

THE ROLE OF THE LINGUIST-AMBASSADOR IN METALINGUISTIC SCIENCE
FICTION

By

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To my Dad, who kept me going,
my Mom, who kept me sane, and my brother, who kept it real.

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In this thesis, I apply Benjamin Whorf's theory of linguistic relativity (the idea that language shapes thought and therefore perception) to the specialized genre of metalinguistic science fiction in order to examine the various manifestations of a rapidly evolving figure that I call the linguist-ambassador. Central to novels that use a fictitious language or languages to alienate characters from each other and readers from the text, the linguist-ambassador functions as the sole link between opposing cultures whose native speakers are automatically blinded to worldviews other than their own. However, just as fluency in multiple languages grants the linguist-ambassador a unique understanding of multiple social realities, it also deprives him or her of a cohesive identity, for true comprehension of the alien comes only with a literal translation of Self into Other, and thus language, as the author of reality, literally *rewrites* the linguist-ambassador within the context of alien cultures even as he or she works to bring the individual members of such cultures to mutual understanding.

Because this resulting identity crisis can be resolved only when the character chooses to accept, reject, or transcend the "revisions" to his or her identity, the majority of my analysis focuses upon three works whose complex intercultural and intrapersonal dynamics demonstrate

the consequences of each of these choices: Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Gordon R. Dickson's *Way of the Pilgrim*, and Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17*, respectively.

CHAPTER 1 LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY WITHIN SCIENCE FICTION

The linguist Benjamin Whorf once commented, “We swim in language as fish swim in water,” and within this deceptively simple statement lies a startling realization: just as fish would perish without water, so too would human cultures shrivel and die without the myriad languages that define, reinscribe, and ultimately maintain their existence. We are only human because we say we are; to declare it is to make it so, and we have become so accustomed to processing the world around us with these enigmatic things called “words” that we often look right through them to the reality beyond, never quite realizing that what we see depends entirely upon what we say. And just as the words we choose instantly alter our perspective, so too does the language we speak define our social reality and separate us psychologically from speakers of other languages, thus rendering us alien to each other.

Nowhere is the interplay between language, thought, and reality so vividly expressed as in the realm of science fiction, for just as multilingual individuals are privileged with the ability to identify, comprehend, and overcome the differences inherent in conflicting linguistic systems, so too must multilingual SF protagonists straddle the boundary between human and alien and translate one into terms that the other can understand. And whether the “alien” is represented as a person of an alternative culture or as someone literally not human, it is the SF author’s adherence to Whorf’s ideas that ultimately allows the protagonist to bridge the linguistic gap between mutually unintelligible realities. As Carl Malmgren astutely observes, “In a relatively few science fictions, an invented language becomes *the* narrative dominant ... [and] these fictions necessarily investigate the nature of language, the relation of language and reality, and the possibilities of linguistic otherness” (4). Such stories typically fall into two groups: those that deal with multilingual dynamics on a cultural scale and those that examine the effects of

such dynamics upon a multilingual protagonist whom I will call the “linguist-ambassador.” Following an overview of Benjamin Whorf’s principle of linguistic relativity, I will examine the *intercultural* focus of stories belonging to the first group (“A Martian Odyssey,” 1984, and *The Languages of Pao*) to lay the groundwork for the *interpersonal* focus of stories belonging to the second group (“A Rose for Ecclesiastes,” *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *Way of the Pilgrim*, and *Babel-17*), and I will demonstrate the growing prominence of the linguist-ambassador as a literary figure within science fiction and examine the ways in which various linguist-ambassadors negotiate the conflicting linguistic realities that influence their conception of themselves as human, alien, or something in between.

The idea that language shapes reality is central to the principle of linguistic relativity, which reflects the work of several linguists but was primarily developed by Whorf in the late 1930s. Drawing upon the assertion of his mentor, Edward Sapir, that “no two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality,” Whorf uses his own studies of Native American languages—and the Hopi language in particular—to elaborate considerably upon this concept (qtd. in Foley 193). For example, he comments upon the temporal differences inherent in Hopi grammar and speculates that because Hopi time “varies with each observer, does not permit of simultaneity, and has zero dimensions,” a physics based upon this particular linguistic system would therefore have to function “without recourse to dimensional time” and would lack such fundamental concepts (from an English-speaker’s perspective) as time, velocity, and acceleration (qtd. in Meyers 161-162). Using the conceptual assumptions of Hopi to develop a more generalized principle, he comes to the conclusion that “users of markedly different grammars are pointed... toward different types of observations... and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the

world” (qtd. in Foley 192). Deliberately mirroring the wording of Einstein’s theory of relativity, Whorf’s statement asserts that reality is only as “real” as the language used to define it (i.e., the “position” of the speaker doing the defining). Because each linguistic system contains automatic assumptions about the nature of the world, a native speaker of a given language must automatically adopt a corresponding worldview in order to make use of the language, and each succeeding utterance only serves to reinscribe that particular “reality” upon the mind of the speaker.

Despite its popularity, Whorf’s principle of linguistic relativity has endured much criticism since the late 1930s. The chief objection of many linguists revolves around the imprecision of Whorf’s wording, specifically regarding the concept of multiple “worlds” created via multiple languages. As Michael Devitt and Kim Sterelny are at pains to point out, “It is plausible to claim that our minds, concepts, and languages construct theories out of experience. It is wildly implausible to claim that our minds, concepts, and languages construct the world out of experience. Imposition on experience is one thing, imposition on the world is another” (249). However, I am inclined to believe that these particular critics interpret Whorf’s principle much too literally and should instead read “worlds” to mean “worldviews” or “social realities.” While there may exist one objective (and perhaps unknowable) physical reality in which all cultures reside, the Whorfian principle that different languages result in different *perceptions* of that reality should not be dismissed because of a slight ambiguity on his part.

Whorf’s most precisely worded explanation of the principle supports this interpretation and can be found in the April 1940 issue of “Science and Linguistics,” in which he states: “All observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated” (qtd. in Meyers 161).

My argument focuses on this very “calibration,” for given that speakers of different languages live in distinctly different worlds—or at least operate with distinctly different understandings of the *same* world—their very dependence upon their native language to articulate and even generate thought renders them blind to the ways in which language controls what thoughts can and cannot form. Thus, the average native speakers of any language are more aptly termed “naïve speakers,” uncritical and indeed unknowing of the biases to which their linguistic system disposes them, and it is only when such speakers come in contact with the fundamental differences of another linguistic system that they can begin to identify and critique the cultural biases inherent in their own. Such realizations occur quite frequently during the process of second language acquisition, but without that stark contrast between languages, monolingual speakers who persist in looking *through* language rather than *at* it will fail to perceive the profound effect that language structure has upon the thoughts with which we construct our own personal realities. As Penny Lee states, “Calibration [in the Whorfian sense] involves paying close attention to language in use and also negotiating meanings... Although we cannot totally escape the linguistic organization of our understanding of experience, we can certainly free ourselves to an interesting degree from the constraints of a single, [un]examined native language” (Putz 49).

Unfortunately, because the achievement of such freedom requires a conscious analysis of different linguistic systems, the “constraints of a single, unexamined native language” tend to remain unexamined by naïve speakers whose belief in the transparency of language prevents them from realizing the myriad cultural assumptions inherent in the structure of any language. And given the absence of a second language with which to sensitize the monolingual speaker to linguistic differences, the most accessible approach to metalinguistic criticism lies within the

realm of science fiction, for although most SF and fantasy writers stop short of creating actual languages (J.R.R. Tolkien being a notable exception), their more sophisticated attempts to employ the principle of linguistic relativity concentrate primarily upon bringing those “transparent” aspects of language into focus and compelling the reader to consider language itself rather than simply seeing through it to the story beyond. A prime example of this dynamic can be found in Gerd Brantenberg’s *Egalia’s Daughters: A Satire of the Sexes* (1977), for although the novel’s sole claim to the title of science fiction is in its elaborate portrayal of an alternative human society rather than in the presence of little green men or bug-eyed monsters, it provides an astute social commentary on the male-oriented conventions of language by literally reversing a plethora of gender-specific labels to favor the female instead. Confronted with strange words such as “wom” and “manwom” that replace the customary “woman” and “man,” the reader must stumble to a halt and consider the reasoning behind such ostensibly awkward terms, and thus the very *wording* of the story becomes a metalinguistic commentary upon the biases in society, forcing the acknowledgment that Brantenberg’s references to “sheroism” and “mafeles” are no more arbitrary than the “real” words upon which they are based and merely seek to strip the naïveté from native speakers.

