

# Learning your own Conlang

## Survey Results

William S. Annis, March 15, 2021

*“This is cool, I want to learn your conlang” seems to be the conlanger's equivalent of “We should meet for coffee sometime.”*

### Background

A friend of mine is learning my personal conlang, Kíлта. That language is documented in my usual style: fairly technical, leaving a lot to my own knowledge to fill in gaps, and in no way suited to language learning. He is sometimes a bit exasperated that conlangers don't do more work to make their languages more accessible to learners. If I were trying to learn a language from conlang documentation I had written, I'd probably feel the same way.

But I started to wonder just how many conlangers even learn their own languages, much less anticipate others learning them.

I ran an anonymous web survey for about a week (March 8-15, 2021) to see what people had to say. I announced the poll in /r/conlangs, CONLANG-L, one of the many facebook groups, and the LCS Slack.

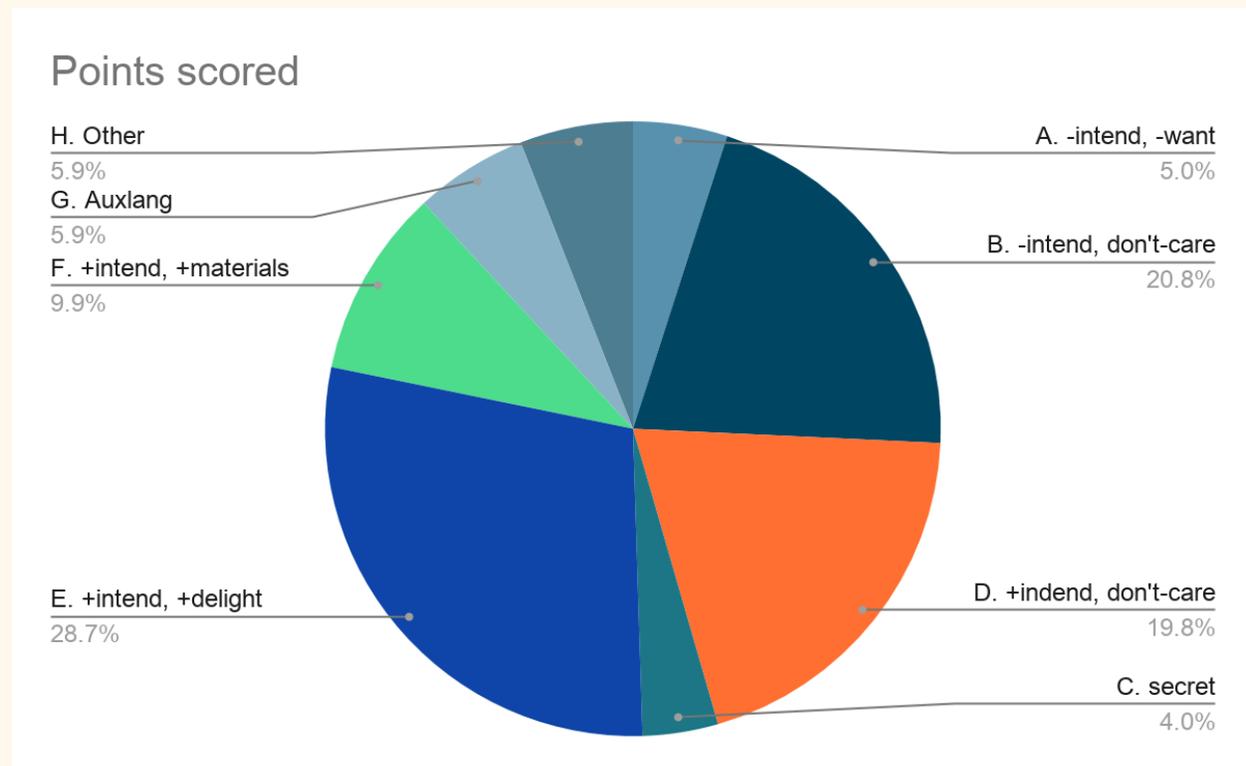
### Results

A web survey is necessarily self-selecting, so it's prudent not to read too much into results, but those who answered (N=273) paint an interesting general picture.

I have also learned a few things about Google surveys I will remember in the future. Quite a few people picked several answers, when what I wanted was for people to pick the one that applied the most. And leaving the “Other” option with a blank to fill in generated plenty of multiple replies, as well. That said, I'll try to draw sense out of the form. The percentages below reflect the total number of answers (361), not the total number of people participating.

A. I don't intend to learn any of my conlangs, and don't want anyone else to either.	5%
B. I don't intend to learn any of my conlangs, but don't mind if someone else wants to.	21%
C. I do intend to learn one of my conlangs, but don't want anyone else to (it's secret)	4%
D. I do intend to learn one of my conlangs, but don't care if anyone else wants to learn it.	20%
E. I do intend to learn one of my conlangs, and would be delighted if someone else wanted to.	29%
F. I do intend to learn one of my conlangs, and have produced materials to help others learn it.	10%
G. I am an auxlanger. I want to take over the world.	6%
H. Other	6%

Viewed in another way (I have no idea why Google Docs is fiddling with the numbers in the chart):



The first thing I noticed is that a lot of people do intend to learn their own conlangs, which is not what I expected at all. Fully 59% of respondents (D, E, F) expressed an interest in actually learning their own languages. The survey did not ask about how well people wanted to learn their own languages, and some were not deeply worried about it, “‘intend to’ is in the loosest sense, I would not feel bad if I didn’t ever learn it.”

