

# LANGUAGE IN FANTASTIC FILM WORLDS

EXPLORING FICTIONAL TELECINEMATIC DISCOURSE

19-20 MARCH 2026

CHEMNITZ UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY  
(HYBRID)

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Funded by  
**DFG** Deutsche  
Forschungsgemeinschaft  
German Research Foundation

## **“You, me, handcuffs ... must it always end this way?”: The Language of desire, romance, and asexuality in *Doctor Who***

**Farah Ali (De Pauw University)**

Asexuality is rarely addressed in sexuality studies; its relative invisibility is even exemplified in the absence of its representative ‘A’ in LGBTQ+ and its absorption by ‘+.’ As a widely unrecognized identity (Bishop, 2014), there is little scholarship that sheds light on how asexual individuals navigate a world that centers sexual attraction and desire, usually through an androcentric, heteronormative lens that misconstrues or erases the experiences of asexual individuals. However, identities that fall on the asexuality spectrum are slowly gaining social visibility, including in media and entertainment (Barounis, 2014; Cerankowski, 2014; Sinwell, 2014). Still, fictional representations often include depicting asexuality as a problem, a character quirk, an abnormal condition, a sign of sexual underdevelopment, and/or the butt of jokes, with few examples of fictional stories challenging allosexual norms (Kennon, 2021). Science fiction is an especially relevant genre for examining asexuality: the imagined worlds and futures in science fiction create a defamiliarized context in which writers and critics have a space for exploring non-normative sexualities, which in turn can inform how they are understood in reality (Kurowicka, 2023). However, these explorations may still be shaped by normative, obligatory sexuality: science fiction often depicts “expressive sexuality” as human, while the “cold rationality” of aliens and cyborgs serves as the polar opposite, as asexuality and inhuman (Barr, 2019, p. 46). In this study, I examine the discursive interplay between allo- and asexuality in one of the longest-running science fiction TV shows, *Doctor Who*. Focusing on the revival series from 2005–2024, I use a pragmatics approach to analyze the language of interaction between the alien protagonist known as “the Doctor” and allosexual characters in romantic and/or sexual contexts. Focusing on speech acts and implicature, I demonstrate how different iterations of the Doctor oscillate between sexual and asexual, as well how the Doctor’s suggested asexuality is perceived from a perspective of otherness. This is primarily evident from the evaluative and allosexual lens that frequently marks asexuality as an alien quality.

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## Foreign tongues and fabled lands: Multilingual complexity in *The Lord of the Rings* and *Dune*

Katja Anderson (University of Maryland Global Campus)

Maurice Anderson (University of Mainz)

Women's whispered words interwoven with the wind – both 21st-century film series *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003) and *Dune* (2021–2024) begin with a focus on language and sound. Women, associated with water, magic, and healing, are powerful forces shrouded in mystery, who support valiant male heroes during their fight for freedom from oppression.

These film adaptations are based on two classic literary works of the 20th century that significantly shaped fantasy and science fiction, respectively: J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, first published in 1954, and Frank Herbert's 1965 narrative *Dune*. The books' detailed linguistic systems and onomastic vocabulary have expanded into central cinematic discourse and epic world-building on the big screen.

The two Anglophone authors drew inspiration from both medieval and modern languages, ranging from Old English, Old Norse, Finnish, and Welsh in fantasy worlds, to Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin in science fiction. Furthermore, Tolkien invented mysterious writing systems, harkening back to prehistoric runes and mystic signs from the Middle Ages, that feature in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Denis Villeneuve's *Dune* duology displays foreign letters and inscriptions on book pages, human faces, gravestones, and walls in the background.

Supplemented by multimodal means such as dramatic lighting, evocative soundtracks, and diverse vocalizations, the cinematic integration of these constructed languages immerses the audience in mystical yet believable fictional worlds. The power of the spoken word is highlighted through both persuasive rhetoric and supernatural skills as demonstrated by elves and wizards alike in *The Lord of the Rings* as well as by Bene Gesserit and the prophesized Kwisatz Haderach in *Dune*. These two blockbuster movies present complex multilingualism and clashes of exotic cultures as different species and societies come into contact and fight for survival, fascinating fans across the globe.

## Translingual tales and travels: Animal languages in film adaptations of children's literature

Natasha Anderson (University of Mainz)

Talking animals are characteristic components of fantasy narratives, yet unique linguistics in fantastic films are more than just a common trope since they open doorways to immersive adventures, sophisticated societies, and wondrous worlds. Two animated film adaptations of well-known British fantasy children's literature exemplify the enchanting effect of invented animal languages: the 1978 film *Watership Down* based on Richard Adams's 1972 eponymous novel and *Legend of the Guardians: The Owls of Ga'Hoole* from 2010 based on Katherine Lasky's *Guardians of Ga'Hoole* series begun in 2003. The rabbits' Lapine tongue and the owls' Hoolian speech facilitate viewers' engagement in fictional realms through oscillating pulls of familiarity via anthropomorphism and novelty via nonhuman experiences.

