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Constructed Languages and Their Role in Drama

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Dialect is the “distinctive vocabulary and grammar of someone’s use of language” that creates a sound so unique to that person that their character and language become one (Crystal and Crystal, 2014, pg. 16). In the recent production of Brian Friel’s masterpiece, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, at the University of New Hampshire, we see dialect play a significant role in the differentiation between characters, how it shapes them, bonds them, and how it separates them from each other (Friel, 2013). From the ideolects of the sisters to the changed dialect of their brother, Father Jack, and the Welshman hiding from himself, Gerry Evans, we see that character is influenced by dialect and dialect reflects character.

The sisters around whom the story revolves have lived their entire lives in the small, fictional town of Ballybeg, Donegal County, Ireland which is close in location to Lough Anna - a small lake - and within driving distance of Ardstraw and Carrickfad. These factual locations gave enough detail to roughly triangulate the possible location of Ballybeg and to research the dialect of the surrounding area, that of Glenties. The Irish have always had immense pride in their masterful use of language and the Mundy sisters should be no exception, particularly the elder sisters Kate, a schoolteacher, and Maggie, the jokester of the family.

Kate uses her language assiduously, taking great care with her pronunciation to the point where she sometimes comes across as pretentious. When she wants to, she uses her dialect as a weapon, sharpening her consonants and wielding them against her sisters in an attempt to maintain order in her home and to elevate her social position to that of a higher class. A character who “believe[s] in responsibilities and obligations and good order”, she “works hard at her job”, and she takes pride in her work, in her grasp of English (Friel, 2013). Maggie, as the

softer of the pair, uses her great ability to calm a situation using mischievousness to alleviate some of the stress Kate imposes of the family, sometimes in great opposition to Kate's goals. There is also a sense of wistfulness, where she find other people "so beautiful [], so stylish", so much more worthy of love than herself (Friel, 2013). Her idiolect uses more of the softer vowels to cushion her words, to sweeten the mood as much as she can.

Agnes, Rose, and Chris tend to have more similar dialectic tendencies but wield their dialects in very different ways. Agnes, one of the main breadwinners of the family and a stolid companion to Rose tends toward a softer idiolect. She often softens some of her more strident sounds, lessening the impact for Rose who has a developmental deficiency. Although when she has an outburst, her strident consonants emerge fully as she calls Kate "a damned righteous bitch" in defense of her illicit love for Gerry Evans (Friel, 2013). In comparison, Rose's dialect tends towards a more stuttering lilt, less controlled and more sporadic. She is less sure of herself than the other characters until her journey to Lough Anna with Danny Bradley. Her notions of a more romantic life are hinted at even at the top of the show as she and Maggie enjoy a moment of reprise and decide "the pair of [them] should be on the stage" (Friel, 2013, pg. 6). When she returns, Rose still retains some of her buoyant speech but grows into assurity, asserting that she has told her sisters "all any of [them] are going to hear" and finally ending a conversation (Friel, 2013). Chris maintains some of the characteristics of all of her sisters, equally parts airy and soft when she needs to be, but with a sharp tongue and a temper to match. She is fiercely protective of her love for Gerry Evans and has the vocal qualities of both the lover and the fighter. With lovely, buoyant lines such as, "Oh God, you know how I loved dancing, Aggie," (Friel, 2013, pg. 13) we see her wishfulness which can contrast with other lines similar to, "Get out of my

road, will you?,” (pg. 6) which demonstrate her ferocity in equal parts with more potent vowels and drumbeat consonants.

