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Introduction to the special issue on “The language of science fiction”

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Abstract: In this introduction, we provide a short rationale for the genesis of the special issue on “The language of science fiction” and introduce its main theme – science fiction, with particular consideration of the language of estrangement – and main methodological framework – corpus linguistics. In addition, we give an overview of the contributions and motivate their grouping into four parts: (1) the influence of science fiction on non-fictional language, (2) sociolinguistic variation, (3) science fiction and the mind, and (4) lexis and literature.

Keywords: science fiction; corpus linguistics; estrangement; pop culture

1 Introduction: science fiction from A(frofuturism) to Z(ombies)

Interest in science fiction has definitely evolved from being a nerdy preoccupation to a subject worthy of academic study, as the large number of handbooks and companions dedicated to science fiction testifies. Between them, Bould et al. (2009), Canavan and Link (2019), James and Mendlesohn (2003), Latham (2014), and Seed (2005) cover about every conceivable niche and aspect of science fiction studies, from the Gothic to the New Weird, from comics to video games, from American to Japanese science fiction, from queer theory to posthumanism in science fiction. However, one field of study remains conspicuously absent: among all these chapters, there is exactly one on “Language and linguistics”, namely Bould (2009). This seems somewhat surprising, given the important role that language(s) and communicative behaviour, alien or otherwise, play in many science fiction stories, and the general interest of linguists in matters of language and pop culture overall (see, e.g., Beers Fägersten 2017; Piazza et al. 2011; Schubert and Werner 2023; Werner 2018, 2022). Our special issue is thus a timely contribution, showcasing what linguistics has to offer to science fiction and vice versa. In this short introduction to the special issue, we briefly survey the relationship between language, linguistics, and science fiction, and provide an overview of the contributions.

2 Language and science fiction

Engaging with possible futures is an essential human endeavour and the popularity of the science fiction genre in general, but also particularly among linguists, thus does not come as a surprise. Science fiction has the power to continually shape, stimulate, and challenge contemporary thought and societal norms, and serves much deeper undertakings than being mere speculative fiction.

While being notoriously difficult to define, most writers on science fiction take Darko Suvin’s by now classic definition of the genre as a reference point (e.g., Adams 2017: 331; Shippey 2007: 15): “[Science fiction] is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (Suvin 2016: 20). Science fiction texts – which we take to include, among others, stories, novels, fan fiction, video games, TV series, and movies – rely on linguistic “means of estrangement”, listed by Adams

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(2017: 333–345) to different degrees. Science fiction’s alternative “imaginative framework” comes to life via the creative use of language and may range from occasional “alien” referring expressions to the development of fully fledged artificial languages (Peterson 2015), with Klingon being one of the most iconic and enduring examples (Adams 2011; Okrent 2009).

Whereas previous research on science fiction has rested mainly on literary and qualitative approaches (see, e.g., Claridge 2001; Mandala 2010; Stockwell 2000),¹ this special issue is devoted to exploring the language in/of science fiction using corpus linguistic and related methodologies.

3 Overview of the special issue

The contributions to this special issue on the language of science fiction stem from numerous fields of linguistic enquiry, from morphosyntax, sociolinguistics, gesture studies, stylistics, and cognitive linguistics to lexicography. Besides the overarching science fiction theme, the contributions are united by their adoption of a corpus-based perspective. The corpora used are of various types and range from self-compiled purpose-driven corpora of various sizes (e.g., Behrens; Keller, Laliberté, and Wengler) to large-scale ready-made corpora such as the TV Corpus, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), and the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA; e.g., Ronan and Schneider; Sanchez-Stockhammer), and big-data datasets such as Google *n*-grams (Ursini and Samo).