Rabbits' everyday needs shape a terminology of grazing and a base-four numeric system in Adams's work, thus illustrating his herbivore heroes' lifestyle amid the omnipresent threat of predators in rural England. Likewise, Lasky's 16-book series highlights her characters' nocturnal habits while following the quest of four orphaned owls to stop a conspiracy imperiling their avian kingdoms. In the corresponding films, phonology and morphology play crucial roles due to onomatopoeic terms and species-specific vocabulary that bring animalcentric stories to life.

Moreover, animal protagonists experience the limits of language owing to geographic boundaries and engage in cross-species communication. Owls of the Southern kingdoms fluent in Hoolian encounter Krakish among the warring northern factions, while rabbits utilize a hedgerow *lingua franca* to communicate with birds and mice. Above all, the spoken word is essential in both movies. While rabbits emulate myths of their trickster hero El-ahrairah with their own escapades, legends of brave owls of Ga'Hoole inspire a quartet of winged youngsters to embark on a dangerous journey. Consequently, oral storytelling becomes intrinsically entwined with the travels of protagonists—be they bards with beak and claws or fast-talking, furry wayfarers.

## **Sci-fi and fantasy television series from Australia: A corpus linguistic case study**

**Monika Bednarek (The University of Sydney)**

In this talk I investigate two recent television series from Australia: Cleverman (Griffen et al 2016-2017) and Firebite (Thornton & Fletcher 2021-2022). Cleverman is a television drama which mixes fantasy, science fiction and superhero genres. The television drama Firebite similarly mixes supernatural and fantasy genres. Both series are culturally significant for representation because they feature Aboriginal main characters. In this study, I apply corpus linguistic techniques (primarily keywords analysis) to identify linguistic practices that differentiate these series from other television series and from each other. As a point of comparison, I use three different corpora: a corpus of dialogue from US television series, a corpus of dialogue from Australian television series, and a corpus of subtitles from Australian television series. In so doing, I aim to revisit the idea of the reference corpus and how its choice influences the results of comparing televisual narratives. Through a set of inter-related comparisons the analysis aims to obtain insights into differences as well as similarities, by investigating unique and shared linguistic practices. Results will be investigated at different levels, with a focus on genre conventions (sci-fi/fantasy) and narrative concerns (characterisation, plot development). Since both series centre on Aboriginal characters, the analysis will also discuss the use of traditional Indigenous languages and Australian Aboriginal English varieties, as a special feature of these Australian series. In so doing, the talk aims to make a contribution to the analysis of telecinematic discourse beyond Hollywood.

## “I am also a We”: Multilingualism and world Englishes in *Sense8*

**Sarah Buschfeld (TU Dortmund)**

**Sven Leuckert (TU Dresden)**

*Sense8*, a science-fiction show produced for Netflix from 2015 to 2018, focuses on eight strangers from eight different cities: Wolfgang (Berlin), Will (Chicago), Nomi (San Francisco), Riley (Reykjavík/London), Lito (Mexico City), Kala (Mumbai), and Sun (Seoul). These eight strangers share “mental, physical, and emotional experiences that amount[.] to radical empathy” (Shaw & Stone 2021: 1), which is reflected, for instance, in their ability to draw on the skills of the others. As so-called “sensates”, they represent powerful but also vulnerable individuals that regularly need to work together in order to combat their enemies and to unveil the truth behind their unique connection. As it becomes clear from watching the show, various multimodal strategies are employed in order to create distinct environments for the characters (see, for instance, Shacklock 2021). While a lot of research has been carried out on *Sense8* in cultural and media studies, thus far, no study has investigated the linguistic strategies employed in the show. In order to start filling this research gap, our study focuses on the question of how multilingualism and World Englishes are used in *Sense8* to establish the characters’ individual identities on the one hand and to create linguistic authenticity on the other hand (see Hodson 2014 on the important role of dialects and accents in film). To this end, we carry out a qualitative analysis of *Sense8*. In addition to discussing individual scenes in which multilingualism and World Englishes are used, we also summarise which languages and varieties occur in *Sense8* in the first place. The results show that multilingualism and World Englishes, such as Indian English for Kala, are employed in the show to create a rich linguistic tapestry that corresponds to the show’s broad geographical and thematic scope. Some linguistic representations on the show, however, also border on stereotyping.

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## **Multimodal discourse analysis: Verbal and multimodal worldbuilding in *The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance***

**Adrián Castro (University of Granada)**

Fantasy as a genre is characterized by the creation of fictional worlds that deviate from common ground reality (James & Mendlesohn, 2012; Castro, 2024). The existence of fantasy worlds on ontological planes different from ours contradict some scholars' assertions that telecinematic texts re-create the world and its spatio-temporal characteristics (Piazza et al., 2011). As a result, the scaffolding of such worlds (i.e., worldbuilding, see Vu, 2017; Wolf, 2018) is essential to the understanding of telecinematic fantasy artifacts and key to their success. In this paper, I examine the relations between fantasy, worldbuilding, and characterization in *The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance*. The TV series, part of the broader Dark Crystal phenomenon, stands out for its intricate combination of techniques, ranging from traditional puppetry to modern visual effects, to create a richly textured world. Given this richness, I propose to analyze the creation of worlds from a verbal and non-verbal perspective by implementing a corpus stylistics as well as a multimodal analysis. I address how elements such as color, symbols, and visual design (Ledin & Machin, 2020) combine with dialogue in a selection of scenes to construct the fictional world. Both the visual and verbal sub-systems foreground themes of fragmentation and unity, appeal to common motifs in fantasy (e.g., good vs. evil), and raise concerns on ecological issues, the latter of which has already attracted some scholarly interest (Dobrin, 2004). This proposal aims to contribute to the growing body of research focused on contemporary media, analyzing how stylistic choices in this TV series serve simultaneously as critical tools for storytelling and problematizing current social concerns (Csomay & Young, 2021).

