Will Monroe

PWR 2SB: Writing the Future

Shay Brawn

1 December 2010

Na'vi: The Significance of a Fictional Language

Oe new pivlltxe nì'it ngahu teri lora lì'fya a fì'ut oel nerume.

What is one's typical reaction to seeing a sentence like the above without warning? Confusion, probably. But undoubtedly this confusion is accompanied by at least a slight bit of curiosity surrounding this mysterious string of italicized letters. What if the above sentence were revealed to be nonsense, simply made to look foreign? If you would feel cheated to hear this, you are not alone. Part of the value of curiosity is that it is nearly always rewarded with new knowledge, old sayings about cats to the contrary.

On the other hand, when one finds out that the sentence in fact means, "I want to talk with you a little about a beautiful language I am learning," one's mind jumps to new questions: Are "*Oe*" and "*oel*" the two *I*'s? How on Earth do I pronounce "*pivlltxe*"? What language is this guy learning, and is it the same language used to produce that sentence?

The answer to the last question is yes: the sentence is in the fictional Na'vi language from James Cameron's film *Avatar*. Cameron hired USC professor Paul Frommer to construct an entire language for the alien Na'vi species in the film. Building a language from scratch is not a trivial task. However, most audience members are hardly impressed by this accomplishment, and film and literary criticism is generally not friendly to the made-up language. More often than not, critics see invented languages as a sure mark of bad science fiction. So why go to the trouble? In this paper I argue that the addition of a fully-developed, scientific fictional language,

far from being a gimmick condemning the film to the category of shallow sci-fi, contributes to *Avatar*'s lasting significance as a work of cinematic quality by adding to the realism of the story as well as creating a community of interested followers that persists separately from the film.

Peu lu ngaya lì'fya atxawnula?

What is truly a constructed language?

Constructing a language is not just a matter of substituting randomly chosen strings of sounds for English words. As Marc Okrand, the creator of the Klingon language, puts it, "you can't just throw words together in some way or other – a language is more than just its dictionary. If I gave you a dictionary of French and said, hey, go ahead and speak French, you wouldn't know what to do" (Okrand). Admittedly, coming up with an expressive and coherent vocabulary is a difficult task in itself, and with enough words, a mere substitution or cipher of English would be just as complete and expressive as English. However, to create such a language is to lose quite a bit of realism. Anyone who has studied a foreign language knows that real languages have real differences that make them difficult to learn for speakers of another language. When I say that Na'vi is a fully-developed, scientific fictional language, that means that it has features that are not only worked out in detail according to some set of linguistic principles but also strange enough to English speakers to be acceptably "alien" for the aliens into whose blue mouths the language is put.

What sort of effort does it take to give a language this required detail and alienness? In an interview with BBC, Paul Frommer describes the process he went through to create the language. "The first step," he says, "is to try to nail down the sound system." Major features of the sounds of Na'vi that make it immediately alien-sounding to the English speaker's ear are *ejective* consonants (*kx*, *tx*, and *px*), which are pronounced explosively while briefly holding one's breath, and a strongly trilled *R (rr*) that functions not as a consonant but as a vowel, giving

a syllable an interesting purring or growling quality. After figuring out a sound system, he continues, "you begin developing the grammar: the morphology, which is the rules for building words. You have to determine, do the verbs get conjugated, for example? Based on what? Do the nouns have endings?" (Frommer 3, 0:46-1:14). Verb conjugation is probably the most interesting morphological characteristic of the language: it is done by *infixation*, splitting root words and adding segments to the interior of the word. As an example, the verb *lu* ("is, are, am") conjugated for the future tense becomes *layu* ("will be"), with <*ay*>[1] added in the middle of the syllable.

The real test of a constructed language, of course, is its expressive power. As mentioned above, a well-formed vocabulary paired with a clone of English grammar is theoretically enough to generate a language just as expressive as English. However, a far more common pattern in hastily made-up languages is a narrow focus on specialized vocabulary, mostly nouns and simple greetings, relevant only to the ideas that they will be used to communicate. Na'vi certainly has words made just for the movie, such as *Atokirina'* "seeds of the Great Tree" (Wilhelm, 192) and *toruk* "Great Leonopteryx" (78). But it does not end there: like all human languages, Na'vi has general-purpose vocabulary, such as pronouns (*nga* "you"), prepositions (*hu* "with"), and simple verbs like "to go" (*kä*), as well as idioms or figures of speech, such as the prominently-featured O*el ngati kameie* "I see you." This means that many English expressions can be said just as well in Na'vi. For example, a possible translation of the preceding sentence is *Tafral tsun fko pivlltxe pxaya aylì'fyavi leÌnglìsì nìtengfya nìNa'vi*.[2] To give a sense of the foreign structure of Na'vi, I'll include what's known in linguistics as a "gloss," a side-by-side, per-word translation, for the bit of Na'vi above:

1 <Angle brackets> mark infixes in the linguistic notation used with Na'vi.