SF authors’ singular preoccupation with creating unique conceptual universes renders the principle of linguistic relativity a tool of their trade, and thus the true masters have been hailed not only for the strangeness of their stories, but for the strangeness of their *language*: the strategic juxtaposition of deceptively normal terms to create a decidedly abnormal effect. Robert A. Heinlein’s brief phrase, “the door dilated,” has become the classic example of this literary technique and has garnered admiration from a variety of prominent SF writers. Harlan Ellison’s effusive response to this neat trick of language not only identifies the scope of Heinlein’s

linguistic skill but also encapsulates the spirit in which such subtle methods of worldbuilding should be recognized and appreciated:

...Heinlein has always managed to indicate the greater strangeness of a culture with the most casually dropped-in reference: the first time in a novel, I believe it was in *Beyond This Horizon*, that a character came through a door that... dilated. And no discussion. Just: "The door dilated." I read across it, and was two lines down before I realized what the image had been, what the words had called forth. A *dilating* door. It didn't open, it *irised!* Dear God, now I knew I was in a future world... (qtd. in Delany, *Jewel-Hinged Jaw* 46)

Thus, as with Egalia's Daughters, the practiced reader must stop to consider language not just as the means to create a narrative, but as an end in itself: a sly entity determined to interject its own thoughts and opinions between every printed word. For a "word" is just one letter short of a "world," and the most skilled of SF writers know that the realization of entire universes lies in the space between one word and the next, where our culturally ingrained expectations clash with the strategic linguistic rendering of the strange and the alien.

CHAPTER 2 METALINGUISTIC SCIENCE FICTION: WRITING SOCIAL REALITIES

The clever literary technique of alienating language in order to conjure a sense of the alien appears in several notable science fiction stories, and although the majority of my analysis will focus upon the ways in which the linguist-ambassador negotiates the shifting borders between human and alien cultures, I will first engage in a broader examination of the complex linguistic realities through which such characters must navigate. Instrumental to this initial discussion are Stanley G. Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey," George Orwell's *1984*, and Jack Vance's *The Languages of Pao*, all of which provide a comprehensive illustration of the various ways in which the principle of linguistic relativity can impact the dynamics of a fictional universe. And whether these stories use individuals to represent larger social realities (as does Weinbaum's story) or examine the psychological effects of language upon entire societies (as do the novels of Orwell and Vance), it is clear that they represent an increasingly sophisticated use of Whorfian concepts to bring multiple realities into being (and often into conflict) within the space of a few well-chosen words.

"A Martian Odyssey" (1934) displays great linguistic sophistication for its time, for despite the author's arrogant assumption that humans have an innate right to exploit alien (read "foreign") cultures, Weinbaum demonstrates a remarkable sensitivity to the intricacies of intercultural communication and conflicting linguistic perspectives. Outlining a human's first encounter with the various aliens of Mars, Weinbaum speaks to his readers through the voice of his main character, Dick Jarvis, who is in turn telling his companions of his adventures with the benevolent alien named Tweel. Although Jarvis's narrative uses the typical adventure-story format of early science fiction, Weinbaum's consistent focus upon language as a major plot component renders this particular story a sophisticated exploration of communication for its

time, as well as an astute examination of the negotiations that take place on the border between human and alien.

Indeed, the alien Tweel personifies that very border, for although he can never be completely understood in human terms, he nonetheless seems infinitely more human to Jarvis than the more predatory Martian inhabitants whose incomprehensible natures render them immutably Other. This interplay between degrees of Otherness is directly addressed when Jarvis, touched by Tweel's offer of defense against these incredibly alien aliens, blurts in relief, "Thanks, Tweel. You're a man!" (82). And although Jarvis can never quite grasp the fundamentals of Tweel's language, the ingenious alien can sometimes compensate for Jarvis's difficulties by using his smattering of English to convey complex ideas in the space of a few simple (and to him, *alien*) words, thus demonstrating that some communication is possible between two such vastly different entities. For example, having learned the words to express basic mathematical concepts ("one-one-two"), Tweel proceeds to use these same words to convey a remarkable variety of abstract ideas. "One-one-two" thus becomes his standard term for intelligence, and when used in combination with various English pronouns, the phrase allows him to identify many of the creatures they encounter. As Jarvis later marvels, "In a single phrase he told me that one [alien] was a harmless automaton and the other a deadly hypnotist" (77).

But despite the characters' sudden flashes of understanding, Weinbaum tempers his optimistic view of intercultural relations with the knowledge that just as some basic concepts (e.g., survival and friendship) can be conveyed despite mutually unintelligible linguistic systems, other ideas depend entirely upon the language in which they are conceived and thus remain untranslatable. As Jarvis explains to his companions, "We just didn't *think* alike," and even his

friends' periodic interjections and requests for clarification indicate the distinct "alienness" that exists between fellow humans who speak different languages:

"I was just about to turn in when I heard the wildest sort of shenanigans!" [said Jarvis].

"Vot iss shenanigans?" inquired Putz.

"He says, 'Je ne sais quoi,'" explained Leroy. "It is to say, 'I don't know what.'"

"That's right," agreed Jarvis. "I didn't know what, so I sneaked over to find out." (68)

Clearly, some mutual understanding is achieved, but only by fallacious means; Leroy's French definition has nothing to do with the English word "shenanigans" but luckily conveys Jarvis's fundamental meaning despite its inaccuracy. Weinbaum's strategic insertions of such exchanges into the narrative allow him to demonstrate the difficulties of translation in purely human terms and permit him to leave the majority of the miscommunications between Jarvis and Tweel unclarified, thus emphasizing the two characters' mutual strangeness and forcing the reader to experience the vacillation between frustration and satisfaction that always accompanies the lengthy trial-and-error method of communication. In accordance with this dynamic, even the relatively simple business of exchanging names becomes a source of confusing ambiguity, for as Jarvis later complains to his comrades, "I was always "Tick," but as for him—part of the time he was "Tweel," and part of the time he was "P-p-p-proot," and part of the time he was sixteen other noises! We just couldn't connect" (69). Thus Weinbaum's scenario represents an admirable exploration of rudimentary communication between cultures even as it emphasizes the limitations inherent in a meeting of two such alien minds.

Insightful as "A Martian Odyssey" is for its time, it does not possess the sophisticated understanding of linguistic principles demonstrated by George Orwell's famous 1984 (1949), for his dystopian society functions according to a very sinister interpretation of linguistic relativity and in fact takes Whorf's basic theory to its logical extreme, positing that if thought is bound by

the limitations of the language in which it is expressed, then the deliberate engineering of a severely curtailed language will reduce its speakers' ability to think and thus render them more easily controlled. As Walter E. Meyers elegantly states, "The Whorf hypothesis has a corollary: if it is true that our language determines our perception of reality, then whoever controls language controls the perception of reality as well" (163). Thus the truly insidious nature of "Newspeak," Ingsoc's calculated butchery of the English language, resides in its steadily shrinking vocabulary and its failure to provide the words necessary for the concepts of rebellion and individual will. As a Newspeak lexicographer eagerly tells Winston, Orwell's initially rebellious protagonist, "Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? ... Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller" (46). In Orwell's world, as in our own, the language available dictates the thoughts that its speakers can form, and therefore the greatest danger to the perpetuation of Ingsoc's version of reality is its citizens' continued fluency in "Oldspeak," the original English.