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## ***Doctor Who, a very British sci-fi***

**Julie Collins (University of New England, Armidale, NSW)**

*Doctor Who*, an iconic fantastical British television series, first aired in 1963, continues to attract a large fandom across the English-speaking World. Nominally science fiction with many futuristic and alien storylines, Doctor Who is also in the realm of fantasy with the Doctor, in his time travelling spaceship, the TARDIS, journeying to historical locations and events, albeit with a little alien infiltration. Doctor Who has undoubtedly had an impact on British popular culture and an influence on language. This paper will explore three distinct linguistic themes: Firstly, the inclusion of Whovian words and concepts such as TARDIS, Dalek and Time Lord into the English language. Secondly, the meaning of the term “The Doctor” and what this signifies in the context of a shifting identity, as relatively frequent reincarnations of this character reimagine what it is to be a wise, powerful and trusted (if slightly eccentric) Time Lord in terms of gender, age and race. Thirdly, and this is niche, I will discuss one Doctor Who story from an insider and experiential perspective and the challenges of learning a new vocabulary. As a young actor in the late 1980s I appeared in *Paradise Towers*, a four-part story; my character, Fire Escape, was a member of the Red Kangs, child goths who spoke in a unique language reminiscent of *Clockwork Orange*, an imagining of how children would learn to speak and interpret their environment if all adult influence was removed at a very early age. This dystopian story reflected urban decay, the demise of the Tower Block, a trope and reality which still has resonance today.

# **Nightcrawler's Babel: Linguistic representations of Kurt Wagner's complex identity**

**Pavel Egizaryan (Independent Researcher)**

Kurt Wagner (aka Nightcrawler), a character in the Marvel Universe, possesses a multifaceted identity that significantly influences his language (Edwards 2009; Darowski 2014). This complex identity is represented in various ways across three movies and seven animated adaptations. Primarily, Kurt is a mutant and an X-Man, a core aspect of his identity that he occasionally reflects upon (Mills 2014). Secondly, he is German (and appears white when using his Image Inducer). This facet is consistently, albeit often stereotypically, portrayed through his accent and occasional use of German words and phrases (Fought 2011). In adaptations featuring a teenage Nightcrawler, there is some evolution in his English proficiency. Minor references to his Bavarian origin are also present. Thirdly, Kurt Wagner is Catholic (and even depicted as a priest in certain storylines). While this aspect of his identity is sometimes omitted, when represented, it manifests through diverse speech genres (Bakhtin 1997), including prayers (Sawyer 2001), formal sermons, informal improvised preaching (Addington 2001), and Bible quotations. Considering that in most adaptations Kurt spent the majority of his life in a German-speaking community, he demonstrates a surprising familiarity with traditional English Bible translations that have a profound impact on his everyday speech. Christianity affects not only the form but also the content and structure of Nightcrawler's language. He frequently employs Biblical concepts (such as blessing, love, sin, and forgiveness) in his communication, prompting his teammates to adopt similar language when addressing him. This study aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the linguistic representation of Kurt Wagner's multifaceted identity across various adaptations from comics.

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## **Powerful ‘others’: Gender role expression and subversion in *Violet Evergarden* and *Spy x Family***

**Zuzana Elliott (University of Edinburgh)**  
**Chad Elliott (Independent Researcher)**

This study examines the fantasy world of Japanese anime, considering how media representations contribute both visually and narratively towards cultural ‘otherness’ to establish their own subjectivity. Two modern anime series, *Violet Evergarden* and *Spy x Family*, share many overlapping features of plot, context, and character design. Most notably, both series feature female protagonists who are presented as ‘ideal’ forms of femininity while also being the most physically dominant characters in their respective series. On the surface, the physical power of these characters challenges ideas of traditional masculinity (Hiramoto, 2013), but with sociolinguistic analyses focusing on linguistic politeness (Liu and Allen, 2014) and repertoire (Stamou, 2014; Ita & Bisila, 2020) we reveal how these characters remain wrapped within and defined by socially constructed gender roles. These roles are enforced through different methods ranging from relatively subtle turn-taking and politeness in dialogue (Ide, 1982) to more overt methods such as labelling and dehumanisation. This study also shows how gender-sensitive linguistic boundaries are manipulated moment-by-moment by other (male) characters, affecting the female main characters’ interactional and personal identities. Although each character is given opportunities to subvert traditional gender roles, the establishment of these roles within the context of each series continues to display male-dominant ideology prevalent during Japan’s modernisation process (Sato, 2018). We argue that the differences in each character’s development are due specifically to how gender roles are enforced in each fictional universe: how each woman is stereotyped as a gendered ‘other’ within their respective communities, and how they articulate their own roles in alignment with or in defiance of these stereotypes.

