how ugly humanity can be. And on that date in particular, there had been another mass shooting. Looking at the larger world outside my home sapped me of hope for a better tomorrow.

Inside my house, it wasn't going much better. I had survived one of the worst academic years of my life that was filled with administrative gaslighting and had resulted in major upheaval in my department (and actually landed me in a totally different department). In early August, I was getting ready to start a new year but didn't feel hopeful about it. And my marriage, which had been crumbling for at least three years by that point, was in shambles and creating a toxic space for me.

That day, it all felt so pointless. Everything felt awful. As I sat there feeling upset and down and hopeless, a song floated into my head: John Lennon's "Imagine." I wrote the lyrics down on my journal page.

*Imagine there's no heaven  
It's easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us, only sky  
Imagine all the people  
Livin' for today*

*Imagine there's no countries  
It isn't hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion, too  
Imagine all the people  
Livin' life in peace*

*You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will live as one*

*Imagine no possessions  
I wonder if you can  
No need for greed or hunger  
A brotherhood of man  
Imagine all the people  
Sharing all the world*

That song sparked a tiny bit of hope for me in a moment that had otherwise been filled with despair. And it also sparked an idea. What if I imagined a community of humans that did just that? A community of humans that lived as one? That cared for the whole? That saw beauty in their world?

I set an intention to create a language of beauty—a language whose very words make me find joy in the little things around me. A language full of whimsy and delight. A language just for me. A language to help me recapture my *joie de lire*.

By August 2019, I had finished working with David on Méníshè for *Motherland: Fort Salem*, and working with David had introduced me to new ways of conlanging and thinking about the process of conlanging that I was excited to explore on my own. I was specifically inspired to evolve a language from proto-forms, which was something I hadn't attempted on my own before, and to incorporate noun classes into the language.

I set to work, getting out a special notebook just for the project and making notes on its grid pages with my new Blackwing pencil. I made outlines for some evolutionary stages of the language and had ideas for root words that I jotted down. And then...

My brain took over. I started seeing the cracks in my outlines and plans and erased some notes in favor for others but then wondered if the original plan hadn't been better after all.

Life also took over. It was August. I was starting a new semester. I had work I needed to finish, which included prepping for classes and putting together a huge binder for my bid for Full Professor. I closed my notebook and returned it to its shelf in my office and didn't look at it again for nearly two years.

During those two years, life upheaved me. It upheaved all of us with Covid. On top of living in a pandemic world, I went through major changes in my personal life that included divorce, personal grief, three cross-country moves, the start of a new relationship, and a change in careers. I needed to find my ground again as everything around me was in motion and unsettled. I reached for that Zhwadi notebook and very (*veeeeery*) slowly started writing down more solid ideas for the language.

### **Zhwadi: Documentation**

My human speakers of Zhwadi live in a place that is essentially southern Missouri—a place I chose specifically because it's where I grew up. It's what I think of first when I hear the word *home*. They live on Earth but in an alternate reality, where humans are better and kinder. They live in dense forested areas with a lot of rivers and creeks and caves, and they experience four defined seasons, with hot summers, beautiful falls, snowy winters, and stormy springs.

Zhwadi is full of the language sounds I most enjoy hearing and producing. As anyone who watches LangTime Studio knows, I struggle with pronouncing a lot of sounds accurately and consistently, and I wanted this language to be one I could pronounce. Instead of walking through what I've outlined so far for the sound features, though, I want to focus on what I am currently most proud of, which is how I'm organizing and documenting features of the language and stages of its development.

First, I organized the sound changes into different stages of language development, aligning sound shifts with grammatical shifts. For instance, the first stage of development is when noun class prefixes and number suffixes were grammaticalized as inflections, and early compounds were formed. The second stage is when case marking became grammaticalized and early derivations started appearing. Right now I'm at four stages of development, though I may end up adding more. Specifically demarcating the sound changes into those stages has made it so I know how to best combine forms at their boundaries to match how the language would have sounded and how it was shifting at the time.

When it came to compiling the dictionary, I came up with some ideas I rather like. I have broken down the basic roots into semantic categories to better track what roots I have and how I want them organized into a full proto vocabulary system. I have a table to show how many roots I've created for each category, and here is what I have so far:

<b>Category</b>	<b>No. of Roots</b>
<b>Appearance</b>	0
<b>Body Terms</b>	27
<b>Category</b>	1
<b>Communication</b>	0
<b>Community</b>	1
<b>Construction</b>	0
<b>Emotion</b>	0
<b>Fauna</b>	1
<b>Flora</b>	3
<b>Insects</b>	0
<b>Interaction</b>	4
<b>Meals</b>	0
<b>Motion</b>	1
<b>Structure</b>	1
<b>Terrain</b>	7
<b>Time</b>	2
<b>Tool</b>	1
<b>Weather</b>	5
	54

Table 1. Semantic categories and number of roots created

For the categories currently shown with a zero, I have lists of words I want as roots that I just haven't created forms for yet.

