

Shaka, When the Walls Fell: Conlangs, Metaphors and (Mis)Communication

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[T]he fact that any alien race communicates with another is quite remarkable.
- Counselor Deanna Troi (“Ensigns of Command” 27:17)

Constructed languages (conlangs) are a way for fans and audiences to more fully immerse themselves in a story. Conlangs provide for that itch of mystery and intrigue that allow us to engage with our internal puzzle solver. As we struggle to figure out words and phrases, we are becoming part of the story – we put ourselves into character’s places and consider what and how we might interact with this new language. Further, conlangs encourage us to think about language and what we *mean* when we say something. They also make us ponder how everything we encounter has a name and how every name has a story. Perhaps no television episode in history exemplifies this investigative itch more than the *Star Trek: The Next Generation*’s (TNG, 1987-1994) season five episode, “Darmok.”

The opening scene provides early context for what follows: The *Enterprise* is dispatched to meet an “enigmatic race” known as the Children of Tama or Tamarians (“Darmok” 0:13). The crew, led by Captain Picard, are tasked with establishing diplomatic relations with them. During the first scenes, audiences find out that the Tamarians are sending out a mathematical signal toward Federation space and the Federation takes this to mean that the Tamarians want to establish some form of communication. Seven previous encounters with the Tamarians have proven to be unsuccessful, and Commander Data, the *Enterprise*’s Operations officer, also an android, reports that these encounters “went without incident” but the Tamarians have been called “incomprehensible” (“Darmok” 0:45). While the

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crew appears to be cautious, Picard believes the *Enterprise* crew's "patience [and] imagination" will allow them to have another successful mission ("Darmok" 1:24).

In this article, I focus on how to better understand communication across cultures and how the use of myth, metaphors, and stories impact those interactions. To do so, I utilize the *TNG* episode "Darmok" and how the Tamarian language functions like a conlang. For this discussion, there are two main focal points. First, I work to better understand cultural communication through myth and metaphor as well as the context needed to comprehend them. Through that discussion, I recognize, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson note, "human *thought processes* are largely metaphorical" (15). I expand on this understanding to describe some common metaphors, including those within the *Star Trek* universe, and how they can be interpreted (e.g. "Scotty, beam me up"). By focusing on the metaphors presented in "Darmok," we are better able to understand the complexities of intercultural communication. Throughout this piece, I pull from "Darmok" to demonstrate how the *Star Trek* franchise uses the concept of aliens to give us insight about ourselves and our relation to other human cultures. I also explore how conlangs are an important way to take on another perspective, which allows us to lean toward shared understanding, understand power dynamics, and clearer communication with other cultures. While I am cautious to argue that the Tamarian "language" is a fully robust conlang, I do think it is an elementary version and close enough for my purposes to explore various aspects of conlangs in general, which I do throughout this article. As I conclude, I highlight the earlier discussion of context and perspective and consider them through other *Trek* episodes to provide additional insight. Finally, that itch can be scratched by more fully engaging with conlangs as we learn to better understand not only these fictional languages, cultures, and peoples but also ourselves.

Myths and Metaphors

When the initial communication channel with the Tamarians is opened, Captain Dathon of the Tamarian ship says, "Rai and Jiri at Lungha. Rai of Lowani. Lowani under two moons. Jiri of Ubaya. Ubaya of crossed roads at Lungha. Lungha, her sky grey. Rai and Jiri at Lungha" ("Darmok" 1:39). Picard and the *Enterprise* crew are befuddled and look at each other hoping one of them understands this cryptic message. Data points out that Dathon seems to be using proper names of people or things, but no one on the *Enterprise* knows who or what they are or what they mean.

Data's right in his guess. The Tamarians are referencing people and places from their mythical history. The Tamarians have a method of communication that is nothing like any other species the audience has seen on *Star Trek*: they communicate through myth and metaphor. As we ponder Dathon's cryptic message, Roland Barthes reminds us, "myth is a system of communication [...] it is a message" (107). While it might be a message, it is not getting through to the *Enterprise* crew. Moreover, it is based on a myth the *Enterprise* crew do not know; yet, Claude Levi-Strauss writes, "a myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place long ago. But what gives the myth an operational value is that the specific pattern described is timeless; it explains the present and the past as well as the future" (209). More specifically, myths convey stories through patterns that we can understand and those patterns cross culture and time. By considering Dathon's odd phrases, one can parse two people from two places meeting at another place, and Levi-Strauss suggests myths like this can give insight regardless of when they are conveyed. Levi-Strauss continues, "the mythical value of the myth is preserved even through the worst translation" (210). For the *Enterprise* crew, however, Dathon's message is literally lost in translation. "Whatever our ignorance of the language and the culture of the people where it originated," Levi-Strauss writes, "a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader anywhere in the world. Its substance does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the story which it tells" (210). While the Tamarian patterns might be comprehensible, the context, and the story embedded within the syntax, grammar, or even tone is not. The *Enterprise* crew make the connections to the Tamarian mythology, but there is still connective tissue missing. This context – the story which it tells – is the problem for the *Enterprise* crew and the mystery for the audience: they don't know the story.

The *Star Trek* franchise is full of stories that have become metaphors, such as the oft misquoted, "Beam me up, Scotty." *Trek* fans likely know many others too. Metaphors are one of the ways we convey meaning and streamline communication. Here are some common examples and a few I have made up to show how complex, even how context specific they can be:

Johnny on the spot.