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# The gaze of the killer: How dialogue and camerawork affect audience participation

Christian R. Hoffmann (University of Augsburg)

For some time now, (feminist) film theory has debated the purpose and effects of different types of POV shots (and) their respective reverse shots in horror films, focussing specifically on their perceptive, dramaturgical and ideological impact on movie audiences (Grant 2010; Clover 2015; Hart 2018; Reiff-Shanks 2024). It is argued that, in many horror films, the gaze of the killer can come to represent what is known as *the male gaze*, “subject[ing] women to male control and scrutiny, fetishizing their image or submitting them to a sadistic voyeurism or scopophilia” (Grant 2010, 9; cf. Mulvey, 1985). This works since directors frequently use these shots to force their audiences to adopt the gaze (and perspective) of the killer (or monster): A process that can lead to the audience’s temporary identification (or affective alignment) with the (often unknown) killer, causing emotional arousal, shock or suspense.

More recent approaches have suggested that such immersive effects of horror movies are more likely to flow from the camera dynamics between killer point-of-view (POV) shots and the subsequent (reverse) shots, not only showing or revealing the POV of killers but also those of their (potential) victims. This visual dynamic and how it keys in with the verbal track of the scene, has so far not been explored in any systematic fashion. While multimodal discourse analysis has explored the cohesive and interpersonal meanings of gaze in various types of spoken interactions, little attention has been paid to the workings of the cinematic gaze (Goodwin 1980; Sidnell 2006; Streek 2014; Auer 2017). To this end, this study draws on Kress & van Leeuwen’s classic frameworks for the analysis of film shots and film image composition to capture the sequencing and visual setup of shot types in killing scenes, drawing on examples from a selection of different horror movies (van Leeuwen 1985, 1991, 1996; Kress & van Leeuwen 2020). The aim is to illustrate (1) how (which types of) shots and reverse shots provide conventional, recurring sequential templates for the staging of killing scenes and (2) how the visual “dance” between the gaze of the killer and the gaze of the victim is guided, sustained, subverted or re-enforced by verbal cues.

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# Science fiction, philosophy, language, and semiotic transformations: The case of Ray Faraday Nelson's *Eight O'clock in the Morning* (1963) and *They Live* (1988) directed by John Carpenter

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Although elements of the science fiction (sci-fi) genre may date back centuries, it is now firmly established in both literature and film. This study examines the semiotic transformations between Ray Faraday Nelson's short story *Eight O'Clock in the Morning* (1963) and its film adaptation *They Live* (1988), directed by John Carpenter. The sci-fi genre is reflected in the language of both works, though each engages with the genre conventions in unique ways. Bradbury uses language to explore speculative ideas, particularly through the protagonist's inner monologue and through vivid, often surreal descriptions that blur the lines between reality and manipulation. The alien mind control in the narrative critiques how society can subtly shape people's perceptions through unseen forces—a common sci-fi trope. Meanwhile Carpenter uses both visual and verbal language to convey its sci-fi ideas, with language serving as a direct tool for social commentary. Carpenter uses concise, easy-to-understand language, which contrasts with the more surreal tone of Bradbury's writing. The film's dialogue is direct and simple, effectively advancing the plot while reinforcing the film's anti-authoritarian and rebellious tone - central themes in science fiction narratives. The investigation also examines semiotic transformations in adaptation through the lens of Michel Foucault's philosophical ideas, particularly from his work *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (1998). Three categories derived from Foucault's insights frame the analysis: *technologies of the self*, which explore personal liberation; *oppression*, reflecting sovereign power's expansion and societal manipulation; and *knowledge*, which either empowers individuals or serves as a tool for domination. In *They Live*, the protagonist embodies Foucault's philosophical ideas. The analysis reveals how the semiotic elements in the film evolve, initially symbolizing oppression and manipulation, and ultimately presenting liberation, reflecting the deeper ideological underpinnings of Foucault's thought.

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# Expecting the unexpected: Examining the interplay between world knowledge and context in relatively unconstraining scenarios

Chengjie Jiang (University of Nottingham)  
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Communication frequently involves discussions of real-world implausible events, particularly in contexts such as fantastic films. Most prior psycholinguistic research studying fictional/fantastical comprehension used specific contextual cues, such as familiar fictional characters and/or detailed set-up stories, to induce a strong expectation for real-world implausible content (e.g., Nieuwland & Berkum, 2006). In real-life situations, however, such discussions often occur within more weakly constraining contexts, where both plausible and implausible information is supported (e.g., “I just watched this interesting film about a boy *travelling to the past* vs. *London*”). We investigated how real-world expectations and contextual knowledge interact in relatively unconstraining fantastic scenarios (e.g., dream scenarios), by using sentence completion (Experiment 1) and self-paced reading tasks (Experiment 2). Results of Experiment 1 showed that comprehenders were guided by the dream context to expect less plausible information in a general way, but their responses were still largely constrained by real-world expectations. Results of Experiment 2 showed that although comprehension in such contexts was initially guided by real-world expectations, plausible information took longer to read than implausible information (e.g., “putting meat and vegetables in the refrigerator<sub>plausible</sub>/wardrobe<sub>implausible</sub>”) in the final words of the target sentence. Our study is the first to show that fantastical contexts (e.g., dream, fictional novels/films) are powerful enough to guide comprehenders towards expecting something unusual even without explicit cues indicating this bias, indexed by increased comprehension difficulties for real-world plausible contents. This suggests that information that is not related to anything in comprehenders’ active memory can still be ultimately preferred in fantastical contexts, indicating necessary extensions for language comprehension models (e.g., Cook & O’Brien, 2013). Additionally, our findings also highlight that mental representations of both the real world and the fantastical world are actively engaged in fictional/fantastical comprehension, raising new questions about how comprehenders switch between these representations (e.g., Kuperberg, 2016).