After the table in my document, each of those categories is broken down into alphabetized lists of roots with their basic semantic meaning. For instance, here is the start of the body terms list of roots:

## BODY TERMS

\***aasa** “mouth (inside)”

\***af** “breath”

\***aiza** “body”

\***ba** “lip”

\***brai** “elbow, knee”

\***diəɹ** “arm”

\***əəz** “hand”

\***ənka** “stomach”

These lists help me keep track of what I’ve created and what the proto-forms look like within each category (which, in turn, helps me make sure I don’t accidentally have all the roots within a single category starting with the same sounds).

Within the dictionary itself, I follow the method David introduced me to, where the Zhwadi entries are organized into proto root forms to show how roots are expanded into noun classes. The entries themselves follow the basic structure David uses (and now we both use for LangTime Studio languages), but I added in some extra features. For example, here is the entry for the proto-form *\*auf*:

\***auf** | <sup>2</sup>**of**

**osh**, **ozh·ī** [ʊʃ] \*auf «WEATHER» (n.SK) {00} wind; **dim·osh**, **dimozh·ī** (**dimosh**) [di.ˈmoʃ] \*diəma- \*auf (n.NI) {00} breeze; **ip·osh**, **ipozh·ī** (**iposh**) [i.ˈpoʃ] \*ipə- \*auf (n.IC) {00} freezing wind, biting wind (e.g. wind capable of causing frostbite); **z·osh**, **zozh·ī** (**zosh**) [zoʃ] \*əzu- \*auf (n.FI) {00} smoke

The entry has standard features like labels for lexical category (the words in this entry are all nouns), noun classes for the nouns (these particular words are sky, night, ice, and fire nouns), and David’s handy register/politeness indicator (here, the zeros in curly brackets indicate these are standard words that can be used in any company).

But the entry also shows a couple added features, including the “proto-at-this-stage” form. The proto-form (Stage 1) is *auf*, but beginning in Stage 2, the form has shifted to *of*. As of right now, that Stage 2 form matches the modern form of the word, so no other forms are listed.



Also, for the word matching the root’s basic meaning, the semantic category is indicated in guillemets (here, *osh* is a weather word).

For any proto-form that shifts phonological shape in one stage of the language but not another, I only list the forms that differ, as in this entry for *\*faisə*:

**\*faisə | <sup>2</sup>fezə | <sup>4</sup>feza**

***feza*** [ʼfe.za] \*faisə «INTERACTION» (v) {00} to put, to place; ***eza*** [ʼe.za] \*faisə (post.) at, around, near (see also ***\*haiza***)

This word begins in Stage 1 as *faisə*, but by Stage 2, it has shifted to *fezə*. Its form is unaffected by sound changes that occur in the next stage, so it begins Stage 3 in the same *fezə* form. However, by Stage 4, it has shifted slightly to *feza*, which is its modern form.

On the English side of the dictionary, I indicate the basic root associated with each entry so I know where to find its full information, as in the current “A” list:

## A

***arm*** (n.) jer (\*diəɹ)

***anthill*** (n.) mevol (\*faul)

***around*** (prep.) eza (\*faisə)

***at*** (prep.) eza (\*faisə)

The roots are helpful, especially in cases like *mevol* (“anthill”), which begins with <m> but is incorporated into an entry beginning with <f> (a sound not even in the modern form for “anthill”!).

### Zhwadi: Some Grammatical Features

I have really had a lot of fun working with the noun Zhwadi noun classes. Every nominal root belongs to a “natural” noun class and is unmarked when used in that meaning. Semantic extensions through the addition of class markers are then marked with a noun class prefix. However, if a noun can be marked with its “natural” class prefix to shift the meaning from its basic root. So, for example, ***yanu*** means “bone” and belongs to the STONE noun class. It doesn’t carry the ***kra-***

STONE class marker because it just “belongs” to the STONE class. If the *kra-* prefix is added, it becomes *krayanu*, which means “fossil” and is another STONE class noun. *Yanu* can take other noun class prefixes to take on different meanings, such as *megyanu*, which means “marrow” and is a DIRT class noun.

As another example, the root *kra* itself means “stone” and is, of course, a STONE class noun. That root can take other noun class prefixes to shift its meaning:

- *chakra* “malleable metal” [GRASS class]
- *ikra* “stalactite, stalagmite” [ICE class]
- *rokra* “gemstone, lode, mica” [DAY class]

Altogether, Zhwadi has 11 noun classes, each of which has a prefix serving as its class marker. These noun classes are largely based on look and feel.

Zhwadi also has five plural suffixes that categorize nouns into classes based on how they’re perceived in the plural. The semantic roots of the plural suffixes demonstrate those perceptions:

- group (in the collective, animate sense)
- mound, hill (typically found in piles)
- group, set (in the generic, inanimate sense)
- well (expands to fill space)
- ivy (grows over time)

The last one is based on the metaphor that time is like a plant or tree in that it grows vertically.