Calgon, take me away.

Bills beat Lions in Buffalo.

Armstrong on the moon.

Challenger during takeoff.

Locutus at Wolf 359.

Shackleton in the Antarctic.

Burke in his parlor.

Readers may recognize some of the above examples or at least be able to understand them or get a sense of the intended significance. More importantly, they may understand what they mean with enough specificity that no further discussion is needed. For example, the well-known advertisement campaign “Calgon, take me away” showed a person engulfed in high-pressure scenarios (e.g. a yelling boss, gridlock traffic, a crying baby). Then upon saying, “Calgon, take me away,” they suddenly appear in a luxurious, steaming bubble bath with soft, relaxing music playing in the background. The Calgon example is similar to the “beam me up” example. Both suggest, broadly speaking, that one wants to leave a situation, but it can take on more meanings based on the context it is used. For example, either could mean one’s tired and wants to rest. For the “Scotty, beam me up” example, it is interesting because it is been reported to have never actually been spoken on *Star Trek: The Original Series* (TOS). Yet, the meaning behind it crosses cultures and languages and reaches to those that may have never seen an episode. And if one happens to be an American football fan, “Bills beat Lions in Buffalo” makes perfect sense. But if one is not a fan or has no knowledge of the two teams, one might be thoroughly confused about some bills beating a pack of lions in a buffalo. The meaning of metaphors can be misinterpreted by people unfamiliar with them. Thus, context and historical knowledge becomes paramount to understanding them. Utilizing the above examples, Armstrong on the moon is pretty obvious to most readers, but does “Locutus at Wolf 359” mean anything to non-*Star Trek* fans? The point here is that these examples require specific knowledge about the people, the places, what happened at those places, and when those people were there. The story, and all that it means, is carried via the metaphor.

In fact, the origin of *Star Trek* is based on a metaphor: Gene Roddenberry, the creator of *Star Trek*, originally sold it as a western in space. At the time, when westerns, like *Wagon Train* (1957-1962, 1962-1965), ruled the airwaves, this seemed like a reasonable idea. Although there is certainly a swashbuckling and frontier aspect to TOS, several episodes throughout the many series were metaphorical. Further, many of the popular culture or political references in *Star Trek* are metaphorical because the episodes themselves are a metaphor, perhaps, for what some see humanity becoming in the future.

Conlangs operate in much the same way as metaphors. We encounter them and might understand some elements based on our life experience, our understanding

of storytelling, or the clues provided by the language's delivery. These little tidbits are just enough to get us curious and work to figure more out about these new words, phrases, and stories. As humans, one way we pass on knowledge is through our stories and myths. Those stories and myths influence and guide us in future interactions. Thomas Richards asserts, "we are immersed in the system of myths we use to explain the world" (*Meaning* 143). Yet, these explanations are not always understood because, as Barthes writes, "myth hides nothing: its function is to distort, not to make disappear" (120). Because myth distorts, it forces us to interpret, and we interpret from our own perspective. As such, conlangs, myths, and stories can be culturally understood through a common perspective. That perspective might be as basic as being human. Context, too, provides insight into language as it generates and enhances meaning. Having some backstory of an event helps us understand what is happening, even what is expected. For example, throughout the "Darmok" episode, many examples needing some experience or more context are required to understand the flow, direction, and meaning. At one point, Commander Riker says, "Riker to La Forge" ("Darmok" 22:41). Without context, what does that mean? There is no verb, no clear action. It is only with experience with human behavior, and perhaps some experience with TNG, does one understand what is meant; Riker is communicating with La Forge and asking him to respond, if he can. La Forge, after hearing the phrase by Riker, responds, "La Forge here," which again, without context, is just as confusing as "Riker to La Forge" ("Darmok" 22:43). La Forge is not there with Riker, he's obviously in another location, but letting Riker know that he's ready for Riker's next message. Essentially, these interactions are metaphorical because they require some previous knowledge or context. Metaphors are phrases that signify or represent something else. Further, metaphors are interpreted by perspective and understanding. But, L. David Ritchie writes, "The question 'what is a metaphor?' is not easy to answer" (3). Riker is not to La Forge nor is La Forge here. But the way we understand their phrases is that Riker is calling out to La Forge and La Forge is acknowledging the calling of his name (over the communication device). To help explain, philosopher Max Black writes, "metaphor may require attention to the *particular circumstances* of its utterance" (29). In other words, context and experience becomes important to understand the message. The understanding of metaphors is, in many ways, just like translating a language or a conlang. Simply put, translation is based on contextual clues and consistency of patterns, so metaphors become another perspective for us to utilize to better understand conlangs.

Back aboard the *Enterprise*, after a few more lines of perplexing phrases of people, places, and things unfamiliar to the crew and viewers, Dathon posits the idea of “Darmok.” His first officer appears first to not understand the rationale of Darmok and then clearly disagrees with that course of action, even though both understand the meaning. Yet once again, the *Enterprise* crew and audience are left in limbo with what Darmok means. The conversation gets louder until finally Dathon, with a firm command voice, says, “The river Temarc! In winter” (“Darmok” 2:57). And with that, the discussion is over; whatever *Darmok* means becomes the course of action. At this point, some viewers begin to connect the freezing of a river to stopping its flow, effectively stopping the flow of discussion between the captain and first officer. Regardless of the actual meaning, the metaphor of *Darmok* carries with it implicit and contextual meaning that signifies how the Tamarians will proceed.