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# ‘Getting (pseudo-)medieval on the lingo’: A corpus-linguistic study into diegetic dialogues in fantasy-medieval TV series

Monika Kirner-Ludwig (University of Innsbruck)

Since the very beginnings of motion film making, neomedieval frames and motifs have attracted and fueled audiences’ fascination. Yet, while, more recently, e.g. Mandala has pointed out the scholarly worthwhileness of scripted telecinematic dialogues as pop cultural discourses (2010), the subtle but effective role that pseudo-medieval linguistic features in such telecinematic dialogues may play has so far mostly escaped researchers’ attention.

The present paper thus builds upon and extends beyond what has mostly been historical, literary and culture science studies dedicated to modern adaptations of pseudo-medieval motifs and frames (cf. e.g. Aronstein and Coiner 1994; Engle 2007), applying a cinematic stylistic lens to speech patterns in fantasy-medieval TV series. My study shall attend to the manner and extent in which stylistic patterns are found to be strategically integrated in pseudo-medieval telecinematic dialogue so as to lend credence and pseudo-authenticity to fantastic characters within their fictional worlds.

This research focus falls back on my earlier claims and observations that constructed fictional dialogues in such genres tend to lack consistency in weaving (pseudo-)archaic components into the diegetic dialogues. This is essentially due to the vast majority of screenplay writers (as well as the authors of any original tectual originals) not possessing any significant knowledge about historical English speech patterns. This is reflected mostly on the lexical level and then in such pseudo-archaisms and pseudo-medieval features that are repetitively and often anachronistically and incorrectly – and yet supposedly effectively – inserted into telecinematic discourse supposed to appear ‘medieval’ (cf. Harris 2004; Bryant 2010; Traxel 2008, 2012; Kirner-Ludwig 2018, 2020).

The dataset to be corpus-linguistically investigated comprises the full scripted and fan-transcribed dialogues extracted from (at this point) six fantasy-medieval TV series produced in a variety of English-speaking countries including the UK, the USA, and New Zealand, while more TV series may be included still. Series featuring in the current corpus are *Merlin* (2008–2012), *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), *Outlander* (2014–), *The Witcher* (2019–), *House of the Dragon* (2022–), and *The Rings of Power* (2022–).

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# From Klingon to Belter slang: The forms and functions of (science) fictional languages

Claudia Lange (TU Dresden)

Alien(ating) languages in SF and Fantasy range from *constructed* to *created* (Cheyne 2008, Sanders 2020): Iconic examples of the former include Tolkien's Elvish languages and Klingon for the *Star Trek* franchise (Adams 2011, Okrent 2009), acquired by a loyal fan base with the help of fully-fledged dictionaries and grammars. Created languages, on the other hand, are generally more common in SF and Fantasy and may include snippets of actual language as well as metalinguistic comments, but are no less complete than constructed languages according to Cheyne (2008: 390-91). However, TV adaptations of novels such as *Game of Thrones* and *The Expanse* have shifted the emphasis from the created languages in the novels to constructed languages for extensive TV dialogue, e.g. in Dothraki (Peterson 2014, 2015).

This presentation will review and illustrate the how the “pragmatics of estrangement” (Adams 2017) are applied in creating fictional languages in fantastic film worlds. It will also offer a case study of the forms and functions of the Belter slang or Creole (Velupillai 2015) in James S.A. Corey's *Expanse* novels and trace its evolution to a constructed language in the TV series. As the underdogs in the fictional *Expanse* universe, the Belters are the only community with a dedicated created/constructed language, and their status as outcasts is supported as well as enhanced by the use of a language with its connotations of substandard, but also of solidarity.

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# **Navigating real-world challenges through fantasy: Linguistic perspectives on parasocial interactions and ASD in magical and galactic worlds**

**Veronika Mattová (Masaryk University)**

This study investigates the representation of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in telecinematic contexts and its implications for parasocial interactions, particularly for neurodivergent viewers. Characters like Spock from *Star Trek* and Luna Lovegood from *Harry Potter* exemplify traits associated with ASD, although overall representation remains limited. Expanding this field is essential, as representations can significantly affect sense of coherence (SOC) and societal support, enabling individuals to manage stress and thrive (Galletta et al., 2019).