Some critics perceive the troublesome presence of Oldspeak to indicate a flaw in the reasoning behind Orwell's linguistic construction, contending (quite rightly) that no matter how small the Newspeak dictionary might become, it cannot possibly "change the meaning of a word or prevent a change in meaning that the mass of speakers have set in motion" (Meyers 164). However, I would contend that despite Winston's final acceptance of Ingsoc Party doctrine, Orwell's philosophical point is in fact in agreement with the convictions of such critics, since the very existence of the English-speaking proles guarantees the perpetuation of their language and consequently of their perception of reality. Indeed, Winston's desperate confession in the forbidden pages of his journal, "If there is hope it lies in the proles," suggests that the use of Oldspeak among the essentially apolitical lower classes indicates a linguistically-based trend of

separation within the Party-dominated society (60). Newspeak *does* “contain the weaknesses that will lead to its eventual collapse,” but this, I believe, betrays a hint of optimism in the midst of Orwell’s dystopian misery rather than a fundamental flaw in the creation of his world (Meyers 164). A society so linguistically conflicted could never achieve seamless unity beneath the mindless reality perpetuated by Newspeak, and therefore, despite Winston’s final defeat at the hands of Big Brother and the continued existence of Ingsoc, even the seemingly problematic functions of Oldspeak within the novel remain true to the principle of linguistic relativity.

Even as the intellectually crippling effects of Newspeak within Orwell’s dystopia demonstrate the author’s shrewd application of linguistic principles to complex social structures, the philosophical dichotomy represented by Newspeak and Oldspeak remains far too simplistic to allow for any extensive experimentation with developing cultural values; and indeed, this was not Orwell’s primary intention. His linguistic commentary serves the sole purpose of facilitating the realization of his society’s *political* objectives and therefore does not extend to a detailed examination of how a language like Newspeak might transform that same society.

For a more thorough extrapolation of the long-term social and psychological impact of competing linguistic systems, it is best to turn to Jack Vance’s novel *The Languages of Pao* (1958), for in this particular story, the author eagerly embraces the principle of linguistic relativity and makes it the foundation upon which the entire plot is based. Indeed, Vance manages to sidestep even the theoretical problems that Orwell’s critics observed with the ubiquitous presence of Oldspeak, for Vance’s novel successfully incorporates the influence of *his* society’s original language (Paonese) into the fundamental tenets of linguistic relativity while simultaneously exploring the effects of four specifically engineered languages upon the largely homogeneous society of Pao.

Hailed as “an exposition of dynamic linguistics,” *The Languages of Pao* represents a fascinating interpretation of linguistic relativity and a sincere attempt to explore the ramifications of the principle’s application on an invented society, for Vance’s familiarity with the Whorfian hypothesis manifests itself in the novel in the form of a megalomaniacal “wizard” named Palafox who, in order to overthrow Pao’s despotic ruler, proposes to divide the culture into speakers of three artificially engineered languages (Cogitant, Technicant, and Valiant), thus transforming the blandly passive Paonese into intellectuals, engineers, and soldiers, respectively, and creating a multi-faceted culture desirous of regaining its own independence (Barnes 163). Thus the true driving force of the novel is language itself; each specific linguistic system that Vance creates becomes a character in its own right, reflecting a highly specialized worldview and dictating both the philosophy and the behavior of its speakers.

Yet long before this “master plan” becomes clear, the author takes pains to establish the close relationship between linguistic structure and cultural perspective and even goes so far as to employ a variety of deliberately pedantic footnotes in order to lend his world a degree of authenticity that cannot be achieved by narration alone. The most convincing example of this faux-academic technique occurs during a meeting between Paonese royalty and the offworld traders known as Mercantil, for Vance’s simulated translation of the Paonese statement, “There are two matters I wish to discuss with you,” and of the Mercantil reply, “I am at your orders, sir,” vividly demonstrates the psychological assumptions inherent in the way each language reflects a specific cultural reality. As Vance notes for the reader’s benefit:

The Paonese and Mercantil languages were as disparate as the two ways of living... [T]he statement, “There are two matters I wish to discuss with you,” used words which, accurately rendered, would read: *Statement of importance* (a single word in Paonese)—*in a state of readiness*—two; ear—of Mercantil—*in a state of readiness*; mouth—of this person here—*in a state of volition*. The italicized words represent suffixes of condition....

The Mercantil express themselves in neat quanta of precise information. “I am at your orders, sir.” Literally translated this is: *I-Ambassador-here-now gladly-obey the just-spoken-orders of-you-Supreme-Royalty-here-now heard and understood.* (10)

From this brief explanation, it is clear that the Paonese worldview of passivity and respect for the *status quo* finds its roots in the grammatical structure of the Paonese language, which articulates every concrete object and abstract idea as existing in a specific *state of being*. This contrasts greatly with the Mercantil trader’s briskly efficient and dynamic reply and provides an excellent explanation for why the Paonese remain contentedly upon their home planet while the Mercantil move aggressively between star systems. And it is the linguistic principle behind this characterization of Paonese as “a passive, dispassionate language” with “docile, passive” speakers that allows Palafox to implement his daring plan for social change; for whereas Paonese renders “The farmer chops down a tree” as an unchanging relationship between states of being, Palafox’s new war-language of Valiant reconfigures the same concepts according to the basic principles of conflict: “The farmer overcomes the inertia of the axe; the axe breaks asunder the resistance of the tree... The farmer vanquishes the tree, using the weapon-instrument of the axe” (Vance 77). Limited to such a bellicose manner of expression, native (naïve) speakers of Valiant have no choice but to adopt a correspondingly bellicose view of the world; in short, they become a race of conquerors.

An identical rationale governs Palafox’s creation of Technicant, the language of industry, and of Cogitant, the language of intellectuals. The strategic introduction of the three languages and the new worldviews they represent completely revolutionize the planet of Pao and transforms its bland homogeneity into four separate societies: the engineers, the academics, the warriors, and the now-traditional (and greatly outnumbered) Paonese. For unlike Orwell, Vance actively develops the continuing influence of the Paonese “Oldspeak,” as it were, even as he works to incorporate the other three languages into the overall society; indeed, he deliberately

creates a rising tension between speakers of the original Paonese and those of Palafox's linguistic inventions, thus acknowledging the fact that even with such a seamlessly executed plan for linguistic change, the psychological influences of the original language cannot be entirely eliminated. Only with the introduction of a fifth language, Pastiche, (a deliberate combination of Paonese, Technicant, Cogitant, Valiant, and several offworld languages) can the newly divided culture recover some measure of unity, for just as Pastiche utilizes the vocabulary and grammatical conventions of multiple languages, so too does it incorporate multiple worldviews and allow the people of Pao to understand each other once again.

Yet inherent in this cultural blending is the danger of losing the self *as defined by language*: of literally translating the nature of the self into the nature of the Other and so losing the fundamental distinctions between the two. On a macrocosmic scale, this process allows disparate cultures to become one and proves beneficial to the people of Pao, but the ultimate success of such a process requires a deliberate sacrifice of selfhood on the part of the individuals belonging to each culture; for as Beran's first teacher advises the young linguist and ruler-to-be, "If you can think as another man thinks, you cannot dislike him" (Vance 64).