A metaphor’s meaning provides many opportunities to ponder possibilities. Black argues, “the purpose of metaphor is to entertain and divert” (34). Certainly, the episode “Darmok” was designed to entertain, and one could make a case for diversion (i.e., isn’t entertainment a form of diversion?). The director of the episode, Winrich Kolbe, says, “Storywise, it was one hell of a story. It was almost flawless” (qtd. in Gross and Altman 228). But even Kolbe was perplexed by the dialogue, he continues, “can you imagine not speaking Russian and, in your case, having to write an article in Russian?” (qtd. in Gross and Altman 228). While Kolbe helps connect the idea of translation and conlangs with comprehension and context, Katrina G. Boyd refers to the Tamarian language as a “narratively metaphoric language” (112). Boyd points out that the way the Tamarians are speaking is a conlang, and while being driven by narratives and metaphors, one needs particular insight to comprehend it. Although I have noted I’m not convinced Tamarian is a conlang, I do believe one can reach that conclusion, especially if one believes a conlang to be created for a specific purpose. Additionally, Tamarian does convey meaning through a specific narrative, which helps it lean in the direction of conlangs. To better understand the Tamarians and their discourse, let us return to Lakoff and Johnson: “Metaphors [...] are conceptual in nature. They are among our principal vehicles for understanding. And they play a central role in the construction of social and political reality” (164). But it is not that simple.

Literary critic William Empson recognizes that metaphors “correspond to what the speakers themselves feel to be a rich or suggestive or persuasive use of a word” (333). Black, in a footnote discussion with Empson, recognizes “the opposite

danger [...] of making metaphors too important by definition, and so narrowing our view of the subject excessively” (45). Black’s insight allows us to point out some problems within “Darmok.” First, if viewers fail to make some connections to the “Darmok” metaphors, they will not like the episode. More specifically, if they cannot begin to parse the Tamarian conlang, they won’t get that itch to figure out more and become more immersed. While this has become only a minor problem for the episode, the second presents a larger concern; the Tamarians have made metaphors so important and so narrow that their usage appears to limit the Tamarian culture or at least their ability to communicate to others who may not know the story or context of their cultural metaphors. As such, it seems then that Tamarian discourse can be better understood through symbolic convergence theory (SCT).

Originator of the theory, Ernest G. Bormann explains, “An important part of the symbolic convergence theory is the way it explains how individuals come to share enough symbolic ground to take part in logical negotiation processes, problem-solving procedures, and decision making” (90). Essentially, SCT gives us more connective tissue to understand the Tamarians: their group cohesion is based on the sharing and retelling of their myths and historical narratives. The more cohesive the group, such as on a confined ship in space, the more a group might create common discourse or even shorthand, which we see with the Riker to La Forge example earlier. So, the Tamarians may have deep connections to each other and communicate through their symbolic and metaphor-driven background and language, and we can even posit the same theory to explain some *Trek* phrases and metaphors (e.g. “Beam me up”). But Picard and his crew are still outsiders and do not understand the Tamarian phrases.

Eighth Time’s the Charm

An interesting aspect of the early exchanges between the two crews is that no one on the *Enterprise* questions if the Universal Translator (UT) is working properly.¹ The UT is a “device that senses and compares the brain wave patterns of intelligent life-forms, then uses the patterns it recognizes to provide a basis for translation”

¹ The UT often acts as a useful plot device for *Trek* episodes. It tends to not work when it is imperative it does or, such as in this case, it works but it doesn’t help. While the UT appears to be working fine in the “Darmok” episode, we cannot determine if imperfections are creeping in or not. For example, “some one” versus “someone” might add to the lack of clarity that makes cross-cultural exchanges challenging.

(Erdman and Block 23). In essence, the UT makes communication with alien species easy, just like modern translation apps for cell phones. With the UT, the Tamarian language appears to be translated without issues, but the *Enterprise* crew still cannot understand it. There are missing pieces, missing stories, and missing context. To help explain, science and history writer, Mark E. Lasbury reasons, “The more culture plays into a language, the less useful a culturally neutral UT will be” (193). Tamarians have based their entire language on their culture, and since the UT only translates words, and not context or meaning, the *Enterprise* crew’s lack of experience with Tamarian culture makes communication almost impossible.

Recognizing that the conversation is not working and rather than continue to struggle through linguistic difficulty using traditional means, Dathon decides actions speak louder than words and “Darmok” is put into action. He takes his first officer’s dagger and is transported with Picard to the planet El-Adrel below. On the planet’s surface, Picard and Dathon continue their communication struggles. Dathon tosses the second dagger to Picard, which Picard interprets as an invitation to fight, and Picard refuses to engage in what he believes is a combat situation. Unable to reach any understanding, the two make separate camps for the night.

As a chilly night falls, Picard fails to create a fire to keep warm and is visibly cold, and he comments that he might “freeze to death” (“Darmok” 10:19). Dathon again says some of the already stated Tamarian phrases. In response, Picard attempts to mimic the metaphorical style and says, “Picard of the Federation. Of the starship *Enterprise*. Of the planet Earth” (“Darmok” 10:36). Not understanding, Dathon turns away to consult his gear in what seems to be some type of ceremony or ritual.² After a few moments, Dathon stands up and tosses Picard a burning log from his fire. As he does, he says, “Temba, his arms wide,” with a calm almost parental tone (“Darmok” 13:00). As Picard pieces together the context of accepting the burning log, he talks through the meaning of Temba:

PICARD: Temba? What does that mean? Fire? Does Temba mean fire?