Linguistic research by Goode and Robinson (2013) highlights how audience members adjust their language to align with TV characters, indicating the substantial influence of parasocial relationships on linguistic practices. Spock's logical reasoning and emotional detachment resonate with viewers who relate to such experiences, while Luna's unique perspectives challenge social norms, promoting empathy and understanding. Furthermore, ASD-coded characters like Sheldon Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory* and Drax from *Guardians of the Galaxy* demonstrate how their distinctive speech patterns and social bluntness create relatable connections for neurodivergent audiences (Danger, 2022).

In examining the character of Luna Lovegood, Nathan (2012) highlights five positive traits commonly associated with Asperger's Syndrome. By presenting Luna as a multifaceted character who embraces her differences, the narrative encourages audiences to appreciate neurodiversity and recognize the strengths that come with it. This representation plays a crucial role in enhancing the discourse surrounding mental health, as it offers viewers a chance to reflect on their experiences while promoting a more inclusive understanding of individuality in society.

These representations illustrate how telecinematic portrayals shape perceptions and foster connections with diverse characters. This research underscores the importance of ASD-coded portrayals within fantastic film worlds as a source of meaningful parasocial interaction, providing visibility and fostering a sense of belonging. By examining these dynamics, this study aims to enrich the discourse surrounding mental health representation in media.

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## Fantasy or truth? How films tell stories

Roberta Piazza (University of Sussex)

Films tell stories but what happens to the viewers' comprehension of the film (Tan 2018) if the film makes clear to the audience that they are being told a story? This talk reports on a multimodal study of cinematic discourse centring on forms of narration and different narrators, a topic that is not always taken into due account. However, it is indeed through the presence of an implicit or explicit, (un)reliable story-teller that the suspension of disbelief and the contract with the audience is built, confirmed or betrayed. The study centres on the relationship between language and images, which goes back to Barthes' work (Oxman 2010). Drawing on well-established models of reported discourse (Coulmas, 1986; Güldemann and von Roncador 2002), it aims to investigate possible realisations of how a story is cinematically told through someone's eyes. The study builds on the assumption that viewers are ratified overhearers and recipients totally engaged in a process of listening and viewing (Dynel 2011) deliberately designed for them. The theoretical framework draws on cognitive stylistics and text world theory (Lahely 2023), and a model of story-telling is proposed.

Three films represent the various categories in the model: *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar*, in which the reported discourse is extremely direct. *Nathalie* and its Hollywood version *Chloe* in which reported discourse is only realised at a verbal level and eventually betrayed at a visual level. *Nocturnal Animals* in which the story reported discourse is only realised at a visual level and the audience only see everything through the eyes of the protagonist who reads the source (a novel).

The textual investigation of the films is accompanied by a discussion of the results of a focus group talking about the members' cognitive impact of the films.

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# The language didactics of sci-fi and fantasy

Kerstin Richter (University of Regensburg)

Films set in fantastic worlds or futuristic settings almost always contain a variety of terms and names that have been especially coined to underline the films' exotic and outlandish character. Viewers with no prior knowledge of the franchises confront the director with the challenging task of introducing a variety of fictional neologisms in a clear and memorable way. This talk focuses on ways of "teaching" an audience new words and concepts through different approaches such as

- **Frequency** (Are words that are repeated over and over throughout the film more likely to be remembered or even actively used by the audience, and how can this be evaluated?)
- **Glossing** (Glossing refers to the way a word is explained or paraphrased, e.g. *Muggles* as 'non magic folk'. Are shorter or longer glosses more memorable? Does repeated glossing help? How are the films' semantic suggestions adapted or even developed further by the audience?)
- **Cinematic Linguistic Landscapes** (Are new words more memorable if they appear in written form?)
- **Adjacent Pair Discourse** (Frequently, the viewer's initial ignorance is mirrored by a character from the film who is accompanied by an omniscient mentor, e.g. Hagrid introducing Harry Potter to the magical world. Can the viewer profit from and identify with "student – teacher interactions" from the film?)
- **Screen Time** (Are long pauses after the introduction of a new word affecting memorability?)
- **Audio-Visual Effects** (Does the introduction of a new word combined with powerful visual effects and sound add more cognitive force?)

and various combinations thereof.

Examples from the films *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977), *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979), *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001) will be discussed.

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# What's in a Disney movie? A comparison of language in the Grimms' fairy tales and their animated adaptations

**Christina Sanchez-Stockhammer, Cansu Akan, Sasha Coelho, Marina Beccard**  
**(TU Chemitz)**

When people have a conversation about fairy tales, they very often move on to discussing movie adaptations by Walt Disney Animation Studios. This is because feature films like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) or *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) are cherished by several generations and have become classics in their own right. But to what extent does the language in those movies reflect the original spoken passages from the fairy tales collected by the brothers Grimm in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? And since the fairy tale collection *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* was first published in German and has been translated into English several times, is it possible to determine which of the alternative translations was used as the basis for the dialogues in the classic Disney adaptations?

To answer these questions, we first created a (highly specific) corpus of fairy-tale dialogues by extracting the spoken language from the fairy tales *Sneewittchen* (*Snow-White*), *Dornröschen* (*Sleeping Beauty*) and *Rapunzel* in the Grimms' original 1812/15 publication and the now most widespread German 1857 version as well as various English translations (e.g. by Margaret Hunt and Lucy Crane). We then procured the subtitles of the animated Disney movies *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and *Tangled* (2010) in both English and German. Since the Disney adaptation of *Cinderella* (1950) is based on Charles Perrault's version of the fairy tale, this movie was not considered in the analyses.

