Interview with Christine Schreyer

Editors: You've observed that there are not many studies of speakers of media-driven constructed languages like Na'vi. These speakers have tended to be dismissed simply as overzealous fans. Yet, from your perspective, these communities deserve more thoughtful and in-depth analysis. Can you elaborate on the need for such study and its potential value for popular culture studies?

Christine Schreyer: My thoughts on the importance of studying conlangs, fans, and fandoms aligns with the work of Mark Duffett, who writes,

> Fandom remains a complex and challenging area of analysis worth studying for many reasons. As Western society shifts further into a digital, tertiary, service economy, its analysis can help to explain why individuals are increasingly constructing their personal identities around the media products they enjoy… A focus on fandom uncovers social attitudes to class, gender, and other shared dimensions of identity… Crucially, its study can expose the operation of *power* in the cultural field. (2-3, emphasis in the original)

In my own research, I was interested in research with speakers of fanlangs, constructed languages tied to popular culture and fandoms (*Conlanging*), because they are a unique group of people. They are the "uber-fans" (Okrent 271; Schreyer "Digital" 1.3) but they are also fans who are actively taking up works of popular culture in a specific way – through the language of the world built for the artistic work.

Fanlang speakers are similar to individuals writing fanfic in that they are engaging with the material through a focus on language. However, while fanfic writers typically use their own languages to build out the world of the fandom, speakers of fanlangs are using the language of the media world to both participate in the fandom and the built world, but to also bring an aspect of the popular culture

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into their daily lives in the "real world." This has potential value for popular culture studies as it allows a new window into how popular culture impacts individuals and society.

For instance, my research with the Na'vi community has provided insights into how learners of endangered languages can model the language-learning techniques of fan communities to encourage more speakers of the endangered language (Schreyer "Media"; Schreyer "Digital" 10.5). However, the research has also shown that for a portion of the Na'vi speech community, learning the Na'vi language, as well as being a fan of the movie *Avatar*, has led to these individuals focusing on environmentalism in their daily lives (Schreyer "Green"). Similarly, the research of my former student, Amy Doricic, has shown that individuals who learned Dothraki, from the television series *Game of Thrones*, were more accepting of the different cultures within the television series, and this acceptance might also be expanded appreciation of cultures in the real world (Doricic). This was seen to be true for Na'vi speakers as well. For instance, one participant commented the following, "I feel that the Na'vi is an analogue of human indigenous cultures and that James Cameron intended to use the film to draw attention to these people and to the destruction of their environments. I have a strong interest in this as well, thus my interest in the film" (Na'vi English survey respondent #148). Others mentioned this connection as well and described how, despite the critiques of *Avatar* as a "fictional *Dances with Wolves*" (Ketcham et al. 199), the film does bring Indigenous issues in the real world, although it is unclear how allyship for those non-Indigenous speakers of Na'vi might have played out beyond this recognition.

Studying fanlang communities also has potential for examining how communities form around artifacts of popular culture, specifically an intangible item, such as a language. For example, research conducted by my former student, Brianna Peacey, has examined how participation in the Trigedasleng community, from the television show *The 100,* has led to greater sense of belonging and a stronger sense of identity for members (Peacey). Studies of fanlang communities also contribute to the field of sociolinguistics through the analysis of how different social factors play out within a new speech community; how do dialects form, if at all. How is slang developed? Are there differences in the speech of different age groups or genders? Fan language communities are microcosms of both the fandoms themselves but also of speech communities writ large.

Overall, returning to Duffett, the study of fandoms allows scholars to better understand how media and popular culture help shape people's identities and how

this relates to the broader world in terms of contemporary social attitudes, whether those are positive or negative, and how these imagine worlds might provide opportunities to imagine new realities as well (2-3).

Editors: We think your research on using Na' vi language learning techniques of fan communities to encourage more speakers of endangered languages is very interesting. Of all the conlangs and conlang-learning techniques, what drew you to look at Na'vi? What is so distinct about the Na' vi learning techniques from other conlang learning techniques? Considering the strong colonial tropes and racialization in *Avatar*, it would make sense to use the Na' vi learning techniques if fans were aware of these power relations and using/learning Na' vi language as resistance to colonialism.