DATHON: Temba. His arms wide.

PICARD: Temba is a person? His arms wide. Because he’s holding them apart in, in generosity. In giving. In taking. (“Darmok” 13:02)

Picard recognizes Temba is a person performing an action and extrapolates “arms wide” as an offering. In this case, the offering of the fiery log. While the item being

² In an email, David Patterson, the linguist, notes that Joe Menosky, the writer of the “Darmok” episode, explains this scene as Dathon consulting what are essentially oracles for some guidance.

offered is unimportant, it is the act of offering that the phrase refers to. This understanding and translation of the Tamarian conlang appears to be consistent throughout the episode and is one of the easier connections to make for viewers. At this point, the episode is pulling the audience along, with Picard's dialogue working through each phrase to comprehend its meaning for himself and the audience. While some phrases are left to interpretation, a point I return to later, others, such as "Temba, his arms wide," are clear.

In the morning, Dathon is nowhere to be found and Picard wakes up and decides to investigate Dathon's camp in hopes of learning something useful. Suddenly, Dathon yells "Darmok!" and runs up to Picard while holding a dagger ("Darmok" 21:14). Picard, surprised, begins to apologize but is cut off by Dathon again offering him the dagger and frantically saying, "Temba, his arms wide" ("Darmok" 21:23). Picard, about to refuse, is interrupted by a pile of rocks falling and a creature's monstrous sound off in the distance. Recognizing he's not in danger from Dathon, Picard accepts the dagger as the pair seem to mutually understand each other as allies against an unseen beast that is getting closer.

Back on the *Enterprise*, Commander Data and Counselor Troi have been working to understand the Tamarian language and share their thoughts with the rest of the bridge crew in the following exchange:

DATA: The Tamarian ego structure does not seem to allow what we normally think of as self-identity. Their ability to abstract is highly unusual. They seem to communicate through narrative imagery by reference to the individuals and places which appear in their mytho-historical accounts.

TROI: It is as if I were to say to you, Juliet on her balcony.

CRUSHER: An image of romance.

TROI: Exactly. Imagery is everything to the Tamarians. It embodies their emotional states, their very thought processes. It's how they communicate, and it is how they think.

RIKER: If we know how they think, shouldn't we be able to get something across to them?

DATA: No, sir. The situation is analogous to understanding the grammar of a language but none of the vocabulary.

CRUSHER: If I didn't know who Juliet was or what she was doing on that balcony, the image alone wouldn't have any meaning.

TROI: That's correct. For instance, we know that Darmok was a great hero, a hunter, and that Tanagra was an island, but that's it. Without the details, there's no understanding. ("Darmok" 29:25)

This exchange allows Counselor Troi and Commander Data to raise an interesting and problematic point. Data mentions that, "it is necessary for us to learn the narrative from which the Tamarians draw their imagery" ("Darmok" 30:31). While Richards was analyzing the episode and the presence of myth within the Tamarian language, he points out that, "'Darmok' makes a case for the mythic content of language itself" (*Meaning* 144). This might help make a case for Tamarian being a conlang too, because if the mythic content helps establish a language, then Tamarian must, therefore, be a constructed language. He continues, "Tamarian myths are embedded in the Tamarian language" and it is this embedding that makes understanding and comprehension so difficult, unless one knows the mythos (Richards *Meaning* 144). With this, Data is suggesting that unless a fuller understanding of Tamarian culture, and by extension those metaphors, is provided to the *Enterprise* crew, there will only be pieces of understanding that, more importantly, have significant gaps.

In the *Star Trek* universe, the Tamarian language is unique. With other *Trek* conlangs (e.g., Klingon), it was simply a matter of creating words and giving them meaning.³ Because Tamarian communication is based on their cultural and mythical understanding, their stories, even experiences of specific people in specific places doing specific things, the entire culture would have to be created full of history, heroes, and villains. Peter A. Jansen and Jordan Boyd-Graber agree: "The more fundamental challenge of extending Tamarian is that every sentence must be connected to an underlying mythology" (37). In this sense, the mythology was designed for one episode, so it might not be a complete conlang (but perhaps, a pseudo conlang), because to make it a complete conlang the entire Tamarian culture would need to be created. Since the Tamarians are not a large part of *Trek*, unlike Klingons, there has been little push to create a full culture and by extension a full language.

³ Klingon language was first spoken (i.e., made up) in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. For *Star Trek: The Search for Spock*, the third film, it was fully created as a language by linguist Marc Okrand ("Development"). In the TV series, then, originally, Klingon was just words and meaning; when it had syntax and context, it became a conlang.

Metaphorical Barriers

When one watches the “Darmok” episode, one almost cannot help creating their own understanding and translation of each of the metaphors and trying to decipher this (pseudo) conlang. The interesting aspect, however, is that each interpretation is just a little different. For example, Richards writes,

“The river Temarc” means the crossing of a boundary. “When the walls fell” means a sudden catastrophic change. “In winter” means a time of sadness. “His arms open” means a willingness to talk. (*Star Trek* 129)

But other viewers have suggested other interpretations. The science fiction author, Christopher L. Bennett, thinks the river Temarc means, “Be still or Be silent. ‘Literally freeze’.” Bryce Hedstrom suggests it means, “That’s enough. Be quiet. Stop. No more. Don’t go there.” Even Memory-Alpha, the well-known fan site of all that is *Star Trek*, has another view: “to not be swayed from a decision; often used as an imperative” (“Tamarian”). With just about every narrative metaphor from the episode, similar differences can be seen. These diverse interpretations or translations emphasize the confusing aspects of language, which are probably only highlighted with conlangs in the early stages of publicity. The larger point being made is that the perception of the context is the most important aspect of understanding. As viewers of the episode, we can watch events unfold on the *Enterprise* and down on the planet. Neither of those two parties has the view or perspective the audience does. Even when we as viewers have all the exact same information, we have different interpretations of that same information.

