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### Language and Linguistics

J. J'Fellers

Theresa McGarry

East Tennessee State University, mcgarry@etsu.edu

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## Language and Linguistics

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## LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

The ways in which language and linguistics figure in women's science fiction reference communication both within human societies and among humans and other societies. While the general trend is for writers to largely gloss over the question of communication within and among future or alternate societies, perhaps creating a few new words for alien concepts, those who deal with language in more depth show interest in the power of language to shape, maintain, and transform societies and in the importance of the positions of those who work closely with it.

The role of linguists and linguistics is most prominent in the work of **C. J. Cherryh**, Sheila Finch, and **Suzette Haden Elgin**. Each takes the premise that, in a future where communication between vastly different populations of various worlds is necessary, the linguists who provide linguistic bridges between communities will be important because their work yields new cultural and socioeconomic structures. Cherryh's Hunter of Worlds duology (*Brothers of Earth*, 1976, and *Hunter of Worlds*, 1977) and Foreigner series (*Foreigner*, 1994; *Invader*, 1995; *Inheritor*, 1996; *Precursor*, 1999; *Defender*, 2001; *Explorer*, 2002) are notable examples of works exploring the relationship between worldview and language through the experience of a cultural and linguistic liaison. In Finch's "lingster" stories, many of the protagonists are members of a guild of "xenolinguists," and the plots often involve moral conflicts arising when their work puts them in situations that make it difficult to maintain the official neutrality required of them.

In Elgin's Native Tongue trilogy (*Native Tongue*, 1984; *The Judas Rose*, 1987; *Earthsong*, 1993), the linguists form a closed and largely isolated social class

on twenty-third-century Earth, where intense oppression of women is legalized by their constitutional status as children. This work constitutes an explicit exploration of the power of language to transform society, in that the women linguists secretly create a language, **Láadan**, specifically designed to express the perceptions of women, in the hope that the spread of the language will engender the end of violence on Earth. The (separate) grammar/dictionary shows a language going far beyond typical innovation in lexicon, reaching elements of syntax, morphology, and discourse.

Another writer who shows women attempting societal change by linguistic change is Monique Wittig; in *The Warriors* (*Les Guérillères*, 1969), the women of Earth, rejecting attempted domination by men with physical **warfare**, remove from their language all elements indexing male domination. *The Dispossessed* (1974) by **Ursula K. Le Guin** also shows a revolutionary group creating a new language to enact and maintain a new social order, though the focus is broader than **gender** equality. Researchers have also pointed out the power accorded the linguistic act of naming in the works of Le Guin, Elgin, Mary Staton, **Marge Piercy**, and others.

In **Margaret Atwood's** *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), women are restricted to specific forms of language, and the protagonist's exploration of forbidden forms, while private, constitutes a rebellion against male hegemony. A more extreme reaction to the inadequacy of language appears in Lisa Tuttle's "The Cure," in which language is portrayed as a trap from which characters are liberated by means of a treatment that protects from all diseases and also renders them permanently speechless.

In other works, the processes of rejecting, changing, and creating language are emphasized less, but the language used evinces similar principles. Janet Kagan's *Hellspark* (1988)—similar to the “lingster” stories in that an interpreter deciphering the culture and language of an alien society communicates with a computer by means of body implants—extensively explores how culture shapes language and language shapes society. More specifically related to feminist goals is Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig's *Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary* (*Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes*, 1975), which shows a future feminist society by means of encyclopedia-like definitions and explanations of terms both created and radically redefined. Writers such as Piercy and Le Guin invent and use new pronouns to provide different opportunities for invoking, or not invoking, gender.

Conversely, some writers show language simultaneously reflecting and maintaining dominance, as many linguists have argued actual current human languages do. Notable in this regard is **Esther Friesner's** *The Psalms of Herod* (1995), in which characters speak a future version of English in which male domination is tied to significant changes in the English lexicon, involving both new words and significant changes in the meanings of existing words. Many writers also create words in the languages of alien societies to show the worldview of those societies, and in **Joan Slonczewski's** *A Door into Ocean* (1986), the syntax of an alien group's language corresponds to their beliefs regarding concepts such as agency, force, and violence.

