

Language (was: Time) and the New Sun

The SF-Lovers list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 13 Oct 1992

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C.E. Thompson — 13 Oct 1992, 21:57

dani at netcom.com (Dani Zweig) writes, apropos of TBOTNS:

We also note that it was reasonable to expect a coin from Ymar's time to survive, badly corroded, in Severian's: There is reason to suspect that common words such as 'copper', 'stone', 'wood', often refer to far more durable materials than we associate with them.

Which gives me a peg to hang the following question on: what relationship does the language spoken by Severian bear to English?

I offer the following two contrasting passages for your delectation:

1. In TSOTT, in Thecla's story, as retold by Severian to Agia in the Botanic Gardens, Father Inire is made to say to Domnina: "Yet even though light is so weightless we have given its name to that condition...". This pun only makes sense in English or **very** closely related languages, as far as I can trace the derivation of the words light (opposite of heavy) vs. light (opposite of dark).

2. In TCOTC, Thea says to Severian: "The dawn-men ... renamed it [Mars] Present. That was a jest in their tongue for the same word meant both Now and The Gift. Or so one of my tutors once explained the matter to my sister and me, though I do not see how any language could endure such a confusion."

So how is one to reconcile the two passages? With any other SF author than Gene Wolfe, I would attribute one or other to a momentary carelessness, but I would be quite reluctant to assume that here.

Chris Thompson
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Dani Zweig — 14 Oct 1992, 01:52 · follows C.E. Thompson

cet1 at cus.cam.ac.uk (C.E. Thompson):

What relationship does the language spoken by Severian bear to English?

Essentially none. What we see as English in the text is the language spoken in the unthinkable remote future. What we see as Latin is an almost-as-remote language which, by Severian's time, is dead-but-respected

- - like Latin in ours. (Did you notice that Valeria's translations from the 'Latin' are faulty?)

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There will be people in the remote future who, like Wolfe and others today, will have a love of language. Should Wolfe avoid wordplay in his characters' speech? Or give us wordplay that fails completely, with a footnote to the effect that it's brilliant in the original language? There's no good answer for this. Treating that language as if it were English, and giving us derivations that work for English, seems a legitimate decision, though not perfect. We are being given the feel of the character's speech, though it could be that in the 'actual' language, the connection being made is between 'light' and 'freedom', to offer a random example.

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So how is one to reconcile the two passages?

Again, I don't see a problem. The speech tells us about the speaker, not about the language. Besides, the language in question here is neither English nor the language of Severian's time. To which we add that the speaker's philology (and her tutors') may well be suspect.

Dani Zweig