Still after Picard’s breakthrough with “Temba,” there remain several instances of unclear meanings of Tamarian metaphors. Again, one might wonder why all the Tamarian phrases in the episode are not understood the same by everyone. To help further illustrate these unclear interpretations, Dathon and Picard share a moment after a battle with the creature, and Dathon is near death. As Dathon struggles and is clearly in pain, he says “Zinda. His face black, his eyes red” (“Darmok” 34:19). But back on the *Enterprise*, the conflict has increased and the *Enterprise* crew decides to attack the Tamarian ship in such a way that will allow them to transport Picard up to the ship. When hailing frequencies are opened and after the Tamarians and *Enterprise* have exchanged phaser fire, the Tamarian first officer says “Zinda. His face black, his eyes red” (“Darmok” 41:05). Contextually, these scenes are different. Dathon is in severe pain when he says it; the Tamarian first officer says

it after being fired upon and is visibly angry. But what does the phrase convey? Some sources suggest pain or anger, but neither of those seem to fit both scenes. The phrase can't mean pain *and* anger since the Tamarian first officer is not in pain when he says it, and likewise, it doesn't seem to mean anger since Dathon is in pain when he says it. After watching both scenes several times, I conclude it means frustration with the situation. Dathon is unable to do anything about his injuries and the Tamarian officer does not understand why they are exchanging fire; both lead to frustration. Regardless of what interpretation is correct, without additional examples of its usage, one cannot be certain. Even better would be witnessing the initial event that generated the phrase, but that would be colored by our perspective and experience. This type of analysis is part of the attractiveness of conlangs too; the audience imparts meaning to it and deepens the connection.

Throughout "Darmok," viewers are tasked with trying to figure out Tamarian culture with limited experience and clues. Linguist Roger M. Keesing provides some warning as we attempt to interpret other cultures. While he referenced the work of ethnographers, we can borrow the kernel of his idea and apply it to "Darmok" and the many readings and interpretations of Tamarian language and metaphors. Keesing explains two main concerns as we encounter an unknown culture. First, "by rendering the fragmentary coherent," we may, essentially, not get it quite right (Keesing 202). If we consider Picard here, he has only a fragment of Tamarian language and culture, and he's still fumbling along. Perhaps more importantly, if we consider the reality that Picard would have spent much more time with Dathon and perhaps had other off-screen encounters with him, those viewers that have imparted their own explanation or definitions to the metaphors would likely have an incomplete understanding. Even though Picard does not clearly define any of the metaphors, he seems to understand them enough to use them in what appears to be appropriate context. But he (and we) could still not have the full flavor of the metaphor, just enough to possibly be comprehensible to native speakers.

Further, Keesing warns against a more concerning aspect of this learning and explanation: we "may be wrong" (202). Several times during the episode, the phrase "Shaka, when the walls fell" is said, and the context seems to mean giving up or essentially saying, "you don't understand." However, what if "Shaka, when the walls fell" means "you're an idiot?" In reviewing the times that phrase is used, it could work. It is not a perfect match for every situation it is used, but it does fit. As a reference point, as in "the river Temarc" noted earlier, different interpretations

seem to cross several possibilities. So, if the interpretation is wrong, we humans are creating a foundation that is faulty and could be doing more damage. To help understand the complexity of interpretation, George Lakoff and Zoltan Kövecses point out, “the study of the language as a whole gives us no guide to individual variation. We have no idea how close any individual comes to the model we have uncovered, and we have no idea how people differ from one another” (220). In other words, how metaphor is understood or translated does not necessarily mean I or anyone else understands it the same way. Keating’s warning about being wrong becomes more important with “Darmok,” because maybe only these Tamarians are somewhat comprehensible and all the other ones, as Data pointed out, are “incomprehensible” (“Darmok” 0:52).

Throughout “Darmok,” the *Enterprise* crew continually refers to the ways that the Tamarians use language as either “citing example,” and as Picard surmises, “by metaphor!” or by citing elements of their own mythology and history to convey ideas (“Darmok” 25:45). As the story moves forward, the inability for the two crews to communicate becomes the single factor that identifies the Tamarians as alien. Though when it comes to their use of language and metaphor, the Tamarians are not unlike humans. What is important to note about our metaphors is that each one is as significant to *us* as “Shaka when the walls fell” is to the Tamarians. The position, therefore, that the Tamarians’ use of imagery and metaphor to convey ideas makes them alien or unique is problematic and succeeds only in showing us that we (humans) are more like the Tamarians than we may be willing to admit.