The first three articles of this special issue are concerned with the influence of science fiction on non-fictional language use, thus reflecting and developing further the long-standing general interest in media influence on language change (cf., e.g., Sayers 2014; Stuart-Smith 2006). In her article, Christina Sanchez-Stockhammer investigates the influence of the *Star Wars* universe on the lexicon of present-day English. She traces how lexical items like *lightsabre* and *Jedi* as well as the construction *to the dark side* have become entrenched in everyday language use and are employed innovatively, even without explicit reference to *Star Wars*. Patricia Ronan and Gerold Schneider likewise seek to uncover the impact of an iconic sci-fi construction – the split infinitive from *Star Trek (to boldly go)* – on other genres and registers. Here, however, the evidence points to other reasons behind the rise of the split infinitive than its emblematic use in the title sequence of *Star Trek: The Original Series*. P. M. Freestone, Jessica Kruk, and Lauren Gawne investigate emblem gestures and how they are transported from the fictional universes of *Star Trek* and *The Hunger Games* to the use of emoji on Twitter and representation in the news. Usage patterns show that while the three-finger salute from *The Hunger Games* has transcended mere reference to a fictional world, the Vulcan salute from *Star Trek* remains firmly in its science-fictional trappings.

The next two articles investigate the sociolinguistic issues of language and gender and regional variation. More than 50 years lie between the first air date of *Star Trek: The Original Series* and *Star Trek: Discovery*, and Tanja Behrens shows how the language of men and women, as scripted into these two shows, has become more egalitarian in the newer instalment, both in terms of quantity of contributions as well as the type of contributions made by female and male characters. As Catherine Laliberté, Melanie Keller, and Diana Wengler demonstrate, the cult classic sci-fi series *Firefly* relies in its world-building on the audience’s real-world knowledge of regional varieties, in particular Southern varieties of American English, which are drawn on by the *Firefly* crew to create a complex web of social identities and hierarchies.

Boundaries of the mind and consciousness are important science fiction themes and we find these at the heart of the next set of contributions: once in the form of a cognitive linguistic investigation of motion in the *Star Trek* franchise, and once in a corpus stylistic analysis of science fiction literature on altered consciousness. Kajsa Törmä finds that *beaming* has a special status in the *Star Trek* universe, as it behaves as a verb of motion while

¹ This is not to imply that previous corpus linguistic work on science fiction is non-existent; corpus linguistic research on *Star Trek*, for example, includes Rey (2001), who performed a multidimensional analysis on some of the dialogue in the films and series, and Csomay and Young (2021), who used diachronic keyword analysis on a 140,000-word corpus of *Star Trek* dialogues. For further references, the readers are invited to consult the reference sections of the individual contributions in this special issue.

lacking the verb class’s characteristic of continuity of motion. Törmä’s cognitive linguistic analysis is accompanied by a detailed description of the verb’s collocational environments. Elizabeth Oakes next focuses on a specific stratum of science fiction literature: American science fiction from the 1960s with a thematic representation of altered consciousness. Using a computational stylistic approach, she shows how a language of altered consciousness states is constructed via linguistic means of defamiliarized estrangement.

The final set of articles is concerned with lexis and literature. Matt Gee examines the coinage of words in a corpus of science fiction literature and how these words are then made to be meaningful for the readers. Linguistic estrangement plays another important role here and contributes to the out-of-this-world air of the respective sci-fi works. Last but not least, Francesco Ursini and Giuseppe Samo engage in a meta-study of genre naming related to *punk* subgenres (such as *steampunk* and *cyberpunk*). Drawing on a range of datasets (e.g., Google *n*-grams, fan-curated online encyclopedias) and evidence from four languages (English, German, French, and Italian), they show how the *-punk* affix has become productive in the designation of sci-fi subgenres and how these lexicographical issues feature in the community-building aspect of science fiction.

A number of science fiction formats such as TV series (*Star Trek*, *Firefly*), movies (*Star Wars*, *The Hunger Games*), and a vast array of science fiction literature are covered in this special issue. While these represent rather traditional forms of science fiction, future research on the language of science fiction might find it worthwhile to include other formats and media types, such as video games, graphic novels, and fanzines. We look forward to see what the future holds in store for linguists and sci-fi nerds alike!

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