Following the method used in Sanchez-Stockhammer (2020), we conducted a qualitative manual comparison of the spoken language from the Disney films with the language of the printed fairy tales and carried out n-gram searches of relevant word combinations in *Google Books Ngram Viewer* (Michel et al.) to determine diachronic developments and trace the process of conventionalisation in mainstream English.

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# **The use and function of ‘foreign’ languages and accented English in fantastic film and television**

**Catherine Sangster (Oxford University Press)**

I propose a talk offering a sociolinguistic analysis of the use of real-world languages and accented English in fantastic film and television, considering both the choices of filmmakers / showrunners and the experiences of audiences. How, and why, is the choice made to use real languages, as opposed to invented / constructed languages, as stand-ins for fantastic or alien languages, and what is the impact of this choice? To explore this, I will consider the examples of Mandarin Chinese in *Firefly* / *Serenity* and of Latin for magical language in multiple settings, but focus in particular on the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*’s creators’ use of Xhosa for spoken Wakandan (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Black Panther*) and Serbian for written Sokovian (*Captain America: Civil War*).

How accurately are these languages used in their fantastic settings? Does this matter? What assumptions do creators make about their audiences’ linguistic competence and identity? Here I will draw on an interview I conducted with Sarah Shepherd, who worked as a dialect coach on several MCU films.

The relative merits of using real-world languages versus constructed languages (such as Dothraki in *Game of Thrones* or Parseltongue in *Harry Potter*) will be considered, alongside the third option, as chosen by *Star Wars*, of using no fully structured language at all but rather creating the impression of alien language with what Ben Zimmer calls “sonic pastiche”. The use and function of accented English in fantastic films will also be considered, with particular reference to two MCU characters who speak Sokovian-accented English, Wanda Maximoff / Scarlet Witch (Elizabeth Olsen) and Helmut Zemo / Baron Zemo (Daniel Brühl).

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# Anticipating the monster: Suspenseful dialogue in the horror film series *The Conjuring*

Christoph Schubert (University of Vechta)

In the horror genre, a key ingredient of audience entertainment is suspense, which is fundamentally caused by the anticipation of monstrous narrative developments (Schubert 2025). In particular, a full arc of suspense relies on the linear succession of the three steps of expectation, delay, and resolution (Bennett and Royle 2016) and is prompted by an insinuated threat combined with a lack of information (Fill 2007). From a psychological vantage point, the creation of suspense is associated with the cognitive components of conflict, uncertainty, and a high emotional significance of the expected perils (Lehne and Koelsch 2015). In pragma-stylistic terms, holding back desired information can be considered as a blatant non-observation of the conversational maxim of quantity (Grice 1975). While the visual mode in telecinematic discourse plays a pivotal role in the depiction of frightening creatures, utterances by characters serve to raise expectations of horrific plot developments. Accordingly, the present study combines narratological, psychological, and pragma-stylistic approaches in order to explore linguistic techniques in film dialogue that contribute to suspense generation.

The paper offers a qualitative linguistic analysis of the four tremendously successful films in the recent horror series *The Conjuring*, released between 2013 and 2025 by Warner Bros. Pictures. These movies are particularly suitable for investigating verbal suspense since they recount supernatural events involving fantastic phenomena such as haunted objects, spiritual entities, and demonic possession, which are explored by the paranormal investigators Lorraine and Ed Warren. As will be demonstrated, for instance, informational gaps can be triggered in inter-character dialogue by the cataphoric use of semantically open pronouns as well as by general nouns such as *thing* or *presence*. At the level of speech acts, an anticipation of evil can be evoked by unanswered questions and ominous announcements of future violence. In semantic terms, expressions of epistemic modality such as modal verbs have the capacity of foreshadowing possible and probable dangers. In sum, such linguistic devices constitute a tight-knit web of suspenseful strategies that greatly contribute to the appeal of thrilling feature films.

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## Evaluating truth in discourse on *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, *Game of Thrones*, and other fantastic worlds

### Squid Tamar-Mattis (Yale University)

My work explores the interaction between language *in* fantastic films, and language *about* those films. In real life, we can make statements about the real world (1), which we evaluate using various sensory methods, and statements about fictional worlds (2), which we evaluate using the text and a presumption of similarity to the real world (Lewis 1978). We can also construct upward (3) and downward (4) referential cross-world sentences (Cook 2017).

- (1) Mark Hamill was interviewed on CBS.
- (2) Luke Skywalker is a Jedi.
- (3) Luke Skywalker was interviewed on CBS.
- (4) **Mark Hamill** is a Jedi.