The Tamarians, as aliens, are presented as a somewhat common and somewhat unfamiliar construct used to make audiences look at humanity and our various cultures differently. The presence and use of mythology as a building block of human communication, culture, and history have been well established. For example, Richards asserts, “we are immersed in the system of myths we use to explain the world” (*Meaning* 143). At the same time, Richards suggests that “stories do not successfully communicate meaning between cultures [...] Mythologies rarely coexist” (*Meaning* 145). “Darmok” serves as a humanized version of *Gilgamesh*. In fact, Picard tells Dathon a version of *Gilgamesh* moments before his death, which is strikingly similar to their experience on El-Adrel. Picard, knowingly or unknowingly, imports “our” mythos onto the Tamarian mythic story of Darmok and Jalad, which essentially negates this particular Tamarian myth and supplants it with the version told by Picard to Dathon. Another more likely option is that a new metaphor is created. This is what we see when Picard returns to the *Enterprise* and

saves the day, the now-Captain of the Tamarian ship says, “Picard and Dathon at El-Adrel” (“Darmok” 42:03). As a result, it is possible this replaces or displaces the Darmok and Jalad myth, or at least what we have learned about it.

To recognize another way that the story of “Darmok” reflects our own history, we can look at the way that language is acquired in children. As children, we hear words and see the actions at the same time. For example, if Mario asks Kenya to hand them the television remote, then Kenya picks up the television remote and passes it to Mario, the child sees this interaction. For children observing this exchange, they will most likely begin to put together the action “hand” in relation to the object “remote control.” Additionally, if the asking adult includes a “please” or the other adult’s name, more information provides insight into the exchange. The child can begin to put the language pieces together and generate an elementary understanding. With repetition of similar exchanges, meaning and context are reinforced each time, just like recognizing patterns for translation. However, there are certainly opportunities for conflicting information. For example, a child is likely learning about their body parts at the same time they are learning about cooperating with others. Therefore, the distinction between a hand (the body part), lending someone a hand, and the action of handing an object to someone, suggested in the example above, could create confusion.

Now consider what “Darmok” shows the audience about language acquisition. Picard is learning a new language, so in some ways, he’s like a child. Steven Pinker, in his well-known book *The Stuff of Thought*, discusses language acquisition. Picard is watching Dathon demonstrate the metaphors, and Picard, as Pinker explains how we learn language, picks up “from watching what’s going on” (34). While Picard is certainly more experienced than a typical child, he is still constructing an understanding of this new language by putting the pieces together. More precisely, as Dathon says, “Shaka, when the walls fell,” Picard sees the tone and expression of the words and, thus, imparts a meaning (“Darmok” 23:57). As noted earlier, everyone watching the episode is imparting a meaning, and those meanings do not always match up. In “Darmok,” a similar learning experience is demonstrated. As the *Enterprise* crew figures out the potential meanings of the proper names and locations the Tamarians spoke of, Picard learns much in the same way as the child, by experience.

Further, Picard picks up on the pattern that Dathon uses to create the meaning and establish a context of the phrases. Dathon’s body language and expressed frustrations indicate to Picard whether he’s catching onto the meaning, and as such,

the reactions act as a reward or punishment. As Dathon reacts with positive reinforcement, Picard connects the phrase with an appropriate meaning. Picard first does this with “Temba, his arms wide.” Obviously, regardless of its literal meaning, this particular phrase suggests a course of action and a specific meaning, similar to Dathon’s statement of *Darmok* earlier. And with that meaning comes some cultural power. Psychologist Brian E. Levitt also acknowledges, “We each have our own unique meanings words point to for us” (100). He continues, “We tend to believe that our words can carry understanding to others. What makes this so tricky is that words exist externally and *seem* static and unchanging” (Levitt, emphasis added, 100). In other words, we expect others to understand the meaning of what we are saying, but how words are defined and used is constantly changing. Another example most of us have experienced is texting with someone and they misunderstand our meaning. We might be laughing uncontrollably and they are stoic, not understanding the joke. Levitt explains, Picard and Dathon “listen through the filter of their own meanings, which they ascribe to the words they hear being spoken by the other” (101). Each person is framing an understanding based solely on their own experience and is not making much effort, at least initially, to understand the other. More precisely, as Levitt points out, “Picard and Dathon are speaking two entirely different languages with a shared vocabulary” (102). While Picard and Dathon remain fixated on their own respective worldviews that they are right and in a superior position, no real communication occurs. Each assumes the other should understand because they are being so clear, but that clarity is subjective and based on positionality.

Only when Picard begins to shift to a position of wanting to understand (and not just repeating phrases) does he make a connection, as noted with the Temba scene. Dathon does not seem to make that same link, even near death he seems to take the story of *Gilgamesh* as almost comical. After Dathon passes away, the monster reappears and Picard is on his own. This unwillingness to change perspectives also created a standoff between the two crews. At this point, the *Enterprise* has attempted and failed to transport Picard and has concluded the only way to save Picard now is to attack the Tamarians. Without warning, the *Enterprise* crew opens fire and the Tamarians respond with their own phaser fire. Neither opted to open hailing frequencies to communicate one more time to resolve the conflict. The unprovoked attack, however, creates a short amount of time to save Picard and transport him to the *Enterprise*. It seems clear the Tamarians appear content to destroy the *Enterprise*, and it seems they will as Security Chief Worf says, “Our

shields have failed” and Data reports, “we cannot survive another hit” (“Darmok” 40:53). Suddenly, Picard strides onto the bridge and orders Worf to hail the Tamarians and he sternly says to the Tamarian First Officer, “Temarc! The river Temarc in winter” (“Darmok” 41:09). Picard utilizes his new knowledge of the Tamarian language to end the battle. Recognizing the authority of Picard and his understanding of the metaphor, the Tamarians immediately stop. Picard is the only character, Tamarian or Federation, that seems to have genuinely made headway to understand the other.