Another feature of Zhwadi is that speakers can potentially make semantic distinctions based on the chosen plural form. For instance, *anilū* means “cloud,” which is a SKY noun and breaks down into the SKY prefix *an-* and the root *ilū* meaning “down (as in feathery down).” The typical plural is *aniluwī*, which is the WELL plural and indicates that clouds are perceived as growing and filling a space as they multiply. However, if a speaker wants to indicate there are multiple distinct clouds in the sky, they can use the form *anilūkū* for the plural. That plural is based on the generic GROUP/SET form.

As a side note, there is actually an older root in Zhwadi that means “cloud,” which in its modern form appears as *ma*, belonging to the SKY class. That root was reinterpreted to specifically refer to clouds that require taking note, such as a dark cloud or storm-bearing cloud. The newer word *anilū* refers to any non-threatening cloud.

While noun class and number affixes are among the oldest forms, noun cases are a later development in the language. Verbs grammaticalized as postpositions, and a handful of those further grammaticalized as case markers, appearing after any plural suffixes. Because these forms are later, they phonologically interact with stems in different ways than the other inflections. I’m still working on those sound changes, but here is a potential preview of where I might be going with those...

*pəilə “person”	Singular	Plural
<b>Nominative</b>	pela	pelya
<b>Accusative</b>	pelam	pelyam
<b>Genitive</b>	pelto	pelyato
<b>Dative/Locative</b>	pelaz	pelyez
<b>Instrumental</b>	peljo	pelyajo

Table 2. Potential inflected forms for *pela* “person”

The dative and locative forms began as two different verbs but conflated because their proto- and grammaticalized forms were so similar.

I’m still on nouns and haven’t made it to the wonders of the verb yet, but I definitely have some plans.

These are all things I’m happy with (at least for right now), but my hurdles are definitely still there. I keep working through them one conlang decision at a time. That’s not to say every working day is a good one. Some days all I do on Zhwadi is change a single sound of root, only to change it back again. And yet, on the good days, I can see that I like what I’ve started—especially when I see entries I’ve forgotten about and am like, “Ooh, how fun!” Those moments remind me to try to step out of my own way as I continue creating.

I conlang to create moments of joy in between moments of self-doubt. In the end, it's beautiful to see it all coming together, but lingering self-doubt means I struggle with sharing my work with others. It also means this topic has been really difficult for me to open up about.

If you are like me and experience some of the same hurdles, I hope you can also find the joy in between the not-so-good moments. I hope you, too, can continue to create and see the beauty in what you've created. At the end of the day, the most important thing is that you can find happiness in what you're doing and you've done.

As I was trying to figure out a good way to wrap this up, I recalled a list of five rules of conlanging that I created for a project I had started working on, and sharing them here feels like a fitting way to conclude:

## Conlanging Rules

*(Heck, yeah, it does!)*

#1: Have fun. Language is fun. Constructing your very own language is fun to the max! Conlanging *is* challenging, though. And it can be oh-so-tempting to compare your work to someone else's or your knowledge of linguistics or language(s) to someone else's. For the love of all that is grammar, please don't do that. Keep the focus on your growth and your process, and enjoy every second of it!

#2a: Be choosy when it comes to the features you incorporate. There are so many freaking cool features out there that languages have, but not all of them play well together in a single language. You might want to keep a running list of cool features you find but didn't include in your current project to remember for future conlang projects!

#2b: Don't worry about making every decision a "creative" one. Some decisions are going to be more "fun" than others because you may have had a brilliant idea for a compound or a source for an inflection. But not every decision will end up feeling "brilliant," and that is not only okay but is necessary for making a language that reads and resolves more naturally. There is a reason there are commonalities among linguistic features of languages that are totally unrelated to each other.

#3: Remember that your conlang is *yours*. You get to decide what you want to do with it and how you want it to look and sound. Asking people for advice and feedback is a wonderful

way to grow as an artist (one I highly recommend!), but remember that, at the end of the day, it is *your* conlang and *your* art.

#4: Don't be afraid to revise... but recognize when a revision will require a major language overhaul and think through that decision very carefully. Very rarely do conlangers look at any of their languages and say, "It's perfection!" Like all artists, we tend to see things we wish we would have done differently. Embrace the growth and use newfound knowledge to make future conlang decisions even better.

#5: Remember that no language is perfect or complete. All languages have idiosyncrasies and quirks. All languages have irregularities. And all living languages continuously grow and change with no end point to the growth. No conlang will ever be "complete," but it can reach a stage where you say, "That's enough for what I needed for this project."

Yes, I realize I'm better at giving advice on this topic than I am at following my own advice some days... Whatever struggles you face in your conlang journey, I hope you know you're not alone, and I hope you're able to find your own joy and happiness in conlanging.