

Linguistics in science fiction

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 30 Oct 1998

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1233>

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mary whalen — 30 Oct 1998, 11:28

This is Sean Whalen (prion).

---John Bishop <jbishop at blkbrd.zko.dec.com> wrote:
re _Snow_Crash_: it was fun, but the basic premise is just wrong;
Sumerian is _not_ the first language--it's maybe the oldest one we
have texts from, but that's different. Plus it's not a "brain-stem
hacking" tool; I've looked at it in passing and it's just another
language. As a BA in Linguistics, I've not yet seen SF which gets
Linguistics right at all; the tendency is to go wild on the wildest
version of Whorf' hypothesis, or to get some basic concept wrong.
As an MSc in Computer Science, it's the same for computing. This
is not to say that there couldn't be a tool for programming the mind
via language (indeed, advertising and so on show that there _is_),
but it's not going to be Sumerian.

This post is interesting, because I recently saw a book by Jack Vance called _The Languages of Pao_, which said something like "The first science fiction book based on the science of linguistics" on the cover. I have no idea what the story is about. Since Wolfe says he was influenced by Vance, particularly the Dying Earth books, I wondered if there are any stories where someone has noticed any emphasis on linguistics.

prion

Michael Straight — 30 Oct 1998, 14:49 · follows mary whalen

On Fri, 30 Oct 1998, mary whalen wrote:
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What about C.S. Lewis's "Out of the Silent Planet"? The main character is a philologist and a significant portion of the book is about language learning. Does that count as "linguistics"?

There is Wolfe's whole "I'm just translating this old manuscript from the future" conceit, which is fairly old hat (except maybe the "from the future" part. Have other authors done that before? Wolfe seems to play it pretty much as a joke.)

-Rostrum

Mark Millman — 30 Oct 1998, 15:25 · follows Michael Straight

On 30 October 1998 at 7:28 pm GMT,
prion (Sean Whalen) wrote:
. . . I wondered if there are any stories
where someone has noticed any
emphasis on linguistics.

I haven't read any of her stuff myself, but Suzette Hayden Elgin publishes a magazine devoted to linguistics in sf, and I understand that it's an important theme in her work. I believe that she holds a doctorate in linguistics and has written non-fiction on the subject as well.

One could say that "Alien Stones" refers to linguistics, but I don't really see a lot of it in Wolfe.

As for Jaynesian sf, Harry Turtledove has written a story explicitly based on his ideas (I have, regrettably, forgotten the title, but I think it's in one of his collections: Departures, I think, or maybe Kaleidoscope). Turtledove has also said in an interview that his novel Between the Rivers "borrows some of its ideas" from Bicameral Mind (the interview is at <http://www.chicon.org/gohs/turtldov.htm>). It's set, for those who aren't familiar with it, at the beginning of civilization, in Mesopotamia.

For anyone who hasn't read it and is interested, Bicameral Mind was republished in a revised edition in 1990 (the original publication was in the early or middle 70s), and should be available in most bigger libraries. Amazon.com has it, too.

And on 28 October 1998 (really?) at 9:38 am GMT,

Kieran Cleary wrote:
If I'm allowed a wee tangent, what's the news on Crowley, anyone? Given that Love&Sleep wasn't even published in the UK, and that it's probably out of print already, I have this fear that the Aegypt sequence won't get completed. Anyone got any pointers to recent interviews or other hopeful news?

Locus, the U.S. sf trade magazine, announced several months ago that Crowley had finished _Daemonomania_, the third volume in the series, and delivered it to his publisher. But when I looked in the Internet Speculative Fiction DataBase (<http://www.sfsite.com/isfdb/index.html>) just now, I saw that the book, which had been announced by Bantam for September 98 (hmmm), has been pulled from its list and is rumored to be back in Crowley's typewriter (or otherwise unfinished). Sorry the news couldn't be better.

Mark Millman