Gerry Evans is an incredibly complex dialect character. He and his family live in the south of Wales (we decided on the Rhondda valley) but he still visits Chris to keep up his relationship with her. The character is often played with a Standard British (RP) dialect and as such often loses much of his character. This dialect is standardised to reduce regionalistic sounds and to give a more generalized dialect. Used throughout dramatic literature, if used improperly it can diminish the meaning of the language and the intent of the playwright. Both the Irish and the Welsh have been oppressed by the English throughout their history and have had their native languages murdered by colonialist policy. To have Gerry as an RP speaker is to separate him even more from the plight of the Mundy family, of Ireland, to nearly erase the possibility of the union between him and Chris, and to neglect the evidence within the play. As he hides himself and his true life from the Mundy sisters, so might he disguise his Welsh dialect somewhat, pretending to speak in a higher class accent but never being able to fully participate in that world from whence he pretends to be, full of bluster; he even had “a thousand pupils” in his dance classes at one point (Friel, 2013, pg. 30).

Compared to Gerry, Father Jack embodies the fall from grace and the acceptance of “lower class” appetites. An army priest who worked in a leper colony in Uganda. for the past twenty-five years, he grew to love and become heavily involved with the people for whom he cared. As this intimacy with a culture that celebrates the small and necessary things in life worked itself into his character, his dialect adopted some of the characteristics of Ugandan. The

audience gets a taste of this when he describes the people of Uganda and the rituals of their way of life, one in which he became immersed:

“Oh, yes, the Ryangans are a remarkable people: there is no distinction between the religious and the secular in their culture. And of course their capacity for fun, for laughing, for practical jokes -- they’ve such open hearts! In some respects they’re not unlike us.” (Friel, 2013, pg. 51)

Some of the warmer, less clipped musicality works itself into his dialect and grows stronger when he recalls his many years serving in the village of Ryanga.

Through the lens of character do we see the vital importance of dialect in plays. The speech of individual characters has the power to separate or connect their daily world from that of ours. The way in which these characters speak denotes their status, not just in relation to the audience, but also the world and time period in which they live and the characters with whom they interact. Kate, through her strict speech, becomes an oppressive system to which the other characters grow to despise and, ultimately, thwart through their acceptance and fascination with Father Jack. Gerry’s dialect removes him from the Mundy sisters’ world even as he pretends to be a part of it.

This is true for all plays in which dialect is written into the script, in which the language is altered to serve a purpose. Dialect and language build social barriers which a character must then overcome. Eliza Doolittle of both *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady* goes through a process of changing her natural dialect, Cockney, to RP in order to put on a presence of mature sophistication and to impress the men of the Upper Class, Henry Higgins and Colonel Pickering (Shaw & Parker, 2006; Lerner & Loewe, 1975). This example shows that dialect is not only a

strong indicator of social rank and other admirable characteristics, but is also a tool to further a theatrical storyteller's plot.

Theatre as the art of storytelling often relies on realism in technical elements to convey the setting. The set, properties, costumes, lighting, and sound contribute to the sense of time, location, class, mood, and atmosphere. These elements are all that clue the audience into the world they will be immersed in for the next few hours. One of the most important parts of the theatrical package is the dialect of the actors. The sounds and mannerisms of a dialect clue the audience into the class, education, location, and time of the play quickly and succinctly given that the dialects have been executed well. Dialect is “a key into the world of the play” which both audiences and actors say, “helps ground the text”, providing a clear context for the thoughts and emotions of the characters (Kingston, 2008, pg. 9).

While language does not imply immersion or association with a culture, it is necessary to recognize that language, and therefore dialect, stem from culture and the variety apparent throughout the world echoes the diversity of people who populate it. There is inherent social value in language; whether it is tradition, necessity, or style, language overlays our social identity (Maher, 2017). The translation of language and dialect onto stage is, at its essence, a translation of identity onto the characters, infusing them with social norms, mores, and taboos. What we see on stage and screen is a “stylized variant”, a stereotype of speech and action that allows the audience to see some of the realities of a character's life through language (Maher, 2017). When an actor understands the meaning of their lines in another dialect, that is when the culture of the play shines through (Kingston, 2008, pg. 2); as Ben Crystal puts it in his book *You*

Say Potato, “an accent is a personality flag that we all fly with brighter colors than any garment” (Crystal and Crystal, 2014, pg. 14). The representation of minority dialects can build a sense of belonging in a multicultural society through the encouraged growth of a niche society. Culture and language “have a right to exist and no one has the authority to dismiss that”, especially not on the stage which should be an inclusive place for people of all backgrounds (Morace, 2001, pg. 51). Dialects such as Standard British (RP) or Deep Southern American will inform a sense of sensibility and social reality from which the actor can draw emotion and mannerism.