And just as language transmits culture, so too does fluency in multiple languages dilute Beran's identification with any one culture, granting him the blessing (and curse) of understanding all peoples but belonging to none. Thus he returns to Pao without the fundamental sense of that which made him Paonese, and his unique perspective on the world both empowers him to effect the social changes meant to reunite the planet and distances him from any one aspect of the culture into which he was born. Upon the bitter realization that he—as a linguist and a speaker of all tongues—has become the only true Other on Pao, he laments, "I am changed ... I love Pao, but I am no longer Paonese. I am tainted with the flavor of [another

language]; I can never be truly and wholly a part of this world again—or of any other world. I am dispossessed, eclectic; I am Pastiche” (124). With the theoretical implications of this statement, Vance demonstrates an admirable use of linguistic relativity to articulate the individual conflicts inherent in shifting linguistic systems, consciously treating language as both a character in a story and the means to tell one. In fact, it is Beran’s literal and psychological dispossession that paradoxically heals his divided culture and thus renders him the prototype of a significant yet largely unexamined figure within SF literature: that of the linguist-ambassador. However, because the motive force of Vance’s plot deals with language on an intercultural level and includes only a superficial examination of the individual characters most profoundly affected by such drastic social change, Vance does not pursue the ramifications of the linguist-ambassador’s estrangement to any great degree.

CHAPTER 3 THE LINGUIST-AMBASSADOR

As groundbreaking a novel as *The Languages of Pao* has proven to be, a variety of subsequent authors have far surpassed Vance's understanding of the linguist-ambassador's myriad functions within a language-oriented plot structure and have effectively recast the universal conflict between self and Other as a species-wide negotiation between the human and the alien, using the complex social implications of language to question, conflate, and even reverse the definitions of the two. Whether such blurring of boundaries is ultimately successful or even desirable remains a function of the specific story using the linguist-ambassador as protagonist. Authors have employed this character type to embody a startling variety of philosophies both positive and negative; from the measured optimism of Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* to the astute cynicism of Dickson's *Way of the Pilgrim*, the convoluted roles of the linguist-ambassador have been explored, expanded, and explained, and, in the case of Delany's *Babel-17*, completely revolutionized. By analyzing the psychology of these authors' various linguists, I will identify the methods by which opposing linguistic realities are negotiated and identities redefined as each character attempts to discover just what separates the human from the alien, and whether that separation is worth maintaining.

For by penning thoughtful critiques designed to complicate the binary opposition between human and alien, these authors have created their own linguist-ambassadors as intermediary characters whose physical similarities to one group and psychological identification with the Other blur the distinctions between opposing constructs and challenge the reader to discern where the boundaries should lie. To this end, the authors often go so far as to strand their multilingual protagonists between opposing speech communities in a dramatic illustration of the complexities involved in negotiating the language barriers between mutually alien cultures. And

not all such protagonists escape with their identities intact, for it is the extent of their identification with the alien culture that determines the ultimate condition of their humanity; the more fluently they speak the language of the Other, the more profoundly they comprehend its essence, and the more rapidly they lose any sense of their own. Thus identity itself must be inscribed and reinscribed through language; if the language changes, then so must the definition of identity.

While I intend to focus my analysis primarily upon these three works, I will first use Roger Zelazny's "A Rose for Ecclesiastes" (1963) as a primer with which to demonstrate the fundamental issues that each linguist-ambassador—regardless of his or her specific position between mutually alien societies—must confront and resolve. To this end, I will first identify and analyze the process of psychological development that each protagonist must undergo, for regardless of the specific narrative, it is the linguist-ambassador's job to comprehend linguistic realities separately and then redefine them together, literally reinscribing the self as Other and vice versa in order to forge a new understanding between mutually unintelligible cultures. Thus this development proceeds as a logical progression of the linguist-ambassador's: 1) initial comprehension of the alien culture via language, 2) acute crisis of personal identity precipitated by such comprehension, and 3) redefinition of personal identity and of the larger cultural boundaries that the linguist is originally challenged to resolve.

Within the SF genre, of course, this psychological negotiation is presented as a literal confrontation between human and alien, and such an overt manifestation of this philosophical conflict only serves to heighten the intercultural and intrapersonal tensions that the character must successfully negotiate. Highly representative of the challenges facing all such linguist-ambassadors, Zelazny's "A Rose for Ecclesiastes" (1963) provides a powerful demonstration of

the complex interplay between language and identity, for the irascible linguist, Gallinger, not only relies upon the principle of linguistic relativity to translate Earth culture into Martian terms but also suffers an acute identity crisis due to his success; in short, his skills of interpretation and translation render him alien to both worlds and constantly thwart his need for belonging.

Separated from humans by his genius and arrogance and from Martians by his physiology and culture, he remains forever outside the societies that his actions unite and is ultimately doomed to wallow in lonely bitterness. Yet even prior to the intercultural negotiations that serve as a catalyst for his permanent isolation from both societies, Gallinger considers himself an outsider and makes no effort to ingratiate himself with his fellow humans; indeed, the habitual arrogance with which he treats his companions advertises his deliberate disassociation from the human race even before the introduction of the Martian characters provides an overt manifestation of the conceptual Other. In this way, Gallinger renders himself alien before the aliens appear: a compulsion on the part of the protagonist, perhaps, but also a strategic move of Zelazny's designed to place Gallinger firmly between the two opposing cultures and to render him the only possible bridge before negotiations have even begun, thus initiating the identity crisis that provides the main motivation for the progression of the plot.

In accordance with this dynamic, Zelazny often develops the theme of alienation without the presence of any literal aliens to facilitate it. The extent of Gallinger's self-alienation becomes most apparent in the observer's position that he takes within his own reflections, for just as Zelazny's wry first-person narrative compels us to adopt Gallinger's constantly shifting sense of his own identity, the linguist's own thoughts tend to estrange him from himself even in the complete absence of any character to provide a point of opposition. Readers therefore experience a first-person narrative of his life even as Gallinger detaches himself from his own

memories and consciously separates his present self from his former self in an act of psychological alienation, demonstrating just how far outside of everything he perceives himself to be:

On the day *the boy* graduated from high school, with the French, German, Spanish, and Latin awards, Dad Gallinger had told *his fourteen-year-old, six-foot scarecrow of a son* that he wanted him to enter the ministry. *I remember how his son was evasive:*

“Sir,” *he had said*, “I’d sort of like to study on my own for a year or so...” (emphasis mine) (Zelazny 312)

Ruminations such as these reveal a mindset predisposed to separation, and yet despite his self-imposed psychological handicap, Gallinger must struggle to find common ground with the alien culture of Mars, parsing out the philosophical themes inherent in the nuances of Martian grammar and vocabulary in order to identify and translate an Earth equivalent and provide the ideal bridge between two worlds.

Ironically, his self-inflicted estrangement from his human companions renders him a rather dubious representative of his race and initially serves to hinder his attempts to connect with Martian culture, for his first instinct in any relationship is to hold himself apart, to guard his own personal boundaries and remain safely unchanged by his experiences. Motivated by these psychological inhibitions, he first makes the fundamentally impossible resolution to “learn another world but remain aloof” and dedicates his every moment to comprehending the Martian culture via the High Tongue, thus conflating fluency with access and committing the naïve speaker’s error of treating language as a vehicle for thought rather than its creator (Zelazny 313). Indeed, it is only when he focuses on *comprehending* the cultural biases inherent in the language itself that he transcends the alienness of Martian culture via an appropriate philosophical parallel from human literature:

They wrote about concrete things: rocks, sand, water, winds; and the tenor couched within these elemental symbols was fiercely pessimistic... It reminded me of the Book of

Ecclesiastes. That, then, would be it. The sentiment, as well as the vocabulary, was so similar that it would be a perfect exercise.... I would show them that an Earthman had once thought the same thoughts, felt similarly. (Zelazny 314)

And just as the tone and diction of the written High Tongue actively influence the course of his linguistic endeavors, so too does his growing fluency in the language alter his worldview and promote his sense of kinship with the Martians, allowing him to indulge in and act upon the illusion of their humanity. Thus he conflates his fondness for the Martian language with love for a Martian woman and misconstrues her duty to indulge him sexually as evidence of a mutual attraction, complicating his own ambassadorial duties with personal issues and setting himself up for a curious mix of success and failure in his dealings with this ancient and impassive race.