2 I was unable to find any information on how to translate the English "as well" construction, particularly as an adverb, so my use of word *nìtengfya* at the end is likely incorrect.

tafral tsun fko p<iv>lltxe pxay-a ay-lì'fyavi leÌnglìsì nìtengfya nìNa'vi

therefore can one speak<SBJV> many.ATTR PL.expression ADJ.English same in.Na'vi

The curious reader is encouraged to consult the online sources, particularly the Wikibooks entry (see bibliography), for explanations of the various abbreviations and formatting used in glosses, but the major feature is fairly straightforward: below each Na'vi word appears the English word that best approximates it. The important point is that translating English to Na'vi is not as easy as looking up one word at a time in a dictionary, but Na'vi is nevertheless capable of producing idea structures that come close to being as complicated as English.

San Pey...tsun nga pivlltxe pefya?

"Wait...you speak what?"

Constructing a language for a work of fiction generally does not catapult that piece of fiction immediately into the ranks of literary masterpieces. Rather, the typical reaction to constructed fictional languages, particularly to those who go to the effort to learn a fictional language, is ridicule. Arika Okrent begins her book *In the Land of Invented Languages* by quoting a glib Web comment mocking speakers of Klingon: "Klingon speakers 'provide excellent reasons for forced sterilization. Then again being able to speak Klingon pretty much does this without surgery'" (3-4). When a father made headlines in 2009 by speaking only Klingon to his son for the first three years of his son's life, Greg Gutfeld remarked on the television show *Red Eye*, "Could his son sue him for ruining his life?"

There is one conspicuous exception to the rule that invented languages generally go unappreciated. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is now taught as classic literature in many high school English classes, and critics have come to agree with Neil Isaacs' statement, in the introduction to his collection of critical essays *Understanding The Lord of the Rings*, that *The Lord of the Rings* is "one of the great works of twentieth-century fiction" (Zimbardo, 7).

Tolkien wove not one but two constructed languages into *The Lord of the Rings*. In fact, according to Walter Meyers' book *Aliens and Linguists*, so engrossed was Tolkien in the constructed language hobby that he wrote *The Lord of the Rings* "to provide a source and setting for the Elvish language he had been building since his childhood . . . . *The Silmarillion* was 'primarily linguistic in inspiration and was begun in order to provide the necessary background of "history" for Elvish tongues'" (148).

The most remarkable aspect of Tolkien's linguistic detail is the intricate pattern of evolutionary changes he conceived for his constructed languages to accompany the vivid history he created for the trilogy's fantasy world. Frommer has made a few attempts along these lines with Na'vi. Scattered throughout the various online sources for Na'vi are some bits of a fictional language history, such as this paragraph hinting at the evolution of the language from a hypothetical "Old Na'vi": "The adverb *nìno* means 'in detail, expansively, thoroughly.' The root on which it's based, *no*, conveys the idea of fine detail. It's not used by itself in modern Na'vi..." (Frommer 1). Tolkien took this historical approach to an extreme—one of his languages, Sindarin, is presented as a descendant of the other, Quenya, in the same way modern Italian is descended from Latin. Walter Meyers classifies *The Lord of the Rings* as science fiction, the same genre as *Avatar*, noting that "If *The Lord of the Rings* is not generally considered science fiction, it is . . . . partly because the real science that informs it, historical linguistics, is not well known publicly and is not on the surface of the story. But readers of science fiction enjoy it: Lin Carter credits them with forming its first appreciative audience" (156-7).