Groups that speak with the same dialect, the same slang, will “approach a given subject matter with a different set of assumptions and sensibilities”, thereby further solidifying the role of their dialect in their identity (Kingston, 2008, pg. 1). When playwrights use dialect in their script, they intend for the subtleties of dialectic language to grant a deeper understanding for the actors and the audience (Kingston, 2008, pg. 3). In choosing not to do dialects in a production, the director is neglecting both the intention of the playwright and the reality in which they set the play. The fact is that “accents inform the audience about the relationships between the characters” and are an essential aspect in establishing social hierarchy on stage (Kingston, 2008, pg. 5).

A well educated character might use their consonants more crisply and fully to play all of the sounds they could in a given word. Conversely, low-class characters would say words prescribed as grammatically incorrect to the educated and would often have vernacular speaking habits. The French speakers of the world play with their language differently than the Japanese

do, and both of them have concepts and words that the other does not. Dialect helps portray all of these aspects in a character from the moment they first speak to the last.

Some roles are defined by their dialect, roles that are bound to their dialect by audience expectation. One would never expect to hear Blanche DuBois of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* lacking the slow, sexy Deep Southern American drawl, the dialect of the southern belles. Nor would we imagine the characters in the musical *Everybody's Talking About Jamie* without their distinctive Sheffield dialect, a sound that is based in the real story behind the musical. A dialect adds an extra layer of reality to a theatrical production, an element which film has taken a step further, constructing languages to “provide an instant, inclusive, cultural backstory” (Luu, 2016).

The term “constructed language”, henceforth called a conlang, was first used in 1928 by Otto Jespersen, a Danish linguist who created a new language known as Novial (Adelman, 2014, pg. 545). The purpose of a conlang is to invent a language not currently in use by humanity or that could not possibly be used by humans. In creating such an artifact, an artist further deepens the connection to the world they are building and provides a new lens through which to view humanity. Conlangs such as Quenya and Klingon have enjoyed great fame in recent decade and are being learned at a faster rate than some languages. Voyeurs of their respective universes, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Trek*, are drawn to learning these languages by the urge to connect not only to other people but also to a new world by which they feel avidly inspired.

There are many other names used by linguists: auxiliary language, unnatural language (this is rarely used due to the pejorative nature of the term), fictional language, fake language, or engineered language. Only one is commonly used to describe those found in theatre and film: artlang, a language created primarily for artistic and aesthetic purposes (Peterson, 2015, pg. 18-21). The first recorded evidence for an artlang comes in 1150 CE from the abbess Hildegard von Bingen's list of created words in a language she called *Lingua Ignota* (Luu, 2016). Her vocabulary list explored close to a thousand words which she aesthetically added into Latin hymns. While it was similar to Latin, she often took liberties with her works, including adding /z/ into an overabundance of words (Peterson, 2015, pg. 7).

The creators of conlangs often “deliberately tr[y] to violate human language universals”; Klingon, for example, used “an unusual set of sounds in its phoneme inventory” creating the harsh, guttural feel of the language as well as “uncommon syntactic rules, such as the object-verb-subject word order” which makes it more difficult for English speakers to comprehend (Luu, 2016). These linguists and enthusiasts try to “test the limits of language as a matter of psychology and logic”, as a way to learn more about the languages that live in our world (Adelman, 2014, pg. 548).