Conclusion

The beginning of this article explored the use of metaphor as an aspect of language (natural or constructed) and used “Darmok” to make specific points about metaphors (even perhaps metametaphor), their meanings and interpretations, and how they can muck things up. Through that discussion, I have shown how metaphors are based on one’s perspective and known context, while touching on how SCT creates a stronger group cohesion through shared vocabulary and experiences. Moreover, the Tamarians show us more about humanity, our language, and metaphors than might have been expected from a single sci-fi episode, almost like a mirror that forces us to look back upon ourselves. And yet, there is much more left to learn. Because “Darmok” is not the only *Star Trek* episode in which language becomes a primary barrier for crew members or storylines, two other examples are worth mentioning.

In the *Star Trek: Enterprise* (2001-2005) episode “Dawn,” Chief Engineer Tripp Tucker is attacked and crashes on a planet with a large temperature shift between night and day. His attacker, too, is forced to crash land. As luck would have it, the UT is not available to assist Tripp and a few physical confrontations ensue before the suffocating heat of the day and a lack of options force the two to cooperate even though they have only managed minimal communication. Even with elementary language exchanges, they can work together to get out of the survival situation. One compelling factor is that neither Tripp nor Zho’Kaan is stronger than or able to defeat the other, and it is only when they cooperate does the storyline move forward. Another distinction between “Darmok” and “Dawn” is that the non-humans act differently. In “Dawn,” Zho’Kaan, the one who attacks Tripp and forces him to crash land, learns Tripp’s name and a few other words, as does Tripp of Zho’Kaan’s language. While in “Darmok,” Captain Dathon and his

crew make no attempt whatsoever to learn Federation Standard; they simply repeat the same phrases expecting a new result or sudden understanding.⁴

This distinction is the difference and importance between translation and understanding the translation. In “Dawn,” it is only a translation issue and they work out an understanding, because they seem to be working based on the same syntactical structures, perhaps even metaphorical understandings. In “Darmok,” the issue is understanding of the entire construction of the Tamarian culture and by extension that of the Federation. One way we can gain insight into ourselves and other perspectives is through conlangs. Creating a language forces an audience to wear another mask for even a short period of time and helps us better understand ourselves. As noted earlier, myths essentially are constructions of experiences and our interpretations become our metaphors. At the end of the episode, Picard is in his ready room and reading Homer, what he considers to be some “root metaphors of our own culture” (“Darmok” 43:30). After all the back and forth between the two crews and captains on the planet, there remains only limited progress at communication or understanding. Picard is the only Federation person that seems to have any measure of comprehension of the Tamarian language. We can only assume he transferred that knowledge to a Captain’s log, but we have no evidence of it, and instead, Picard decides to read Homer to better understand himself and his place in the universe. In effect, Picard is engaging in what Richards believes, “the further human beings voyage out into the universe, the more they need to remind themselves of the stories telling them who they are” (*Star Trek* 131). Perhaps this introspection is what Picard was doing as he retold *Gilgamesh* before being caught up in Homer. Nevertheless, by returning to “our” mythos, we learn about our past and how we arrived at where we are, and perhaps learn where we have yet to go.

Of course, conlangs are created for us by us, but in many ways the opening epigraph by Troi signifies what we have left to learn about the other peoples on our planet. With the ongoing conflicts, wars, racism, sexism, ableism, and so on, having the ability to empathize with another group or culture will prove useful if we ever hope to see ourselves contacting other cultures on other planets. If we posit that the Tamarian language was created and constructed to better interrogate how we understand language, even other cultures, we come to realize the importance of it.

⁴ Peterson suggests that the Tamarians are speaking in formal discourse to the *Enterprise* crew and “plain” discourse is reserved for children.

To more deeply understand conlangs, Anca Chiorean writes, “Fictional languages are not the results of an evolution, as is the case of the natural languages, but they are the results of the intellectual efforts to produce a completely original text, in an isolated moment in history and serving a certain purpose” (121). Since “Darmok” aired, the Tamarian language continues to capture the hearts of many groups of people and brought some into the *Trek* universe. Moreover, Tamarian phrases are still being used to describe events that seem to fit the interpreted, translated, or assumed context. This one episode’s conlang, if we accept it as that, proves how we long to create meaning and connect it to our experiences. I’m not the only one to establish this connection: Mattia Thibault⁵ explains, “fiction-born conlangs can have an importance and an influence that sometimes go beyond the boundaries of their fictional worlds” (102). Further, the fact that the episode is still being discussed thirty years later is a testament to that influence. Nevertheless, perhaps Tamarian was just for an episode and we shouldn’t get too far ahead of ourselves and import deeper meaning: J. Koenig believes “sometimes languages can be invented for their own sake, purely as an intellectual endeavor” (qtd. in Chiorean 131). So, unless a fuller creation of detailing of Tamarian culture, and by extension metaphors, is crafted by the *Star Trek* universe, there will only remain remnants of the metaphorical phrases we currently have, because they must be interconnected. With other *Star Trek* conlangs except for Klingon, it was simply a matter of creating words and giving them meaning. For Tamarians because their entire means of communication is based on their cultural and linguistic understanding, the entire Tamarian culture would have to be created full of history, heroes, and villains. But there is something beyond the mere exercise of creating Tamarian that keeps resurfacing – it has a deeper meaning. And as Peterson points out, Tamarian language “says something about their culture.”