Christine: This is a great question, and it was more a case of timing than anything that drew me to look at the Na'vi community. *Avatar* came out in December of 2009 and I taught my course on new languages, at the time called Pidgins, Creoles, and Created Languages, for the first time in the fall of 2010. In that course we focused much of our attention on Klingon, as a fanlang, and Esperanto, as another conlang which was developed with a different purpose (to be an International Auxiliary Language). However, Na'vi was very much a focus in the news at this time and there were reports of thousands of people learning Na'vi around the world. In fact, ahead of my study of Na'vi speakers, I wrote an article comparing both Klingon and Na'vi community learning practices for endangered language communities (see Schreyer "Media"). Since there was little information I could find on what Na'vi speakers were doing to gain all these speakers I decided to find out for myself, which is how I began this research.

One of the main differences turned out to be the availability of online resources. As Rogers notes in *A Dictionary of Made-Up Languages*, "Being a language born during the Internet age, Na'vi has better online representation than most other made-up languages" (155). This remains absolutely true and is also tied to the marketing and information provided on the language ahead of the movie's release, including a Language Log Blog post from Paul Frommer ("Some), and the book *James Cameron's Avatar: An Activist Survival Guide* (Wilhelm and Mathison). In the end, the study became more about how fans who are passionate about language can support each other in community and learn together via online resources. As many Indigenous communities often have members who live away from their home

territories, I became interested in what these online communities could share and how to model Na'vi communities for language. In fact, in 2015, I gave a TEDx talk at my university, the University of British Columbia, Okanagan, on this topic titled, "How to Be a Language Fangirl" (Gagne). So, while some of the Na'vi speaking participants saw themselves as allies to Indigenous communities and their land protection, this was not the main reason I chose this community of fanlang speakers as a focus of my research – it was more a situation of the right time and the right place – online.

Editors: We're interested in the role that conlangs play in reinforcing or challenging the power dynamics within fiction. For example, we've studied the Tusken people and their language, which originally consisted of animalistic sounds like braying donkeys. This seemed to encourage audiences to deny Tusken people their subjectivity (later series have done much to improve this disparity). On the other hand, *The Expanse* and *Star Trek: Discovery* use Belter creole and Klingon, respectively, to enhance the subjectivity of Belters and Klingons. What role/s do you think conlangs play in establishing or representing the identity of their speakers within fiction? Does hearing characters speak conlangs help establish their identity, as well as their subjectivity?

Christine: As conlangs become more popular, they are being used in ways that dialects have been used to indicate different power structures and social standing (think Hagrid in *Harry Potter*). In my opinion, conlangs can represent the identities of the characters of an imagined world in at least two ways: 1) the sound of the language and 2) the look of the language (as represented through writing systems). The first is still the most prominent in the realm of language creation in popular culture since not all artlangs, or constructed languages in artistic works, have writing systems. It is also possible for a work of popular culture to have a writing system without a full constructed language attached to it, called conscripts (*Conlanging*), but in recent years as production designers and directors have realized fans want more authenticity in their media, these have not been as prominent. Sound, therefore, is still the main point of reference to identity. And, yes, I believe that when viewers hear characters speak a conlang this helps establish the character's identity, their role in hierarchical power structures within a film, but also their subjectivity.

For instance, the language of Klingon is known to be guttural and was made to match the aggressive culture of Klingons (Okrent 266) while Dothraki also has been perceived as guttural and made to match the culture of the Dothraki horse riders (Peterson 25, Kass "Speaking"). In contrast, James Cameron's request to linguist Paul Frommer ahead of the creation of the Na'vi language included direction that the language should sound "nice" to audiences (Shaw). In my research, many speakers of Na'vi (n=40 out of 293) pointed to the musical and pleasant sound of Na'vi as a reason why they were learning the language. One respondent said, "At this point, I'd rather learn Na'vi than Klingon largely due to the way it sounds; Na'vi was designed to sound beautiful whereas Klingon was designed to sound harsh" (Na'vi English survey respondent #76, 2015). As we can see from this quote, sometimes the match between sound and identity is made by fans. In my work as a language creator I have also been directed to build languages with specific sound traits. For the Eltarian language for *Power Rangers* (2018), the director Dean Israelite also requested "guttural sounds" for the language to "feel older" like ancient Greek and Aramaic, as this matched his vision of the Eltarian people, who were the original power rangers. There has been less fan take-up of   this conlang, which appears in only a few scenes of the film, so it is difficult to say if these choices have impacted how viewers perceived the characters (Zordon, Rita Repulsa, and Alpha 5) speaking the language.