A conlang can be categorized as either *a priori* or *a posteriori* depending on its influence (Peterson, 2015, pg. 22). *A priori* languages have a grammar not based on an existing language (Peterson, 2015, pg. 22). One of the first examples of such a conlang is Solresol, a language developed by Jean François Sudre using only the vocal notes on a musical scale (i.e. do, re, mi,

fa, so, la, ti). The language could be spoken using not only an intricate phonemic system, but also through the use of relative pitches on a musical instrument (Adelman, 2014, pg. 546).

A posteriori languages are created by altering pre existing languages to suit a function (Peterson, 2015, pg. 22). Giuseppe Peano constructed Latino sine Flexione in the early 1900s by combining all words of Latin in addition to words that were common to all of the following languages: French, Spanish, Italian, English, German, and Russian, but removing difficult grammatical rules such as case declensions and certain tense inflections (Adelman, 2014, pg. 546). While less commonly used than Solresol, it became a staple of some scientific communities for a period of time, fulfilling a purpose of intellectual elitism.

There are other ways of classifying conlangs, besides *a priori* and *a posteriori*. The most prominent class is that of the International Auxiliary Language, which was created to serve as a bridge between the languages of the world. They are meant to be simple to learn and uninfluenced by the cultures of natural languages and their ethnic groups (Adelman, 2014, pg. 547). Some examples are Volapük, Interlingua, or Ido, but the most notable example of this would be Esperanto as created by Dr. Ludwig Lazarus Zamenhof (Luu, 2016; Adelman, 2014, pg. 547). The purpose of this language was to bridge the hostilities between the peoples of Europe using one language that could be used by native speakers of any European language. While Esperanto never rose to the level Zamenhof wished it would, it was at one time used both by the Red Cross and the Universal Telegraphic Union who recommended and lauded its use (Adelman, 2014, pg. 547) and now boasts close to 1,000 native speakers, more than can be said for many natural languages of the world (Luu, 2016).

The primary focus of this paper is on the artistic language (artlang), a constructed language used expressly for aesthetic and artistic purpose in a work of art. The most notable artlangs are J.R.R. Tolkien's language families which include Oromëan (the languages of Elves and Men), Khuzdul (the language of the Dwarves), and Melkian (the Black Speech and the language of Orcs), all of which have a fully formed and distinct history and orthographic, phonetic, phonological, morphological, and syntactic system. These languages were the basis of Tolkien's works and the source from which his writings *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*, amongst others, are based. As a linguistics professor interested in historical linguistics, particularly simulating ancient language evolution in Old Norse and Old Gaelic and Brythonic, Tolkien had at his hands the tools with which to create a model of language family evolution.

The differences between his languages highlighted the cultural divides between his fictitious races. The Elves and Orcs are most closely related, with the Orcs being a branch of the Elves who were captured and forcibly morphed into monstrous beings by the overarching evil of the Tolkienic universe, Melkor and his servant, Sauron. Where Elvish is supposed to sound supple, effortless, and timeless, Orcish is guttural and brutal in pronunciation, meant to emulate a culture that was twisted from the tenets of the Valar, beings of justice and peace. Where the Elves enjoy the beauty of the world and devote themselves to understanding the art in all things, the Orcs have been deprived of the cultural pleasures with which we are familiar, permitted only the bare minimum. Dwarves, steadfast as the earth they live beneath, speak Khuzdul, a clipped, gravelly language that reflects their stubbornness, devotion to tradition, and short tempers.

When Peter Jackson set off on the task of creating one of the most expansive worlds for screen in his adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, he had to find someone to adapt the Tolkienic languages to screen. In Madison, Wisconsin, a graduate student named David Salo had been studying the Elvish languages of Quenya and Sindarin for the past seven years. When he heard that the books were to be adapted to film, “he wrote [to] director Peter Jackson and the film’s producers” to let them know the importance of getting the languages of the film right for the franchise’s fans and to offer his knowledge to the production. The production team had him write out inscriptions for props and set pieces and record phrases for the actors to learn, often at a moment’s notice (Price, 2002).