A related prevalent theme is the possibilities of various modes of language. An interesting example occurs in Amy Thomson's *Through Alien Eyes* (1999), in

which alien visitors to Earth communicate by changing color patterns on their skins. Several writers postulate the danger of foreign linguistic elements: In Janine Ellen Young's *The Bridge* (2000), a message from an alien society is encoded in a virus that kills most people on Earth; those not killed are so changed as to be no longer fully human, suggesting the power of world-views intrinsic in language to alter the mind of the person acquiring the language. This concept also appears in the Native Tongue trilogy, in which human babies exposed to nonhumanoid language input in the hope of them becoming interpreters are extremely damaged if they survive at all.

However, the mode that has received attention in the greatest number of works is telepathic communication. It is often not clear whether telepathy is linguistic or whether concepts and/or feelings are communicated directly. The second description is more likely to apply to works such as **Joanna Russ's** *And Chaos Died* (1970), in which the superior power of telepathy answers to the deficiency of human language, and **Sally Miller Gearhart's** *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women* (1980), in which the various forms of telepathy practiced by the Hill Women give them capabilities men do not have. A prevalent theme is the community-building power of telepathy; another, compatible, recurring notion is the casting of telepathy as taboo.

Finally, a few writers are beginning to take up the theme of language as a commodity. In Cherryh's Chanur series (*The Pride of Chanur*, 1981; *Chanur's Venture*, 1984; *The Kif Strike Back*, 1985; *Chanur's Homecoming*, 1986; *Chanur's Legacy*, 1992), machine interpretation among several space-traveling species depends on initial linguistic input from a native

speaker; when humans first arrive in the area, a trade advantage is to be gained from access to their language, and both a tape of input data and the native speakers themselves become objects of violent contention. In Elgin's "We Have Always Spoken Panglish" (2004), a disadvantaged culture allows its ancient language to die out rather than give dominant cultures access to it.

### Further Readings

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JEANNE G'FELLERS AND THERESA MCGARRY

## LATIN AND SOUTH AMERICA

Science fiction and fantasy have a long history in Latin and South America. The Latin American countries with the highest production of science fiction and fantasy works are Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico. While the works of many Anglophone and Francophone science fiction and fantasy authors have been translated into Spanish and Portuguese, relatively few Latin American science fiction works have been translated into English. A number of Latin American writers, both male and female, working in the genres of **magical realism** and fantastic literature, have attained significant commercial success in translation. However, many important texts that do not easily fit these generic categories are not yet available in English.

The first known work of science fiction written in Latin America was produced in 1775 in the colonial town of Mérida, Yucatán (in present-day Mexico) by the Franciscan friar Manuel

Antonio de Rivas. Rivas included the story "Sizigias y cuadraturas lunares [...]" about a lunar voyage as a preface to his treatise on astronomy. Rivas's protagonist is a Frenchman named Onésimo Dotalón, who is a student of Newtonian physics. Dotalón travels to the moon, where he encounters humanoid extraterrestrials, or *anctítonas*. Rivas's work was the subject of a lengthy investigation by the Inquisition and was not widely disseminated until the twentieth century.

A much more important influence on Latin American literature, including science fiction and fantasy, is the philosophical poem "Primero sueño" (First Dream, 1692) by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz from New Spain (colonial Mexico). The poem details the soul's **quest** for knowledge and imagines a space where **gender** is no longer a constraint. The legacy of Sister Juana—a literary genius who lived and wrote under the influence of scholasticism, hermetic mysticism, and the baroque, as well as newly available scientific knowledge—has frequently been an inspiration to writers and artists of all genres, including Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, and Rosario Castellanos.

In the late nineteenth century, Emília Freitas of northeastern Brazil published one of the earliest works of Brazilian fantasy, *A Rainha do Ignoto* (1899). The subject of this novel is a secret **utopian** community of women ruled by a mysterious queen on the island of Nevoeiro. The novel was republished in Brazil in 1980 and 2003, and although Freitas's novel is generally considered to have had little impact on later writers, it is a significant precursor of fantastic fiction in South America.

The majority of science fiction and fantasy literature from Latin America has been produced in the period from 1960 to the present. However, there are