Gallinger's romantic relationship with Braxa accordingly serves as the catalyst that reawakens his desire for belonging and compels him to use his skill with language to attain it, for long before he manages to convert the Book of Ecclesiastes into the High Tongue, he translates human poetry for Braxa's amusement and renders the grace of her dance into fine English phrasing, indulging the hope that his words might rewrite social realities and make her at least as human as he has become Martian. Yet despite his willful self-deception regarding the true nature of his newfound relationship, he does succeed in his attempt to unite the two cultures, for both his unborn child by Braxa and his daring translation constitute significant revisions of human nature within the context of Martian culture; even his final showdown with the Matriarchs has itself been written, in a manner of speaking, fulfilling as it does the ancient prophecy that the "Sacred Scoffer" would one day "mock [the Martian god's] words as [he] read them" and save the sterile Martian race from its demise (Zelazny 335). However, once he has served his purpose as the bridge between the races, Gallinger must ultimately return to his former state of alienation from Martians and humans alike—as even the strongest bridge between two lands belongs to neither shore.

Zelazny's short story presents a sophisticated negotiation between distinct social realities and provides an ideal introduction to the issues with which all linguist-ambassadors are confronted, for regardless of the setting, the conflict, or even the outcome, these highly specialized characters must willingly sacrifice a measure of their own identities in order to access the Other through language. By consciously utilizing the principle of linguistic relativity, they deliberately shift their own patterns of thought to alter both their understanding of reality *and* their position within it, stepping easily across the boundary between self and Other—human and alien—until that boundary becomes irrelevant, or, at the very least, indistinct. The philosophical parameters of each story differ greatly, but in all instances, the linguist-ambassadors' facility with multiple languages (and therefore with multiple cultural realities) automatically taints them with a tinge of the Other; their profession compels them to tread the outer limits of accepted normality (read "humanity") and renders them prime candidates for translating, interpreting, and ultimately becoming the alien with which they are so fascinated. And if, as is often the case, their ultimate goal is to serve as a linguistic bridge between two mutually alien cultures, then they cannot help but relinquish a part of their humanity to accomplish that goal, becoming, in the end, something paradoxically more and less than human.

CHAPTER 4 THE LINGUIST-AMBASSADOR'S DILEMMA

While the psychological development of each linguist-ambassador follows essentially the same course (comprehension of the Other, crisis of personal identity, and redefinition of both), the final resolution of his or her inner conflict (and the story's denouement) requires a specific declaration of loyalty; the linguist must choose to accept or reject the identity shift that has taken place as a result of such prolonged contact with the alien culture or cultures in question, and not all linguist-ambassadors settle upon the same solution to this common dilemma. The ramifications of accepting or rejecting the Other as part of the self are thoroughly explored in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *Way of the Pilgrim*, respectively, but perhaps it is not quite sufficient to categorize the linguist-ambassador's evolution in terms of unequivocally "accepting" or "rejecting" a specific perspective on reality; say rather that the linguist either chooses to *dilute* the definition of humanity by embracing elements of the alien, or to *intensify* his original definition of humanity by excluding all things alien from his conception of identity. For acceptance of an alternative social reality—whatever it may be within the context of a given story—implies the linguist's innate willingness to adopt aspects of the Other and name them part of the self, thus diluting his understanding of his own humanity. And as Beran and Gallinger have discovered, such a conceptual leap often results in an even greater sense of alienation as the linguist in question no longer "feels" quite human, nor wants to.

If the development of the linguist-ambassador within SF is viewed as a linear progression, then it is clear that Vance and Zelazny have laid a solid foundation for the profound philosophical inquiries inherent in Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), for just as the protagonist, Genly Ai, undergoes the same three-stage process of shifting his own social identity, he also makes the final decision to accept elements of the alien into his perception of himself and

thus dilute his definition of what it is to be truly human. Yet it is in this very transition that Le Guin demonstrates her superior mastery of her craft, for unlike Vance's cursory acknowledgement of Beran as "Pastiche" and Zelazny's limited evaluation of Gallinger as alien to everyone, Le Guin pens an expansive and contemplative tale that encompasses the subtle nuances of three separate cultural systems (one human and two alien) and explores one Terran linguist's struggle to define himself as he straddles the boundaries that divide them all.

Given the initial complexity of Le Guin's story, the evidence of her narrative finesse lies in her unique ability to employ the principle of linguistic relativity to demonstrate both the differences inherent in her alien cultures *and* the cultural biases to which her readers are prone. Whether in dialogue or narration, her choice of wording strategically reflects both the assumptions built into each specific culture as well as the misunderstandings that develop when those cultures meet. And as a *human* ambassador to the androgynous alien cultures of the planet Gethen, Genly represents the reader; his perceptions are essentially our own, and because his reactions to the strangeness around him mirror those we might have ourselves, his unreasoned biases and frequent miscommunications are specifically designed to force us into a startled examination of our own prejudices: to jar us from our linguistic and cultural naïveté.

A prime example of this metalinguistic dynamic occurs during Genly's rather baffling conversation with Lord Estraven of Karhide, for although the passage does not contain a single unfamiliar word and follows the conventional rhythm of dialogue, it is next to impossible for the protagonist (much less the reader) to discern the true meaning of the exchange:

"Did you hear what the king said to me at the ceremony today?" [asked Estraven].

"No." He said nothing more, so I amplified, "The king didn't speak to you in my hearing."

"Nor in mine," said he.

I saw at last that I was missing another signal. Damning his effeminate deviousness, I said, “Are you trying to tell me, Lord Estraven, that you’re out of favor with the king?”

I think he was angry then, but he said nothing that showed it, only, “I’m not trying to tell you anything, Mr. Ai.”

“By God, I wish you would!” (14)

From a metalinguistic perspective, this exchange is doubly significant, for not only does Le Guin establish the obvious difficulties in communication as an ongoing theme, but she also uses the content of the discussion to make a profound comment on the very nature of conversational subtext. Just as the king has said nothing to Estraven (thereby saying something important), so too does Estraven wrap his very silences in significance and expect Genly to understand that, far from “not trying to tell [him] anything,” he is in fact telling him everything.

Thus, in her own way, Le Guin proves even more self-conscious of language than her predecessors Vance and Zelazny, for just as she uses linguistic complexities to enrich the narrative rather than to constitute the plot, she consistently bestows a wealth of significance upon a single, well-placed word and expects her readers to discern *her* subtext, relying upon our intimate knowledge of English just as Estraven assumes Genly’s understanding of Karhidish rhetoric. And contrary to the criticism that her sociological innovations remain “controlled by language and the gender conventions of the reader’s world,” Le Guin often uses those very conventions to manipulate the reader’s assumptions within the framework of the novel (Pennington 351). A prime example of this dynamic occurs with her strategic use of the word “effeminate” in the previous exchange, for not only is there irony in attaching supposedly feminine traits to a genderless character within the context of an androgynous culture, but the word choice also highlights Genly’s own cultural biases and reinforces the Whorfian principle that social realities are continually defined and reinscribed through the nature of language itself. Given the author’s explorations of “the ways in which sex-role stereotyping pervades ordinary

contemporary language,” it is clear that Genly’s unthinking description of Estraven’s behavior is intended to reveal far more about the speaker than about the subject being described, emphasizing as well Le Guin’s profound mastery of her craft (Rabkin 88). Thus, with this highly specialized technique, Le Guin uses language to critique language and creates alternative cultures to question the conventions of our own, drawing attention not just to her story, but also to the way in which she chooses to tell it. As the author herself admits, “To create... ‘a secondary universe’ is to make a new world. A world where no voice has ever spoken before, where the act of speech is the act of creation And every word counts” (*Language of the Night* 95).