Salo’s role required that he make educated guesses about how an English line would translate into the Elvish languages Quenya and Sindarin. After all, Tolkien never left a compendium or guide to his languages, only bits and pieces that have been analyzed, and his notes on creating the languages themselves. For instance, scholars know that Tolkien based Quenya on Ancient Greek but based its sister language Sindarin on Welsh. This gives a cunning linguist such as Salo a hint as to some of the features of the language and how it might sound but does not provide a reference for how they are related historically and what brought about the differences between the two languages. Luckily, Tolkien also left clear hints that all Elvish languages stem from a mixture of Latin, Finnish, and Hebrew (Price, 2002).

Other sources that Salo used to determine the differences between the two languages and their phonemes is the corpus of historical stories set in Middle Earth that were compiled into *The*

Silmarillion, a textbook on the history and culture of the Elves. Tolkien details the splitting of the Valar and the Elves through the actions of Melkor. As the Elves continue to fracture across the ages, their languages splinter and evolve separately into the ones seen in the films (Tolkien, 1985). Salo was responsible for maintaining the sense of connectivity between the languages while also creating the differences that distinguished and broadened the world of the story (Price, 2002).

Before the world first heard the Tolkienic languages aloud, the genre films of science fiction brought conlangs to the screen. A variety of movies haphazardly slapped together a language, such as those created for *Star Wars*, and hoped that the audience would accept what they heard as a natural language for an alien species. Others, such as Klingon, were thought out and designed with a clear idea and culture in mind.

In the *Star Wars* saga, there are two languages in particular I want to talk about: Shyriiwook, and Ubese. The language of the Wookies, Shyriiwook, was a creation built by sound architect Ben Burtt, the man behind the iconic sounds of the *Star Wars* franchise, using only the vocalizations of animals. The animalistic appearance of Chewbacca permits the audience to accept the reality that his vocal tract is more similar to that of other predators than of a human's. As a character more bear than human, an audience can accept that they will never be able to understand or comprehend what he is saying. However, this also means that Burtt was able to get away with, "blending dog, lion, seal, walrus, tiger, camel, and badger sounds" without any hint of linguistic universals which would almost certainly still exist so that a being could convey meaning (King, 2017). Burtt, as the sound engineer, fulfilled his role in the production,

earning himself two Oscar nominations, but clearly had no focus on the linguistic or acting components of his languages. A language that was to be featured so prominently throughout the films deserved more thought and more processing on the part of the production team as a whole and perhaps should have been the purveyal of a linguist, even an amateur.

Ubese is a testament to the fact that language was not considered during the production of the original *Star Wars* franchise. Used once towards the beginning of *Return of the Jedi*, it is spoken by a disguised Princess Leia as she infiltrates Jabba the Hutt's palace to rescue Han Solo after he is captured. The language demonstrated contains a few simple words which are used repetitively to convey vastly different meanings. For instance, Leia speaks a line in Ubese that supposedly means, "I want fifty. No less." which consists of the same two syllable word repeated twice (Marquand, 1983). Now, reduplication is a natural feature in many of the world's languages and is used to the effect of differentiating some meaning, often to diminutize a name or a word. To even an untrained audience, the example of Ubese does not seem a plausible way to express two sentences, especially when one includes a counter value. Thus, Ubese should be classified as a fake language since it has no real linguistic basis (Peterson, 2015).

Now there are some issues that arise from the recording of people speaking their native language and then using it as an exoticized fantasy language. Harmful stereotypes can come from such an act and can upstage the preservation initiatives of linguists who are attempting to save languages from dying out across the world, who are trying to maintain linguistic diversity. Simply saying that an endangered language is of alien origin can demean a culture and remove them from the public view as a people who deserve to maintain their language, culture, and

identity in the face of a rapidly expanding world. Conlangs should draw inspiration from the languages of the world, not use them for commercial value whilst rejecting the people to whom they rightfully belong.