One of the most intriguing aspects of the “Darmok” episode is that Picard now is part of Tamarian culture that will be conveyed to other Tamarians. At the end of “Darmok,” the Tamarian first officer, now captain, says “Picard and Dathon at El-Adrel,” which may effectively displace “Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra.” (“Darmok” 42:03) Each message evolves across time, Barthes explains, and some myths fall out of favor as “others take their place and attain the status of myth” (108). In the Tamarian mythos, “Picard” may now replace “Darmok” as a metaphor for what

⁵ Assistant professor in the interestingly named department of Translation in Creative Industries.

happens when two groups meet each other and form some kind of understanding. What is even more intriguing is that Tamarians who hear “Picard and Dathon at El-Adrel” will have no context to understand the metaphor! So how will the Tamarians that were not witness to the events understand what the new metaphor means?⁶

Regardless, this interaction between the Tamarians and the *Enterprise* crew creates a new metaphor within the Tamarian conlang, but one that does not seem to align with the “mytho-historical” past that Tamarian culture is based on. Picard nor Dathon are mythic figures (at least not that we know of); yet, both are now part of the supposed mytho-historic Tamarian record. Moreover, the meaning of “Picard and Dathon at El-Adrel” seems ambiguous. Does it mean failed communication? Or failure but partial success? Or two groups marginally finding a way to communicate? Or meeting a new hopefully friend, but at least not an enemy? Again, we are left to figure out meaning based on our understanding of the encounter, which is subjective and based on each of our unique perspectives. After Picard has resolved the conflict and the ships are on their merry way, Riker asks, “New friends, Captain?” (“Darmok” 42:47). After a beat, Picard responds, “I can’t say, Number One. But at least they’re not new enemies” (“Darmok” 42:49). This wrinkle becomes another issue for this episode, for Tamarian culture, and the resulting conlang; for those who were not present for the event, how is the context conveyed in such a way that the metaphor and what it means is understood? To be more pointed, other Tamarians will be in the same position as Picard and his crew when they first encountered the Tamarians and tried to communicate with the cultural metaphors that included people, places, and events. This conundrum provides that itch to be scratched and allows us to more fully engage with the storyline and the conlang, because we generate meanings based on what we already understand as well as what we are curious about, which enhances its entertainment value and long-term appeal.

Beyond the complex questions around “Darmok” and its status as a conlang is that this curiosity is the heart of understanding conlangs. Perhaps one of the endearing aspects of the episode and all it created is the depth of the story. The story between Dathon and Picard, the story between the first officers (and crews), the story of Gilgamesh all weave together to create a singular story that needs all three to be understood through the new metaphor of “Picard and Dathon at El-

⁶ For the curious audience, Peterson reports that Menosky, the episode’s writer, explained that Dathon was recording the tale of “Picard and Dathon at El Adrel” in his notebook, which would have allowed him to pass on the story.

Adrel.” Essentially, as hinted at earlier, a metametaphor can now be understood through the complexity of this episode. As humans, we communicate through story. Our histories are passed on by stories, even by metaphors just like the Tamarians. While we might toss in a few more details or context if someone misses something, the passing on of stories becomes how we progress. The first person to reproduce fire probably passed on the knowledge with something like I did this and this and got fire! Then, the story might conclude with, “I also burned my hand.” Even though that fire might be gone, one only needs to see another fire to know that it can burn them. Thus, stories become lessons, and the story of Picard and Dathon provides a story for future communication between the Federation and the Tamarians. This is the heart of *Star Trek*; Richards writes,

Story is the one inescapable reality of *Star Trek*. The crew can be trapped by them, and sometimes liberated by them. But it is when stories shade into myth that they begin to reveal some of the most basic of human experiences.

Foremost among these is the experience of language in one of its earliest forms, the form of storytelling. (*Meaning* 148)

And we use stories to communicate across and within cultures; we build understanding.

To finalize this point, in the TNG episode, “Loud as a Whisper,” the mediator Riva points out that communication begins with finding something, “no matter how small, that was common to both groups.” In the case of the “Dawn,” it is the willingness to survive. For “Darmok,” it is that both Tamarians and humans share myths and stories, which are then partially conveyed by metaphors. Riva is mediating between two warring groups that share a common language and lack any meaningful diplomatic relations but want the fighting to end. He concludes that they should learn a new language to communicate with him and, by extension, then, “they’ll be learning how to communicate with each other” (“Loud as a Whisper” 42:06). This statement by Riva demonstrates what Naeem Inayatullah points out: “Tamarians understand that common experiences provide the context essential to shared meanings” (68). For the Federation and Tamarians, or any different culture, there must be a mutual willingness to communicate and that begins with sharing experiences.

Regardless of the common element between any two cultures, finding that commonality becomes the critical factor in communication. Through such a collaboration, both parties learn more about each other’s differences. The end analysis of “Darmok” is that by being able to understand our differences, and only

then, are we able to progress as humans or empathize with different cultures. Only when we understand the other's story can we more fully understand the meaning of our own. As such, conlangs provide a keyhole for us to peer through to see Riva teaching two warring groups how to communicate in a language neither knew coming into the discussion. To be more pointed, we must learn to communicate when neither has an advantage and when we are all equal.

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