

Cursing in Old Solar

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 30 Oct 1998

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Dan Parmenter — 30 Oct 1998, 14:44

From: John Bishop <jbishop at blkbrd.zko.dec.com>

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's hypothesis, or to get some basic concept wrong.

Actually, I thought that Wolfe's treatment of the Ascians' language was a wonderful refutation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (aka "linguistic relativity" which most people have encountered in some form or other, either through anecdotes about the number of "Eskimo" words for snow or Hopi conceptions of time - roughly stated as "language determines worldview"). Severian, in a rare moment of lucidity, concludes that the Ascian prisoner's thoughts are in no way limited by being forced to speak entirely from stock phrases and that he can express any human thought through his language, including things which have never been expressed, original thoughts. This also serves the purpose of showing us that the Ascian leaders have failed in their Orwellian attempt at controlling the masses. Surely Wolfe was referring to Orwell, but I'm half-convinced that he may have had some exposure to the S-W hypothesis and some of the standard arguments against it. For a good source of these arguments, check out THE LANGUAGE INSTINCT by Steven Pinker.

Of course Star Trek handled this same concept rather well in the "Darmok" episode, which for my money is probably one of the better popular treatments of this sort of thing. The premise was of our Captain Picard marooned on a planet with some humanoid alien who even through the Universal Translator seemed to be spouting gibberish. It turns out that all conversation among these people is expressed in stock phrases from their "national epic". Picard figures it out, hilarity ensues, I think there's probably some shooting at some point. Good episode.

I believe that Suzette Haden Elgin is a linguist who has written SF that touches on these issues. I haven't read any of it.

Sapir-Whorf is controversial, though linguists consider it essentially a dead issue. It is perhaps out of the scope of this mailing list to go into all of the different views and their rationales.

From: Michael Straight <straight at email.unc.edu>

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"?

It certainly involves language, if not linguistics as it is understood now. I tend to view Lewis' linguistics with about the same seriousness as I view his biology. A philologist hero is of course a wonderful idea and I have nothing but praise for the series, but I don't look to it for serious discussions of language.

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.)

Don't forget that Wolfe even claims to have photographed the era's remains! If the future influences the past, I suppose that means he brought his camera on a vacation to Argentina! So yes, I suppose he winks a few times, but doesn't necessarily treat it as a joke.

Yr pal,
Shellac (computational linguist)

Peter Stephenson — 31 Oct 1998, 15:58 · follows Dan Parmenter

Dan Parmenter wrote:

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I enjoyed it too, and it certainly seems relevant to the Ascians, but put in this context the idea struck me as utterly implausible. I can't understand how a space-faring culture could ever get off the ground if instead of 'Captain, the dilithium crystals canna take it' they have to say something like 'Laforge, crawling around in a flimsy studio tunnel again'. Well, all right, they do that every episode so it's completely transparent after all, but think of any mildly technical sentence you like and try to construct a parallel for it using only references to ancient epics. ('And Arjuna said: "How then shall I rig the transporter beam so that the army of the Pandavas arrives in the hold of the freighter without the phaselock undergoing quantum degradation, O Krishna?"...')

Maybe it's another example of what I was talking about a couple of weeks ago with respect to Wolfe's science: the idea of the Ascian language works perfectly in the context Wolfe uses it, exactly because you're never shown an example where an Ascian is saying 'You two go round the other side of the hill, wait till exactly 11:35 and take out the two sentries without making any noise'.

Maybe, too, the trick in Star Trek is different, maybe if it works there it's because there is such a limited repertoire of things you can do: beam up, beam down, lock on tractor beam, set phasers to stun, pick up strange vibrations (Troy only), engage, ...

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