One of the largest sources of difficulty for language creators is the dual necessity to license a language and to let it have room to grow and breathe. The International Auxiliary Language Volapük's creator, Johann Martin Schleyer, "refus[ed] to relinquish control over the language's development", causing it to fall out of use (Luu, 2016). Part and parcel of creating a conlang is the anticipation of allowing one's audience to examine the work accomplished and then to go on their own journeys with the conlang, discovering aspects that might have been overlooked otherwise. Conlangs retain their artistry only when they are allowed to live in the public domain and encourage others to test out their own art.

Dr. Zamenhof, the previously mentioned creator of Esperanto, wanted his conlang to be a language of peace and so renounced his personal claim to the language (Adelman, 2014, pg. 550). The result of this was the swift and forced evolution of the language. Initially, Zamenhoff was receptive to the growth of the language and pleased with its popularity, but the language was being altered so rapidly that he felt it could no longer maintain the stability he felt necessary to maintain an auxiliary language. He created an international committee dedicated to the revision and stability of the language (Adelman, 2014, pg. 550).

Conversely, the Elvish languages fully developed by Tolkien, Sindarin and Quenya, officially fall under the copyright owned by the Tolkien Estate which is responsible for the

preservation of these languages and the notes and annals in which J.R.R. Tolkien inscribed his ideas. In theory, the Estate should have full and total control over all scholarly material pertaining to these languages and their orthographic scripts, Tengwar and Angerthas. Yet, thousands of linguistic analyses have been published concerning Tolkien's works and often under threat of lawsuit by the Tolkien Estate; inevitably, the Estate never carries through on their promise, likely due to the flimsy arguments surrounding the validity of a fair use law as applicable to a constructed language. The study of these languages and their author continues on as a result, maintained by a constant and evolving fan base who became the ones to maintain the culture of the languages on screen (Adelman, 2014, pgs. 551-552).

Under the copyright protection of Paramount falls the conlang created by Marc Okrand, Klingon. Since the debut of the language in *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*, Okrand has published three books on the language, all of which also fall under Paramount's copyright. The language may only be used in the *Star Trek* franchise, but its viewers are welcome to learn it through the mediums allowed by Paramount Studios: Okrand's books and the Klingon Language Institute (KLI). The KLI provides an outlet for interested linguists and enthusiasts to conduct, discuss, and publish their own material on the language given that Okrand has the final word about the validity of the research and its conclusion (Adelman, 2014, pgs 553-554). As such, Klingon enjoys a large fanbase, some of whom have chosen to raise their children to speak the language. The linguist D'Armond Speers attempted to raise his son as a native speaker. The experiment lasted from 1996-2001, when his son demonstrated an unwillingness to use the language likely due to lack of contact with other native speakers (Luu, 2016).

With copyright laws surrounding the creation of newly published constructed languages, corporations and production companies essentially discourage the creation and dissemination of new works in these languages. The result is a lack of interest in interacting with the built world and culture that the languages belong to, thus eliminating another method of examining the world in which we live. The capacity to inspire social cognizance and exploration lies inherent in these languages and is only stunted by the implementation of copyright law, a law meant to award royalties to the creator and acknowledge them for their work (Adelman, 2014, pgs. 559). It is therefore important to stress that most of the language creators for film are driven by “[the] pleasure in contemplating the new relationship established” rather than what little they receive from the small market of conlang consumers (Tolkien & Tolkien, 2006, pgs. 198, 206).

Constructed languages form their own cultures to which we as consumers find ourselves drawn as a method of self-exploration. The presence of such artistically conceived languages on stage and screen presents the public with permission to explore their worlds through these languages, playing, through conlangs, with their own languages and their notions of how they function. As such indicators of social introspection, they should be made more accessible to the public, those who, as conlangers and as theatre artists, we are trying to reach.

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