As with many of the “new worlds” envisioned by SF authors, the words that count the most *are* those that “no voice has ever spoken before”: those words whose meanings, however complex, are not self-contained but are intended to imply the existence of entire languages and the cultures that create and are created by them. Le Guin demonstrates an admirable use of this particular technique by applying her neologisms sparingly but effectively and using them to illustrate in a word cultural complexities that would take volumes to explain. Indeed, the curious exchange between Genly and Lord Estraven—demonstrating as it does the inability of two aliens to understand each other—is preceded by the strategic introduction of the Karhidish concept known as *shifgrethor*, “the untranslatable and all-important principle of social authority in Karhide” which constitutes a vague mixture of “prestige, face, place, [and] the pride-relationship” (*Left Hand* 14). By refusing to define *shifgrethor* to any satisfactory degree, Le Guin has placed *us* in the role of linguist-ambassador, and we—along with Genly—must struggle to gain a deeper understanding of the word from context alone. Deprived of any explicit definitions for this important concept, we must look critically at the specific *language* of the

novel and consciously reject the typical reader's passivity in favor of a more active role in deciphering the structure of the story. Forced to consider the very nature of the "water" in which we swim, we can no longer persist in looking beyond it and ignoring its profound effects upon that which we see.

And just as the term *shifgrethor* encapsulates the essence of the stoic Karhidish culture, a similar technique is used to portray the excesses of Karhide's obsessively bureaucratic neighbor, Orgoreyn, for the citizens of this particular nation engage in a manner of address decidedly more verbose—but no less opaque to Genly's perceptions—than the Karhidish speech patterns. Whereas a Karhidish individual will speak volumes with silence, a citizen of Orgoreyn will indulge in a verbal maze of prevarication and posturing, and the Orgota language accordingly imbues simple words with political definitions so convoluted as to cause them to lose all meaning whatsoever:

[The usage of "commensality"] includes all national/governmental institutions of Orgoreyn, from the State as a whole through its thirty-three component substates... to the sub-substates, townships, communal farms, mines, factories, and so on.... As an adjective it is applied to all of the above... but it may also mean the citizens, the people themselves. In this curious lack of distinction between the general and specific applications of the word, in the use of it for both the whole and the part... in this imprecision is its precisest meaning. (109)

Thus the definition of "commensality" proves to be just as bureaucratically twisted as the culture from which the word comes, and so Le Guin more effectively demonstrates the Orgoreyn worldview—and Genly's relationship to it—by strategically *failing* to explain the culture adequately. Limited to Genly's rudimentary understanding of the Orgota language, we are also limited to an equally rudimentary understanding of the culture that it conveys and must once again adopt the protagonist's role of linguist-ambassador to fully engage the profound metalinguistic commentary inherent in the novel.

Just as Le Guin's neologisms can be interpreted as an abstract critique of language, they also serve to demonstrate the linguist-ambassador's progression through the first of the three crucial stages: comprehension of the alien culture. And this very comprehension, admirable though it may be, serves as the catalyst for the personal identity crisis that constitutes the second stage of development and encompasses the majority of the novel, for the closer Genly comes to grasping the conceptual Other, the more deeply entrenched he becomes in the alien worldview and the more keenly he feels his identity wavering between his original understanding of humanity and his desire to bridge the gap between himself and his companions. This desire manifests most clearly in his growing empathy with Estraven, for long after Genly's initial failure to connect with the phlegmatic Karhidish noble, the two individuals finally forge a deep friendship based upon an understanding of their differences and a mutual appreciation of their similarities; indeed, it is only when he finally regards Estraven in the complex light of friendship, brotherhood, and (unconsummated) love that he is truly able to bridge the gap represented by their mutual alienness.

Yet paradoxically, the very strangeness of the two travelers serves to encourage their deep personal connection, for as Genly muses, "it was from the difference between us, not from the affinities and likenesses... that that love came: and it was itself the bridge, the only bridge, across what divided us" (*Left Hand* 249). Thus by forging this connection between opposite characters and representatives of opposite societies, Le Guin makes the assertion that, unlike the dynamics at work in *The Languages of Pao* and "A Rose for Ecclesiastes," mutual understanding and acceptance do not necessarily imply a complete loss of identity, for it is possible to overcome boundaries without actually dissolving them. As Estraven astutely observes, "Duality is an essential, isn't it? So long as there is *myself* and *the other*" (234).

Yet although Genly succeeds in forging lasting diplomatic relations between Gethen's inhabitants and the cultural collective of the Ekumen, he never completely resolves the issues precipitating his own identity crisis, for the tumultuous years of his linguistic and cultural immersion among the various peoples of Gethen have rendered him acutely aware of his own strangeness within the alternative normality of the world he inhabits, causing him to view his biases and even his own biology as inherently alien. After years of living as the lone alien in a world of androgynes, he cannot help but see his "fellow [human] Envoys" as "a troupe of great strange animals... apes with intelligent eyes, all of them in rut," and he accordingly finds the sight of an androgynous face "a relief... familiar, right" (296). Thus in bridging two cultures he has lost a true sense of his own and has ultimately sacrificed his cultural identity so that the societies he unites may simultaneously maintain and transcend the boundaries that make them what they are. His resolution to the linguist-ambassador's dilemma is to accept the aliens' perception of himself, but such a resolution comes with a heavy price, for he must forever perceive himself as partly alien, regardless of the language in which he is situated.

Genly's final choice to accept the changes he has been compelled to make in his identity mirrors that of his "colleagues" Gallinger and Beran, for all three of these linguist-ambassadors opt to compromise themselves in order to reconcile the conceptual conflicts that arise between the mutually alien cultures they have sworn to unite. Despite the vastly different details presented in each story, the characters' progression through the three fundamental stages of shifting identity remains the same: a pattern largely dependent upon the fact that each of these linguist-ambassadors pursues his journey into the alien *voluntarily*. Even Beran, who begins his linguistic studies under duress, ultimately *chooses* to fully immerse himself in each of the artificial languages that transform the once-homogeneous Paonese culture into something

altogether different. In each case, it is the all-important element of personal decision that allows the linguist-ambassador to reach a psychological and philosophical compromise between his native culture and his alien environment. Present by choice, he conducts himself at all times as an intellectual equal to those he seeks to understand, and at no point must he sublimate his identity or surrender his own sense of himself to a dominant alien will. He must simply learn to redefine himself within the broader context of his alien environment, even as the aliens he meets must redefine themselves within the context of a world that includes this thing called humanity. Whatever misunderstandings may arise, the entire encounter is characterized by mutual adjustments and open communication and thus yields benefits for all parties concerned, an outcome that would remain impossible if either humans or aliens insisted upon maintaining a dominant position throughout the exchange.

However, when a linguist-ambassador is forced into a position of inferiority during his dealings with the alien culture, he adopts aspects of the alien Other merely as a means to *survive*, thus rendering his inevitable identity crisis a supremely bitter one, for any advances he makes in comprehending the alien culture—along with any insecurities he may suffer as a result—arise not from his efforts to bridge the gap between two equal societies but from his need to avoid the dire consequences of acting contrary to alien expectations. And because those expectations place him in a position of perpetual ignominy, any acceptance of such conditions results not in the positive expansion of the definition of humanity but rather in the complete *negation* of humanity in favor of something else entirely. Thus his sense of identity is compromised, and he is ultimately unable to embrace acceptance as a tolerable means of solving the linguist-ambassador's dilemma; the only true means of escape is therefore to consciously reject all things alien.