Despite the positive response of science fiction audiences to the linguistic details, science fiction is still not very rich in realistic use of language. The primary mode of presentation for alien language in the genre is nonsense babble or speech-like sound effects. *Star Wars*, for

example, uses a mishmash of language-like elements, sound recording magic, and digital clicks; language books for the series such as Ben Burtt's *Galactic Phrase Book and Travel Guide* make it clear that the phrases in the movies were not meant for extrapolating to any type of general language use. To give a more recent example, the click-filled language of *District 9* was created by rubbing a pumpkin ("Trivia"). In fact, most science fiction finds a way to avoid the issue. For example, in the *Foundation* trilogy by Isaac Asimov, known for his high degree of scientific coherence, the Galaxy is simply united by one common language; the character Trevize remarks, "Across the Galaxy, there are certainly dialectical variations, but these are not mutually unintelligible. And even if understanding some of them is a matter of difficulty, we all share Galactic Standard" (Asimov, 100). Even *Star Trek*, whose Klingon language is the "gold standard for alien languages in film" (Frommer 1, 23:03), makes use of a "handy little device known as the 'universal translator'" (Broderick, 74) to avoid having to wrestle with the language issue for each new planet the U.S.S. *Enterprise* visits.

Ekxan melì'fyayä

The language barrier

Because language differences are ignored in most works of fiction, they cannot be made central to the plot. Though *Avatar* is hardly unique in its use of a clash between two very different cultures as a force driving the plot (one common criticism of the film is that its plot is nearly identical to that of Disney's *Pocahontas*), it is unusual in accounting for the presence of a language barrier in such a culture clash. The prominence of the language allows for many interesting plot developments that would not be possible if language were ignored in the film. For example, the implied history of the story includes a school set up by Grace to teach the Na'vi children English in an attempt to improve human-Na'vi relations. In the extended re-release of the film, Cameron added a heartbreaking scene in which the main human characters walk

through the building that once housed the school, witnessing the bullet holes and burn marks that paint the interior walls. Later in the film, Grace is joyfully reunited with her former students and speaks to them in Na'vi about how much they have grown ("*sevin nìtxan nang!*": "so beautiful!").

One sign of how important the language is to the film is that the ability to speak the language is a remarkably accurate criterion for determining whether a character in the film is on the side of the human army or the Na'vi resistance. The two most prominent characters on the side of the military corporation are Col. Quaritch, the leader of the military team, and Parker Selfridge, the corporate head, neither of whom speaks Na'vi. Among the humans sympathetic to the Na'vi insurgents are Grace and Dr. Norm Spellman, both of whom speak the language. Most strikingly, the protagonist of the film, Jake Sully, learns the language over the course of the story and, at the same time, slowly transitions from blind loyalty to the military goals to emotional attachment to the Na'vi.

Avatar is not fundamentally a film about language, but it is a film about culture. Critics can easily compare *Avatar* with *Pocahontas* mainly because both draw from an easily recognizable historical pattern, namely the subjugation of indigenous peoples in colonial expansion, or more simply: culture clash. In the book *Language Shock*, Michael Agar makes frequent use of the term *languaculture* to make the point that language and culture are inseparable. "Culture," he says, "is a conceptual system whose surface appears in the words of people's language" (79). As Jake is learning the language of the Na'vi, he is forced to learn the aspects of their culture that inform their language use, such as in one scene early in Jake's instruction, in which Norm attempts to explain the true significance of "I see you" to a bewildered Jake. Until he understands the spiritual belief system of the Na'vi, Jake has no hope

of seeing, so to speak, why the Na'vi use “I see you” as a ubiquitous greeting.

Lì'fyaolo'

The Language Clan

One bothersome question still lurks beneath our discussion of Na'vi so far. In a word: why? Why go to all this effort? It is not immediately clear how a constructed language can be worth the investment for the makers of a film. The number of lines of alien dialogue necessary for a film to allow suspension of disbelief is often negligible. Only when one takes into account the possibility of growth outside the film can one see the language's true impact. The language has already grown far beyond the purposes for which it is used in the film. Unofficial sources outpace official ones: as of 10/20/2010, the forums of the website learnnavi.org, not administered by anyone officially connected with the film, contained 332,431 posts (“Learn”). Frommer himself has a blog about the language, “*Na'viteri*” or “Concerning Na'vi” (naviteri.org), but he did not write the first “*Na'viteri*” post until June 2010, at which point learnnavi.org had already been running for six months. Frommer himself put a link on his blog to learnnavi.org, as well as one to the entry for Na'vi on Wikibooks, labeling it “Comprehensive Na'vi Reference” (Frommer 2).

