Reading fictional languages

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The creation and interpretation of fictional languages, or glossopoesis, represents a particularly rich intersection of linguistic artistry, creativity, and cultural expression. On that note, *Reading Fictional Languages*, edited by Israel A. C. Noletto, Jessica Norledge, and Peter Stockwell, is a fresh contribution to this burgeoning field, offering a comprehensive analysis of how conlangs (constructed languages) function as stylistic, cognitive, and ideological constructs within literature, film, and other media. Drawing on methodologies from stylistics, narratology, and onomastics, the volume adeptly situates conlangs as central to the immersive and rhetorical capacities of speculative and fictional texts.

The collection's structure sets it apart as a uniquely innovative compendium. Notably, it is divided into two distinct yet interconnected sections: Design and Interpretation. The first section delves into the creative and technical dimensions of conlanging (as the construction of languages is referred to by aficionados), recruiting the expertise of well-known practitioners, or professional conlangers (language inventors). For instance, in one of the book's highlights, David J. Peterson and Jessie Sams provide an authoritative account of their work in Hollywood, which includes High Valyrian, Dothraki, Fremen, and several others, thus illuminating the constraints and possibilities of glossopoesis under the industrial pressures of television and film production. Their reflections on balancing phonological authenticity and creative expression with accessibility for actors and viewers underscore the tensions inherent in adapting linguistic creations to a performative medium.

Similarly, Harry Cook's chapter advances a sociolinguistic perspective, articulating how dialectal variation within fictional languages can enhance narrative verisimilitude by simulating the diachronic evolution and synchronic diversity of natural languages. Victor Fernandes Andrade and Sebastião Alves Teixeira Lopes's contribution critiques the Orientalist tropes underlying the design of constructed writing systems in science fiction cinema. Their analysis demonstrates how alien typographies often mimic Asian scripts to signify otherness, revealing how conlang aesthetics can unwittingly reproduce problematic cultural hierarchies. Bettina Beinhoff's empirical investigation into the phonaesthetics of Quenya, Sindarin, and Na'vi extends this discussion into cognitive domains, interrogating the interplay between phonological design and audience perception of beauty or exoticism, which may significantly differ from authorial intentions.

The second section, Interpretation, pivots to the narrative and stylistic implications of conlangs, foregrounding their semiotic and affective dimensions. Noletto's chapter on Brian W. Aldiss's short story 'A Spot of Konfrontation' offers a stylistic reading of the conlang SpEEC, an extrapolated dialect of English portrayed as an International Auxiliary Language. Noletto skilfully analyses SpEEC's function as a satirical device critiquing European unity and linguistic homogenisation, linking stylistic innovation to broader political and ideological concerns. His nuanced application of narrative theory and historical contextualisation makes this chapter a standout, highlighting the interpretive richness of conlangs when approached through a stylistic lens. Likewise, James Tauber's analysis of J.R.R. Tolkien's Elvish languages elucidates the intricate morphological and syntactic structures underpinning Middle-earth, positioning them as both markers of cultural alterity and tools for readerly immersion.

Still within the ideological bounds, Jessica Norledge's chapter on Láadan, Suzette Haden Elgin's feminist conlang from the *Native Tongue* trilogy, interrogates the underpinnings of glossopoesis within dystopian

fiction. By comparing Láadan with Orwell's Newspeak, Norledge critiques the extent to which constructed languages can actualise their purported sociopolitical aims, questioning the feasibility of encoding feminist epistemologies within linguistic structures. This chapter, like several others, draws on stylistic frameworks to unpack the rhetorical affordances of conlangs, reinforcing the volume's commitment to integrating close textual analysis with broader theoretical concerns.

Peter Stockwell's concluding chapter addresses fictional languages that gesture towards the ineffable or inexpressible, exploring their role as stylistic mechanisms for representing the transcendent or mystical. Stockwell's insights into 'unspeakable languages' challenge conventional notions of textuality, proposing that such conlangs function as metalinguistic devices that invite readers to grapple with the limits of expression and comprehension. By examining cases where fictional languages remain incomplete or minimally realised, Stockwell offers a provocative perspective on the semiotic and affective potential of language absence, making this chapter a fitting conclusion to the volume's expansive exploration of glossopoesis.

A notable strength of the collection lies in its interdisciplinary orientation. Chapters such as Christine Mooshammer and colleagues' phonaesthetic experiments on conlangs bridge stylistics with psycholinguistics, offering empirical insights into readerly and auditory reception. Accordingly, Rebecca Gregory's exploration of the conomasticon – fictional naming systems – links onomastic studies with cognitive stylistics, highlighting how names in speculative fiction function as microcosms of broader narrative and cultural logics. This methodological diversity not only enriches the volume's analytical scope but also underscores the multifaceted nature of fictional languages as both artefacts of creative production and objects of scholarly inquiry.

However, while the editors rightly foreground the cultural politics of glossopoesis, particularly in cinematic contexts, there seems to be little engagement with non-Western literary and filmic contributions. This gap is particularly notable given the global popularity of speculative fiction and the increasing prominence of non-Western creators in the genre. Moreover, some chapters presuppose a level of linguistic expertise that may deter non-specialist readers, with the exception of language enthusiasts and other conlangers.

Nonetheless, these shortcomings do little to diminish the volume's scholarly value. *Reading Fictional Languages* is a seminal text that not only consolidates existing research on glossopoesis but also sets a robust agenda for future inquiry. By demonstrating how fictional languages mediate narrative aesthetics, cognitive processes, and cultural discourses, the collection affirms the relevance of conlangs to the study of stylistics and speculative fiction.

Therefore, this volume will undoubtedly become a touchstone for researchers in stylistics, narratology, and speculative fiction studies, as well as practitioners of language creation, fiction writers who wish to integrate narrative and glossopoesis, and those interested in world-building. Its interdisciplinary approach, combined with its rigorous, ensures its relevance to a wide audience, including undergraduates, scholars from various disciplines, language enthusiasts, as well as speculative fiction writers and fans. For anyone interested in the poetics and politics of fictional languages, Reading Fictional Languages is an indispensable resource.

References

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