Shane Evert, the tormented linguist of Gordon R. Dickson's *Way of the Pilgrim* (1987), represents this dynamic of rejection and provides a sharp contrast to Beran, Gallinger, and Genly, all of whom choose to accept the alien influences upon their identities. However, the conditions resulting in Shane's identity crisis are significantly different than those faced by his predecessors, for in Shane's world, acceptance of the alien (Aalaag) is tantamount to acceptance of slavery, and when viewed in this light, his ultimate decision to reject the linguistic and cultural forces with which he is surrounded represents the deep, driving need of humanity itself to rebel against the alien culture that has so callously enslaved the Earth. Shane's position among the Aalaag is particularly untenable, for just as the aliens treat human beings as "cattle" fit only to serve, their language is structurally incapable of articulating humans in anything other than a role of servitude and renders the goals of the linguist-ambassador ultimately impossible to achieve, for the concept of mutual respect between human and Aalaag can hardly take root in a culture ruled by a language that is simply unequipped to convey such a thought.

Thus Dickson manipulates language as artfully as Le Guin, but for an entirely different purpose; his interpretation of the principle of linguistic relativity is specifically designed to accentuate the unbridgeable differences between human and Aalaag and to impress upon both characters and readers that there can be no true understanding—no sense of equality—in a world dominated by a brutal alien tongue that deliberately redefines the nature of humanity. The average Aalaag cannot even pronounce the word "human," much less understand its significance, and thus Dickson employs a *language-based* deficiency to symbolize the aliens' psychological inability to acknowledge humans as equals. Because the word cannot be spoken, the concept cannot exist, and all humans must therefore cease to be human and must accept the only labels possible within the limited linguistic construct that dominates and defines their new reality.

Only as “beasts” may they live to wait upon the pleasure of the “real persons” who speak the “true tongue,” and the greatest ambition permitted them is to one day become “small imitations of the Aalaag,” at least as far as the “beast-limitations of their natures” will allow (Dickson 446). In this way, Dickson strategically alters the novel’s linguistic reality in order to situate humans as aliens within the Aalaag worldview, creating an immediate sense of the Aalaag as normal and forcing readers to view the human characters within the context of Aalaag cultural biases.

To enhance this effect, he employs three distinct registers of English throughout the complex dynamics of his dialogue to indicate both the language being spoken and the social status of the speakers involved. Because casual speech is often associated with the lower classes, Dickson employs colloquial English to represent all human-to-human interactions, while all Aalaag-to-Aalaag conversations are characterized by a formal, stilted, and painfully precise manner of speech designed to reflect the fanatical attention to duty at the core of the Aalaag culture. Finally, to offset these two distinct modes of address and to account for the human-to-Aalaag interactions, Dickson uses yet another register, a modified version of the third-person submissive that emphasizes the inferior position of humans within Aalaag society by denying them the grammatical constructions necessary to form assertive statements. A human must never refer to an Aalaag as “you,” but must always use the alien’s title of “immaculate” or “untarnished sir,” and even the pronoun “I,” impossible to avoid in English, is understood to take an entirely different form when humans must refer to themselves directly in Aalaag. For a beast to utter the first-person pronoun reserved for Aalaag use is an unforgivable offense, and thus by denying humans access to the simple yet vital pronoun of selfhood, the Aalaag language makes it impossible for the aliens even to conceive of their “cattle” as possessing the presence of mind or individual will associated with “the untarnished race.”

The rules governing the specific usage of these various registers are necessarily complex, and as a world-class linguist, Shane can navigate them all. However, his abrupt shifts from one register to another, while vital to maintaining his precarious position within the Aalaag-dominated society, also signal his constantly changing identity in relation to human inferiors and Aalaag superiors. As a courier-translator for First Captain Lyt Ahn, leader of the Aalaag invasion, Shane holds the highest position allowed a beast within Aalaag society and therefore enjoys privileges and benefits far beyond those of humans who do not directly facilitate the Aalaag occupation, but as the following exchange between Shane and Laa Ehon, a colleague of Lyt Ahn, demonstrates, the linguist must constantly rely upon his consummate skills of manipulation and language and his innate understanding of Aalaag social customs in order to negotiate even the most commonplace interactions:

“How long have you spoken the true language?”

“Two and a half years of this world, immaculate sir.”

“You are a beast worth having,” said [Laa Ehon] slowly. “I did not think one such as you could be brought to speak so clearly. How are you valued?”

“To the best of my knowledge, immaculate sir”—he dared not hesitate in his answer—“I am valued at half a possession of land... and the favor of my master Lyt Ahn,” said Shane.

The thoughtfulness vanished from Laa Ehon’s features... “Favor” was a term that went beyond all price. It was a designation meaning that his master was personally interested in keeping him, and that the price of any sale could include anything at all.... Such “favor,” involved in a sale, could in effect constitute a blank check signed by the buyer, cashable at any time in the future for goods or actions by the seller, guaranteed under the unyielding obligation code of the Aalaag. (Dickson 38-9)

Contained within this brief exchange are the Whorfian principles upon which the entire novel is based, for not only does Shane define himself within the ignominious boundaries of Aalaag social biases, but he also demonstrates an acute understanding of how to manipulate those biases to his benefit. Just as he proves himself to be “a beast worth having” by suppressing his human

identity beneath the verbal conventions of the “true language,” he also utilizes his understanding of the Aalaag word “favor” to discourage Laa Ehon from purchasing him. Yet the true delicacy of Shane’s maneuver lies in the fact that Lyt Ahn has never expressly included his “favor” as being part of Shane’s stated value. By taking a calculated risk that the First Captain might indeed value him so highly, Shane seeks to prevent Laa Ehon from making any further inquiries into his sale, an event which would deprive the linguist of the minimal stability that he has managed to regain following the Aalaag invasion.

Yet as skilled as Shane has become at manipulating his masters via language alone, such prevarication carries a heavy price. Because this particular linguist is an ambassador only under duress, his intimate comprehension of the alien culture leads to an identity crisis so acute that it threatens to alienate him from all that he cherishes in the human race. To survive in an Aalaag world, he must twist himself into the closest approximation of an Aalaag that he can achieve, sublimating his fear and hatred beneath a self-perpetuated delusion of respect and admiration for the Aalaag culture. As Maria, his lover and his link to the human world, declares, ““You can think like them, feel like them... it’s almost as if you’ve become part Aalaag yourself”” (Dickson 246). And while such a shift in identity proves an advantage to linguist-ambassadors like Gallinger and Genly, it becomes pure torture for Shane; his cooperation with the Aalaag is nothing less than the basest betrayal of humanity, and there can be no middle ground.

Given the particularly uncompromising nature of Dickson’s version of the linguist-ambassador’s dilemma, Shane’s only means of recovering his humanity is to reject the Aalaag with thoughts, words, and deeds; and accordingly, his fantasies of becoming a rebel “pilgrim” lead him to make contact with an international Resistance group and to organize increasingly dramatic displays of defiance, all of which culminate in a single worldwide show of resistance

that finally convinces the Aalaag to abandon Earth to its original inhabitants. Dressed in the robes of the Pilgrim, the humans march against every alien stronghold with nothing but wooden staffs and stoic determination, proving by their mere presence that they will no longer serve as beasts. And just as the symbol of the Pilgrim comes to represent the human race, Shane himself becomes the Pilgrim in the eyes of humans and aliens alike as he steps forward to speak for the world, and more importantly, to *change* the world through the act of speech:

“The Aalaag should understand that each individual of any people carries within him or her a portion of what belongs to that people as a whole. There is no Aalaag who lacks such a portion; and likewise there is no *human* without it,” [said Shane].

Lyt Ahn tilted a thumb toward the crowd outside.

“We do not call those a people, but beasts and cattle,” he said. “And we would not use that word you use to describe them, even if it were pronounceable.”

“Such refusals,” said Shane, “mean nothing and change nothing.” (413-14)

It is important to note that because this conversation takes place in the Aalaag language, the word “human” is italicized not for emphasis, but rather to indicate its foreignness. Just as in the majority of the novel, humans are cast as the Other, the not-normal, and the alien within the reality defined and maintained by the Aalaag invaders, and not even in his final plea to the First Captain can Shane overcome the biases inherent in the language he must use to communicate.