On the other hand, the idea of other people learning our conlangs is just slightly dominated by indifference: 41% of people don’t particularly care if others learn their languages (B, D). Some are open to the idea if it seems worth the effort, “if someone wanted to learn a language of mine, I’d be open to learning a bit, too, because there would be a sort of purpose at that point.” Those who express delight at the idea of other speakers of their conlangs, or who encourage it by generating learning material makes up 39% of the survey (E, F). So, the people who want other learners and the people who don’t care are nearly in balance.

There has always been a branch of conlanging that focuses on secrecy and privacy, and it is slightly more popular than I thought it would be, though not by a lot. As one person said, “when I started conlanging, it was because I *didn’t* want anyone else to know what I was writing.” If I’m interpreting one reply correctly, at least one person has decided to turn their private language into a philosophical auxlang, which I doubt happens very often.

For most of the “Other” options people mixed and matched the text I’d given in the A-G options.

### **Open Answers**

In addition to the simple checkbox selection, I had two questions permitting open format answers: “Would you have answered the above question differently in the past? If so, what changed your thinking on the matter?” and “Anything else I should know?” The answers were sometimes only tenuously related to the question, but still (mostly) informative.

(Some replies have been modified to fit the capitalization and punctuation style of the rest of this document.)

Conlanging that’s part of a larger worldbuilding project generally seems to be associated with indifference to others learning the language. While some people expressed interest in the idea of readers of their books (or whatever medium) taking an interest in their conlangs, most were more focused on slotting the conlang into their narrative works, with no time left over for other conlanging efforts.

A few people who do learn their conlangs also share it within their families, though this is mostly not more than a few phrases and terms.

The difficulty of producing language instruction material got mentioned a few times, especially the time it takes to do. As one person said, “if people want to learn my conlangs then go ahead I’d say, but they need to be aware the resources are limited to zero.” Similarly, “I’d like for my time and effort to continue to be focused on the creative aspect, rather than working to accommodate another person.” Not surprisingly, the effort of learning any language at all was also mentioned several times as an impediment to learning one’s own languages, “My thinking was changed when I realized that I was just making clongs for fun and learning my clong isn’t fun.” Another respondent said, “While I’ve never made a conlang with the specific intent of learning it, I at least used to think that learning it would be fun endeavour. After having conlanged for a number of years though, I’ve realized that my motivation to learn my own conlangs is exactly zero.”

On the other hand, a few people recommended producing learning materials, not on the expectation that anyone else will actually use them, but because they help you fill in gaps in your language, “I enjoy producing learning materials over research-style materials to get things about my language across.” And another, “I’ve made learning material for languages without the intent for anyone to ever use them. I find it is pretty useful for constructing the everyday parts of the language that we often neglect.” One person also mentioned learning materials as a worldbuilding tool.

One person mentioned my ideas about keeping a diary in your conlang as a creative tool, but a few other people independently talked about learning a conlang a little, more as a way to improve the language than to use it as a regular medium of communication. One respondent wondered, “I do not understand, how does one create a conlang and not learn it?” Another said, “It’s way easier to tinker on a conlang when you know enough to at least come up with some basic sentences, and it’s way easier to learn a conlang when you’re constantly tinkering with it. Making and learning are really not separate processes for me.”

Several people observed that expecting anyone at all to be interested in your conlang enough to learn it is quite unlikely, “I’d take anyone who wants to learn any of my conlangs as a nice bonus for my conlanging as a hobby, but expecting that it will happen just sets you up for disappointment.” Another respondent resorted to simile, “finding someone else who wants to learn your language is harder than finding someone else to help you move a piano from one penthouse to another.” The same basic sentiment was expressed several times.

I will never again put “Anything else I should know” into a survey. I did get a lot of useful information, but I also got a good dose of silliness, including answers like, “your mom,” “I have erectile dysfunction” (see your doctor), and “You lookin good today” (thank you!).

## Final Thoughts

Though many people find it unlikely others would want to learn their conlangs, there are still enough people who are open to the idea, or actively want other learners, that perhaps instead of yet another mobile app or web site to store a phonology and some declension tables, the next focus for conlanging resources should be tools and templates for writing conlang primers. This is not as tidy as a grammar outline, unfortunately. Difficult questions of pedagogy arise, and there are some terrifying dependencies between chapters (simply having noun gender is enough to reorder lesson topics significantly), but with some thought a template outline might be possible.

Auxlangers remain devoted to promotion. Also, the opportunity to vilify auxlangs is a temptation some conlangers cannot pass up (though to be fair, my phrasing of that option might have been provoking).

There have been many ways to classify conlangs and conlangers over the years (*a priori* vs. *a posteriori*, the Gnoli triangle, etc.), but I propose one axis should be intent for the language to be used vs. no intent, whether personally or as an auxlang, and separately from the heartlang/secret language axis.

## Thanks

Thanks first to Uhítël whose exasperated questions led me to create this poll in the first place.

Thanks to everyone who filled it out, and to those who wrote at length in the open replies. There was no way for me to include everything people said, but it helped me write the summaries.