Linguistic Science and Science Fiction

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http://www.umich.edu/~jlawler/valhallaconpanel.pdf

ValhallaCon ’09

Language in Science Fiction

The Language Construction Kit
http://www.zompist.com/kit.html

This set of webpages (what's a set of webpages? a webchapter?) is intended for anyone who wants to create artificial languages--for a fantasy or an alien world, as a hobby, as an interlanguage. It presents linguistically sound methods for creating naturalistic languages--which can be reversed to create non-naturalistic languages. It suggests further reading for those who want to know more, and shortcuts for those who want to know less.

--Mark Rosenfelder

http://xkcd.com/483


The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language, The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language (Both by David Crystal, each 1-vol pb. Contain everything one needs to know about the subjects.)

Blogs: Tenser, said the Tensor, Language Hat, Arnold Zwicky, Language Log

The LINGUIST List and the Ethnologue are the best general online linguistic resources to start with

Linguistics in Science Fiction

Suzette Haden Elgin: Linguist and SF writer (Native Tongue, Ozark trilogy, Coyote Jones series) Publishes a newsletter about Linguistics in/and SF. Check out “We Have Always Spoken Panglish”.

Lists of Science Fiction Books which feature linguistics or linguists

• a list from LINGUIST
• a list from Maggie Browning, at Princeton
• syllabus from a Linguistics and Science Fiction course at the University of Florida
Some human language phenomena  (and I’m not even mentioning Metaphor!)

Lushootseed (Skagit dialect):

tq'tqʔáč ‘Vine maple (Acer circinatum)’
  Root tq'áq ‘(to) split, separate’ Suffix -ʔáč ‘tree or bush’
  CVC- root reduplication: Augmentative/Plural ‘all split up’ (cf č’áč č’áč ‘rocks’ < č’áč ‘rock’)
  ‘The all-split-up tree’
ju-jubʔalikʷ-ʔáč ‘Pine tree’ (Pinus spp)
  Root jub ‘(to) kick’ + Suffix -ʔalikʷ ‘act in a conventional fashion’
  = jubʔalikʷ ‘(to) dance’ (cf padʔalikʷ ‘(to) farm’ < root pad ‘(to) plant’)
  CV- root reduplication: Diminutive/Attentuated ‘dance a little bit’
  ‘The dance-a-little-bit tree’
qájat-áb ‘be (a) Skagit (person)’ qájat-áb-čət ‘We are Skagit(s)’
duhóbaš-áb ‘be (a) Snohomish (person)’ duhóbaš-áb-čəxʷ ‘You are Snohomish’
q-qájat-áb ‘speak Skagit’ q-qájat-áb-čəlap ‘You folks speak Skagit’
d-duhóbaš-áb ‘speak Snohomish’ d-duhóbaš-áb-tiʔit ‘He speaks Snohomish’
  C- root reduplication: [applies to group name only] ‘speak (like a) _____’
gʷat ‘be who?’ gʷat-čəxʷ ‘Who are you?’
ʔəxid ‘be how?’ ʔəx-ʔəxid-ćiʔit ‘How is she? ’
Prefix ʔə- ‘temporary condition’

Malay (Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Malaysia, Bahasa Melayu):

benar ‘correct’ kental ‘thick (of liquid)’ betul ‘true’
ke-benar-an ‘correctness’ ke-kental-an ‘coagulation’ ke-betul-an ‘by coincidence’
hati ‘liver’ ke-hati-hat-an ‘care, caution’ mem-per-hatik-an ‘to pay attention to’
bilang ‘[1] to say; [2] every’ Apa dia bilang? ‘What did he say?’ bilang hari ‘every day’
matahari ‘(the) sun’ [lit ‘eye of day’] orang utan ‘orangutang’ [lit ‘jungle person’]

Ergativity (found widely in Basque, Caucasian, and Australian languages, among others)

In this system of grammatical relation marking, the “object” of a transitive sentence (e.g, They saw him) and the “subject” of an intransitive sentence (e.g, He sat there) are both marked the same way, in the Absolutive case, while the “subject” of a transitive sentence gets marked differently, in the Ergative case. Sometimes pronouns are marked as in English, but all nouns are marked with an Ergative system.

English has a little of this in some compounds; everybody knows that employer and employee are complementary, but what about the –ee suffix in transportee, parolee, and escapee, for example? These are all Absolutive nouns, either subjects of intransitive verbs like escape, or objects of transitive verbs like transport or parole with indefinite subjects. But most European languages use a different system (the Accusative system) which marks subjects and objects differently no matter what verb they’re used with.

Noun Classes (often called “Gender”, this is really a categorization system for nouns, and concepts)

English has no noun gender, Spanish and French have two genders, German and Latin three, Swedish a different three, and Polish four. Bantu languages, however, typically have ten to twenty noun classes, sorted not by sex but by meaning category. Examples from Swahili:

Trees: [sg] m-limau, [pl] mi-limau ‘lemon tree’; m-ti, mi-ti ‘tree’; m-witu, mi-itu ‘forest’
Fruit: limau, ma-limau ‘lemon’; pera, ma-era ‘guava’ People: m-tu, wa-tu ‘person’;
m-zee, wa-zee ‘old person’; m-toto, wa-toto ‘child’; m-wana, wa-ana ‘son/daughter’