Na'vi continues to show signs of evolving on its own, without the approval of Fox, Cameron, or even Frommer. Frommer coined a new Na'vi word to refer to the dedicated supporters of the language on sites like learnnavi.org and Wikibooks: *lì'fyaolo'*, which literally means “language clan” (though Frommer usually translates it as “the Community”). The language is in active development by members of the *lì'fyaolo'*, most of them amateur enthusiasts like “Prrton,” who has made an average of nearly four posts per day to the forums since December 2009 (“Learn”) and is mentioned by name on Frommer's blog as the source of many everyday expressions such as *Tìk'ìnìri kempe si nga?* “What do you do in your free time?”

(Frommer 2). All of this activity points toward the same conclusion: the Na'vi language has become much more than the few dozen lines of dialogue used in the film.

Na'viä zusawkrr

The future of Na'vi

Despite its increasing independence, however, the Na'vi language will always carry the title of "the language of *Avatar*." From the name of the language, to its special-purpose vocabulary, to the font faces used on fan-created Na'vi sites, everything about the language bears marks of Cameron's work. Na'vi represents a significant artistic accomplishment in itself, but every success for the language is a success for the film as well. Cameron's genius in storytelling, effects, and promotion has created the wide audiences necessary for the discovery of the Na'vi language. But as the audience discovers the language, its detail, evolution, and importance to the story will give back to the film, yielding new insights in future study. Timelessness of this sort makes *Avatar* likely to maintain its significance far beyond its viewing cycle.

James Broderick, in *The Literary Galaxy of Star Trek,* mentions *Star Trek*'s universal translator as a piece of hopeful symbolism. The fact that so many of the encounters in the show turn out peacefully, he says, means that "*Star Trek*'s creators seem to hold out faith that if humans ever *do* meet an alien race, it will merely be linguistic differences that need to be overcome" (74). In *Avatar*, getting along isn't quite so simple, but the story's resolution still affords a cautiously optimistic view of the ability of the human race to overcome cultural differences—with some work. Jake's transition from a "trigger-happy moron," as Grace puts it at the beginning of the film, to a loyal freedom fighter comes from the work he puts in toward understanding the culture of the Na'vi people. Jake's journey is all about the value of exposing oneself to unfamiliar cultures. The first step is to learn a new language.

Works Cited

Agar, Michael. *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1994.

Asimov, Isaac. *Foundation's Edge*. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1982.

Burtt, Ben. *Star Wars Galactic Phrase Book and Travel Guide*. San Francisco: Lucas Books, 2001.

Frommer, Paul. "Avatar and the Culture of Language." Oklahoma Conversation in the Humanities. Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Okla. 7 Oct. 2010. Web. <http://okhumanitiescouncil.org/Websites/ohc/Images/Newsmedia/conversation_frommer.mp3>.

-----. "Getting to Know You, Part 3." [Weblog entry.] Na'viteri. 29 Sept. 2010. (http://naviteri.org/2010/09/getting-to-know-you-part-2/) 24 Oct. 2010.

-----. "The University of Southern California's Paul Frommer on Creating the Na'vi Language for the New Film *Avatar*." Radio Interview. *Today*. BBC. 12 Dec. 2010. Web. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_8409000/8409319.stm>.

Gutfeld, Greg, perf. *Red Eye with Greg Gutfeld*. Fox News. Cable. 21 Nov. 2009.

"Learn Na'vi Community – Index." *Learn Na'vi*. 20 Oct. 2010. <http://forum.learnnavi.org/>.

"Na'vi." *Wikibooks, Open Books for an Open World*. 9 Aug. 2010. Wikimedia Foundation. 25 Oct. 2010. <http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Na'vi>.

Okrand, Marc, perf. *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*. Dir. Leonard Nimoy. Paramount Pictures, 1984. DVD. Paramount Home Video, 2000.

Okrent, Arika. *In the Land of Invented Languages: Esperanto Rock Stars, Klingon Poets, Loglan Lovers, and the Mad Dreamers Who Tried to Build a Perfect Language*. New

York: Random House, 2009.

"Trivia for *District 9*." *The Internet Movie Database*. Amazon. 20 Oct. 2010. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1136608/trivia>.

Wilhelm, Maria, and Dirk Mathison. *James Cameron's Avatar: An Activist Survival Guide*. New York: HarperCollins, 2009.

Zimbardo, Rose A., and Neil D. Isaacs. *Understanding The Lord of the Rings: The Best of Tolkien Criticism*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004.