Only (2) would be sensible if uttered by a character in a *Star Wars* film. This is because fictional characters (possibly excepting those that break the fourth wall) lack any kind of access to the real world. Meanwhile, only (1) is true in the real world on a literal reading, but (2-4) are still felicitous to a listener familiar with *Star Wars*, because the presence of a known fantastic concept (*Jedi*) or fictional character (*Luke Skywalker*) makes the relevant fictional world salient. Using data from conversations about *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, and *Game of Thrones*, as well as the video game *Disco Elysium* and role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, I argue for an asymmetric semantic analysis that uses a single silent operator, which I label FICT (5), that can generate either upward or downward sentences, depending on its syntactic position. This allows us to account for various asymmetries in how cross-world phenomena interact with predicate coordination and gendered pronouns.

- (5) FICT = $\lambda^P\langle e, \langle s, i \rangle \rangle. \lambda x. \lambda w. \exists y [\text{PLAYS}(y)(x)(w) \wedge P(y)(w')]$

FICT also has non-trivial interactions with morphosyntactic tense and aspect in discourse on stories that are told non-linearly. These interactions range from relatively simple (regarding, e.g., the nonchronological release of *Star Wars*) to maddeningly complex (anything with time travel). The results have significant implications for adjacent phenomena, like dream reports (Percus and Sauerland 2003), for the morphosyntactic representation of gender, and for questions about what constitutes truth in a fictional world.

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## **Stereotypes, humour, and exoticising: Finnish, Hebrew, and Yiddish in fantastic film and TV**

**Riitta-Liisa Valijärvi (University College London and Uppsala University)**  
**Lily Kahn (University College London)**

The purpose of this presentation is to analyse the role of Finnish, Hebrew, and Yiddish in Englishmedium fantastic films and TV shows. These three languages have been chosen because they all have relatively small speaker populations combined with a long history of inspiring linguistic content in imagined worlds. For example, J.R.R. Tolkien's Elvish language was based partly on Finnish, while Klingon in *Star Trek* contains Yiddish-origin words and Hebrew is often featured in connection with mysticism and supernatural powers, as in Frank Herbert's *Dune* series.

Our key theoretical concepts alongside estrangement are national/ethnic stereotyping, insider vs outsider humour, and exoticising/othering. Our data consist of a corpus of English-medium films and TV shows from the past 50 years (1974-2024), including *Blazing Saddles* (1974), *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986), *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), *Family Guy* (1999-present), *The Mummy* (1999), *Futurama* (2000-present), *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), *His Dark Materials* (2019-2022), *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm* (2020), and *Only Murders in the Building* (2021-present). We examine the linguistic and audiovisual content of the relevant scenes or episodes.

Our analysis shows that Finnish is employed in two primary ways, each facilitated by the stereotypes associated with Finns. First, a Finnish side character symbolises morbid oddity or humorous silliness. This character has a pseudo-Finnish name but speaks in an accent that is not Finnish, often a Russian, Swedish, or German one. Second, Finnish speech is associated with ice, snow, and attractiveness. This includes Arctic whale hunters in *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* and sex workers in *Blade Runner 2049*. In this category a group of characters speak Finnish to each other, but their Finnishness is not highlighted.

Hebrew and Yiddish serve three functions. First, they tend to act as a secret in-group code concealed in the guise of a different language, e.g. Hebrew masquerading as Kazakh in *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm* or Native Americans speaking Yiddish in *Blazing Saddles*. The surreal contrast between the ostensible and actual language creates a humorous effect accessible only to insiders. Second, they appear in obviously Jewish contexts, in which they function both as a marker of cultural otherness for general audiences and also as another opportunity for insider humour, e.g. the robot bar mitzvah in *Futurama*. Third, Hebrew can be used to represent an exoticised Ancient Near Eastern language, as in *The Mummy*.

Our analysis thus shows that all three languages symbolise exotic otherness for English-speaking viewers. Finnish is most commonly used as a marker of nihilism, eccentricity, pan-Arctic stereotypes, and sexiness/attractiveness. By contrast, Hebrew and Yiddish often provide in-group humour for a small subsection of the audience.

## **Building a corpus of fantastic movies for the exploration of gendered telecinematic discourse: Issues and challenges**

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While the compilation and annotation of written and spoken corpora has been discussed extensively since the emergence of quantitative approaches in linguistics (e.g. Ädel, 2021), the idiosyncrasies of telecinematic dialogue have rarely been taken into account (but see, for instance, Bednarek, 2020), especially for languages other than English. This paper aims to fill this gap by focussing specifically on challenges involved in i) selecting and accessing audiovisual products and dialogue in particular via subtitle databases, scripts, and transcripts; ii) manually or automatically transcribing TV or movie dialogue; and iii) annotating a corpus of telecinematic language for the age and gender of the fictional characters. Based on insights from the process of building a corpus of Polish fantastic movies spanning several decades (comprising almost 100 thousand words transcribed from approx. 25 hours of film), created for the purpose of a larger project exploring representations of gendered actors in telecinematic discourse, it is argued that dialogue in audiovisual products depicting alternative realities presents its own set of challenges with respect to each of the above-listed stages of corpus creation, which might differ from those posed by movies or shows set in more familiar, realistic universes. This is discussed in particular with respect to the annotation for gender and what it might reveal about the potential of fantastic genres to “explore (and explode) our assumptions about “innate” values and “natural” social arrangements” (Russ, as cited in Lefanu, 1989, p. 13) regarding gender roles, prior to the proper linguistic analysis.

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