Similarly, for the language of Beama in *Alpha*, the director Albert Hughes requested that the language sound similar to Spanish and Italian with shorter syllables (Consonant-Vowel, Vowel-Consonant, Vowel), which also matched the academic research on the earliest human languages as well; I considered both when developing this language (see Schreyer and Adger). I think the combination of artistic vision and academic research led to the characters speaking this language being perceived as "realistic" or "authentic," which was the aim of this film that was set 20,000 years ago. For this film, I also created a dialect of the language, which was spoken by a neighboring tribe although, unless they were listening closely, viewers might not notice this difference in speech. However, I felt it was important to highlight how we can imagine these early human communities as similar to our own modern speech communities with different structures. On a related note, there was also an early storyline, which did not make the final cut of the film, where the main characters in Alpha encounter Neanderthals. The first draft of the scripts I read did not have the Neanderthals speaking their own language, but rather communicating through grunts. As you note in your question, this choice

would have limited the subjectivity of the Neanderthal characters, but it also contradicts modern research on the origins of human language. I argued for a Neanderthal language, and was eventually asked to create one, although this language and the associated storyline did not make the final cut of the film. Finally, Bettina Beinhoff's work has examined both the sound symbolism of conlangs, as well as how conlangs are perceived alongside other natural languages.

In regard to writing, if media includes writing, whether that's as an art piece, such as the writing systems of Gallifreyan, which appear in *Dr. Who* (Vultee), or a writing system based on a constructed language, such as Kryptonian in *Man of Steel*, the producers of that media are also using this aspect of the conlang to project an imagined society, which has an impact on how the characters associated with that society are portrayed. Is the writing complex or unusual, such as that which appears in *Arrival*, or something that reminds viewers of a particular human writing system? There are two kinds of Kryptonian writing in *Man of Steel*; one is a logographic writing style, designed as the ancient system, where a symbol represents concepts, while the other is the more modern syllabic writing, where Consonant-Vowel combinations are represented as one symbol. This latter writing system matched the constructed language I developed while the logographic system, known in the canon as "glyphs," were developed by the art department before I arrived and are a major plot point in the film. For instance, in the DVD promotion materials for *Man of Steel,* a website identified the ancient Kryptonian writing system in the following way:

> Symbols (Kryptonian Culture)
> Glyphs
> Emblems or glyphs represented a Kryptonian family dynasty, and would adorn Kryptonian homes as well as clothing. Among these was the House of El, which also represents hope in Kryptonian. (Burlingame)

While this backstory does not appear in the film specifically, commentary on the "S" meaning "hope" appears in one of Kal-El's (Superman's) lines to Lois Lane in the film. Supplementary materials to the original media production then can help to explain the logic of the world to interested fans and expand how the world, the characters, and the language are viewed.

Editors: You may be familiar with the Bechdel-Wallace test for objectively analyzing the validity of female characters in films, which was translated for race by Nikesh Shukla (Bechdel, Latif). Recently sisters Nadia Latif and Laila Latif and

Ava DuVernay developed separate sets of questions that expose structural racism in film (Latif, DuVernay). Building on the work of these thinkers, we have developed the Conlanger test for cultural artifacts with conlangs. We proposed questions like: How often do characters speak to each other in the conlang about subjects unrelated to characters from outside the group? Do you think such a test would reveal useful insights about movies like *Avatar* and their associated conlangs? If so, what questions do you think should be part of our Conlang Test? Do you think such a test would reveal useful insights about movies like *Avatar* and their associated conlangs?

Christine: Yes, absolutely! However, I think that I would not have been able to answer this question just from my experience conducting research with the Na'vi speech community since I think this question speaks more to the writer and directors of films than to the fans or even the language creators. Since my work with the Na'vi speech community, I have made languages for a variety of films. These include languages that were made to be "art" (*Man of Steel*), languages that were made to "set the scene" (*Power Rangers*), and languages that were meant to be pivotal to the film (*Alpha*). The use of conlangs in each of these films was not my decision, but what has happened to them after is absolutely related to popular culture. For *Man of Steel*, I was hired by the Art Department, who wanted to include instances of Kryptonian writing on the sets and props of the film. The language is never spoken in the film, but there is a full conlang (well, as full as conlangs for popular culture can be, as they are built in short timelines with limited vocabulary) associated with the world of the film. Kryptonian would not pass a Conlang Cultural Artifact Test if speaking was the only criterion.