“We do not call those a people, but beasts and cattle,” Lyt Ahn declares, and in the very labeling of the beings that defy him, he refuses to recognize the bald fact of their defiance; *people* may resist, it is true, but *cattle* are merely “sick” and must be summarily destroyed so that they cannot infect the rest of the stock. And Shane, speaking Aalaag, must accordingly translate the essence of his argument for freedom into the unequal power relationships of master and slave, ruler and ruled. Shackled by the linguistic blindness of the Aalaag, he simply cannot *say* that humans must live free: only that the cattle “do not tame” (Dickson 415). Thus there can be no mutual

understanding between the two races, and all Shane can hope to do is convince the Aalaag that humans are not worth the effort involved in occupation and enslavement. As Lyt Ahn tells

Shane prior to abandoning the planet:

“You conceived the conceit that we were leaving because you had shown yourself too brave and independent of nature for us to control. It is not so. We, who do as we wish, build or destroy at our pleasure, choose to abandon you. Not because you have shown that you prefer death to service, but for a far different reason.”

“Because we will not be slaves,” said Shane thickly.

“No,” said Lyt Ahn. “Because you are unworthy.” (447)

Thus Shane has indeed fulfilled his duties as linguist-ambassador, but in reverse; whereas Beran, Gallinger, and Genly manipulate language to bridge the differences between cultures, Shane uses his unique understanding of the Aalaag to prove that no bridge is possible: to ultimately *fail* to communicate and to succeed because of that failure.

CHAPTER 5 TRANSCENDING THE DILEMMA

When Shane's performance is compared to that of his three "predecessors," it is clear that these four protagonists illustrate the full spectrum of solutions to the linguist-ambassador's dilemma, for whether the character in question chooses to integrate the human with the alien or to deny the one in favor of the other, there remains the inescapable *duality* of the choice involved: to accept or to reject the alien. However, what these novels do not reveal is that the dilemma is in fact a false one, and so it is left to Rydra Wong, the heroine of Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17* (1966), to transcend the limitations of this either-or construct; and transcend them she does, and brilliantly so, for Rydra Wong—navigator, captain, poet, and linguist extraordinaire—is the bridge between all worlds. In a universe where the living can modify their bodies and the dead can exist bodiless, where six known sentient species roam the stars and the definition of humanity is already stretched to the breaking point, where traditions blend and cultures collide and languages shift like kaleidoscopes, only Rydra can find a way to unite a motley starship crew in the common purpose of comprehending the motivations of the strange (but ultimately *human*) Invaders whose complex and highly analytical language, Babel-17, remains a mystery to everyone but her.

Given her quest to decipher the language of the Invaders so as to understand their psychology, Rydra Wong is perhaps the most blatantly Whorfian of all the linguist-ambassadors. As she tells a trusted confidant, "Most textbooks say language is a mechanism for expressing thought. But language *is* thought. Thought is information given form. The form is language. The form of [Babel-17] is amazing'" (*B17* 23). And although we never learn a single word of this mysterious language, we are treated to numerous examples of its power, for by switching from English to Babel-17 at critical moments, Rydra is able to describe and therefore understand

the world around her in such a way that the very *description* presents her with the solution to whatever problem she faces. An example of this phenomenon occurs when she and her crew are captured by starship pirates. When Rydra uses Babel-17 to analyze the nature of the webbing that imprisons her, she suddenly realizes that it is not webbing, “but rather a three-particle vowel differential, each particle of which defined one stress of the three-way tie... By breaking the threads at these points, the whole web would unravel. Had she flailed at it, and not named it in this new language, it would have been more than secure enough to hold her” (113). And with Rydra’s newfound perceptions comes the dangerous conviction that she has finally discovered the “right” way to articulate the world: that because the efficiency of Babel-17 far surpasses that of any other language she knows, it must therefore describe things as they truly are. But “Truth” is a slippery concept shaped purely by the assumptions inherent in language, and if a truth is only as real as the words by which it is declared, then Babel-17 is not just a language but a weapon, a linguistic invasion that does not require the presence of its creators in order to conquer.

Thus it is the insidious nature of Babel-17 that compels Rydra to sabotage her own quest to thwart the Invaders, for whenever she abandons the thought patterns inherent in English and begins to *think* in Babel-17, she becomes her own enemy and accepts the alien truth that her mission must be stopped and her own government, the Alliance, destroyed. As she later tells her psychiatrist, “the word for Alliance in Babel-17 translates literally into English as: one-who-has-invaded ... While thinking in Babel-17 it becomes perfectly logical to try and destroy your own ship and then blot out the fact with self-hypnosis so you won’t ... try and stop yourself” (215). And instrumental to the dynamics of this “perfectly logical” betrayal of self is the fact that the structure of Babel-17 does not allow for the concept of selfhood. There is no “I” in Babel-17, and consequently, no “you,” which is simply a linguistic representation of the Other. When

faced with this critical handicap, a naïve speaker of Babel-17 necessarily develops a monstrous indifference to the value of individual life; for if there is no “I” then there is no reason for self-preservation, and if there is no “you,” then murder is hardly a crime. Indeed, when reality itself is reduced to the status of data to be processed by the analytical system that is Babel-17, then killing a sentient being is merely equivalent to deleting a specific piece of information. Without the all-important pronouns of selfhood, Babel-17 proves to be a soulless language governed by pure logic, and therein lies its flaw. For logic is only as sound as the premises upon which it is based, and just as the Invaders can commandeer a mind by forcing it to reason in alien terms, so too can Rydra unbalance such reasoning by bombarding that same mind with unsolvable paradoxes. Confronted by a series of what can essentially be classified as programming loops, the mind shuts down like a computer and “reboots” in its original language, thus restoring a crucial sense of self to the individual.

Thus far, the novel has only demonstrated another version of the original either-or dilemma facing every linguist-ambassador, for just like Beran, Gallinger, Genly, and Shane, Rydra strives to comprehend the language of the Other and suffers a resulting identity crisis that can only be corrected when she must choose whether to accept or reject the alien influences to which she has been exposed. However, Delany’s true innovation comes when Rydra transcends the limitations of this three-stage pattern and manipulates the structure of language to overcome the psychological damage inherent in the usage of Babel-17, for despite her previous assertion that language is synonymous with thought, Rydra refuses to remain bound by it. Instead, she systematically eliminates the treacherous logic inherent in Babel-17 so that the language can no longer subvert her loyalties or undermine her personality. Thus, by recreating the language of the Invaders and dubbing it Babel-18, Rydra effectively rejects the alien influences that resulted

in her own identity crisis while simultaneously using those same influences to bridge the gap between Alliance and Invaders. Faced with the conventional dilemma of either accepting or rejecting the Other, she completely transcends the choice. Like a more benevolent version of Vance's Palafox, she deftly takes possession of the complex dynamics of linguistic relativity and uses her new language to impress her own desire for peace upon the war-torn world around her, and her parting message to both sides, "This war will end within six months," therefore reflects far more than wishful thinking, for by stating it, she literally wills it to be (219).

Thus Delany's novel represents the culmination of the linguist-ambassador's evolution as well as the ultimate manifestation of Whorfian principles within SF, for not only does Rydra solve the dilemma to which all other linguist-ambassadors eventually succumb, but she also proves the philosophical point that language and reality are one and the same and must be treated accordingly. And although such "proof" stems entirely from the realm of science fiction, it is proof nonetheless; for if we as the myriad naïve speakers in a world commonly referred to as "real" would agree to treat our own perceptions with the same degree of skepticism commonly accorded to fiction, we would find it much easier to bridge the cultural gaps that the average linguist-ambassador is so sorely challenged to cross.

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