Editors: If so, what questions do you think should be part of our Conlanger Test?

Christine: You had proposed the question, "How often do characters speak to each other in the conlang about subjects unrelated to characters from outside the group"? However, I think perhaps a broader question might be the following, "How often do characters speak to each other in the conlang about subjects unrelated to characters, or cultural objects, from outside the group?" since I can imagine scenarios where characters speaking a conlang are reflecting on an aspect of society that is alien to them, as well as the people who are unlike them or are alien. *Power Rangers* would likely rank highly in this version of the test since, as a language that

was made to "set the scene," the characters speak mainly to themselves in Eltarian, until Alpha 5 tells Zordon the new rangers "speak a primitive language called English" (*Power Rangers*), and then directs him to the ship's matrix and all future communication is in that language.

I think other questions that might be helpful for a conlang cultural artifact test are the following:

1. Is there a writing system for the language and is it used to communicate within the conlang community or to provide historical or cultural context? Or is it a "flavor conscript" (Schreyer "Constructed") to give the idea of another world and culture or an actual fully realized constructed language?

2. How often is the conlang spoken within the media? Is it being used to "set the scene," as *Power Rangers* does or as Na'vi does in the new *Avatar: The Way of the Water* where the "instant translation" trick occurs (Shaw), or is it used throughout the film, such as in *Alpha*?

Alpha remains fairly unique as a film that uses a conlang throughout its entirety and, as a result, it sometimes received mixed reviews due to the use of subtitles throughout (Henderson). The film wasn't marketed as a film with a conlang – in fact the trailer used English voiceover – but the genre may also have contributed to this since the film was set in the ancient past in Europe and was not a film where two alien cultures are interacting with each other. Sci-fi and fantasy remain the staples of conlang creation. These are spaces where conlangs are anticipated, if not expected, but the question remains if audiences are ready for films or television shows that are entirely subtitled (despite the benefit to Deaf audiences, amongst others). Therefore, any Conlang Cultural Artifact Test would need to take into account quantity, quality, and scope of the conlang it was evaluating.

Editors: Follow-up to Question 3, with the full list of questions provided, how might this be applied to *Avatar* and the Na'vi language? Looking at those for whom the conlang is their language: Do some of them have names?

Christine: Yes, in *Avatar* the Na'vi characters have names, including the most important one, Neytiri, who is Jake Sully's Na'vi teacher. Fun fact: the Learn Na'vi community developed a one-on-one tutor program where advanced Na'vi speakers are paired with beginners, which models a language-learning method called "Master-Apprentice" (Hinton 177) that is used extensively in endangered-language contexts.

Editors: Do any of them talk to each other in that conlang, and are we able to understand them?

Christine: Yes, we see multiple scenes where Na'vi speak to each other, but also to the newcomer, Jake.

Editors: Are some of them individuated? Do we see subjectivity for any of them?

Christine: Yes, Neytiri is definitely individuated and has her own opinions on how life should be.

Editors: Are we shown any social structures like family units?

Christine: Yes.

Editors: Are we shown their everyday lives, like cooking, sleeping, hanging out?

Christine: Yes.

Editors: Are we shown a culture for them that includes history and spiritual components?

Christine: Yes.

Editors: Do they get to tell their story in their own voice?

Christine: No, the story is still told from the outsiders' perspective.

Editors: Do they "fulfill harmful, simplistic, or down-right racist stereotypes"? (DuVernay)

Christine: Yes, the Na'vi are portrayed with many stereotypical pan-Indigenous characteristics (Ketchum et al.).

Editors: Are marginalized people included in the production team?

Christine: Yes, while James Cameron, director, and Paul Frommer, language creator, are older white men, Frommer is a member of the LGBTQIA2s+ community, which is marginalized. And the lead actor, Zoë Saldaña, who speaks Na'vi as Neytiri, is Dominican and Puerto Rican.

Editors: This list is not a taxonomy of successful representation of Other in cultural artifacts. It describes, based on our analysis of them, what makes the Tuskens seem like a people.

Christine: Following this list of questions, the Na'vi language and community would rank very highly on what makes the Na'vi speakers seem like a people as well.

Editors: Thank you very much!

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