



Philip Seargeant looks at the different ways in which sci-fi writers have created alien languages.

“One of the unanticipated achievements of the twenty-first century”, wrote H. G. Wells, “was the rapid diffusion of Basic English as the lingua franca of the world and the even more rapid modification, expansion and spread of English in its wake... This convenience spread like wildfire after the First Conference of Basra... and by 2020 there was hardly anyone in the world who could not understand it”.

Wells wrote this in 1933 in his novel *The Shape of Things to Come*, which predicted the future for global society over the next hundred and fifty years. ‘Basic English’ was a popular, simplified version of the language, created by the philosopher C. K. Ogden, and promoted

in the first half of the twentieth century as a solution to the growing need for a means of international communication. As the world was becoming ever more interconnected people first tried designing artificial languages, such as Esperanto and Volapük, for this purpose, but when these didn’t catch on they switched instead to simplified versions of natural languages.

Skip forward 50 years, and Basic is also the name for the lingua franca used throughout the Star Wars franchise. It’s the language the main characters all speak, and that most of the alien species also understand. And in practical terms, it too is English.

The representation of Galactic Basic by English is artistic licence of course – it helps if your audience can understand the dialogue without too much trouble.



Why does everyone in Star Wars speak English?

But its use also reflects the rise of English as a global language – and in doing so paints a very different picture from the utopian ideals of other universal language advocates.

The idea of a universal form of communication is a common trait in science fiction, as is the need for intergalactic communication. But most stories don't dwell on the linguistic difficulties that either of these issues poses, side-stepping the problem either by ignoring it completely (having everyone just speak a human language) or through convenient solutions such as the universal translator. Douglas Adams's Babel fish, from A Hitchhiker's Guide to

the Galaxy, are a knowing but ingenious example of this, in the way that they

“feed... on brain wave energy, absorbing all unconscious frequencies and then excreting telepathically a matrix formed from the conscious frequencies and nerve signals picked up from the speech centres of the brain, the practical upshot of which is that if you stick one in your ear, you can instantly understand anything said to you in any form of language”.

Star Wars is pretty much in this tradition itself. In fact, compared to Star Trek and other recent franchises, ideas about language in general are very underdeveloped throughout

the expanded universe. Where languages such as Klingon, Na'vi and Dothraki have been painstakingly designed with the help of professional linguists (Mark Okrand, Paul R. Frommer and David J. Peterson respectively), in the Star Wars films alien communication has been approached more as sound design than linguistics, while interspecies communication is solved either by droids such as C-3PO being “fluent in over six million forms of communication”, or by a pan-galactic lingua franca.

The way language is depicted in science fiction is party to the same paradox that governs all fantasy world-building:

Kanjiklub members
Tasu Leech and
Razoo Qin-Fee in
The Force Awakens.



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alien languages need to be noticeably different from human languages to indicate their other-worldliness, but close enough that we can still accept them as language. When linguistic difference is addressed in science fiction it’s done to give a sense of imaginary verisimilitude. In dreaming up an alien race, language needs to be a key aspect of the culture, and thus a sense of what that language sounds like, or how it operates, can help in the process of characterisation.

In the first Star Wars trilogy, the sound director Ben Burtt came up with some ingenious strategies to achieve these ends, without ever actually constructing any new languages. In the cantina scene in the first film, for example, the conversation going on in the background is made up of a mishmash of recordings including a hippopotamus, a tree frog, and a group of extras who had inhaled helium. For the people operating the carbon-freezing chamber in The Empire Strikes Back, Burtt used “some baby raccoons frolicking in an empty bathtub” to represent the sounds of them chattering to each other. This is all a long way from the tradition of fantasy language-design of someone like J.R.R. Tolkien, whose Elvish languages are a reflection of his

own deep preoccupation with linguistics, and with his study of a variety of different languages past and present, including Welsh, Finnish and Old Norse.

For the languages that play a slightly more developed role in the plot, Burtt turned to pre-existing ‘exotic’ languages – i.e. those that he thought the majority of the Anglophone audience wouldn’t know – and used these as the basis for his sound creations. His aim, he says, was to come up with “something entertaining, alien, and full of appropriate character”. The most developed of these is Huttese, spoken by Jabba the Hutt, which is based on Quechua, from Peru and the Andes. For the Ewoks, he started with a BBC documentary recording of an old woman speaking Tibetan and improvised from there. Jawaese is based very distantly on Zulu, while Lando Calrissian’s co-pilot Nien Nunb, who helps blow up the second Death Star, speaks Sullustese, based on the Tanzanian language Haya. In this last instance, as Burtt explains, time pressures meant that the transformation from ‘exotic’ African language to alien language was rather slapdash, but he “gambled that no one hearing the film would speak Haya and recognise the language. Was I wrong!” When the film played in Tanzania a lot

of the audience was surprised to hear one of the peripheral characters speaking their own language. This is hardly surprising for a film franchise with such global reach, but indicates the Anglocentric approach that underpinned the creation.

This general approach has continued into the most recent films. In The Force Awakens, for example, J. J. Abrams enlisted the help of Sara Maria Forsberg for the Kanjiklub language, with the YouTube star using sounds from Indonesian and Sundanese “to come up with something suitably exotic-sounding”. In all these cases, what is ‘alien’ or ‘exotic’ for the purposes of the film is judged against a Western and Anglophone norm.

As far as interspecies communication goes, this is solved by reliance on a universal lingua franca which all the main characters speak. Known as Galactic Basic, or often simply Basic, the idea appears to have originated in the expanded universe with Brian Daley’s novel Han Solo’s Revenge (1979). It now has its own back story, as Bill Slavicsek explains, being “based upon the language of human civilizations of the Core Worlds... It became standard trade and diplomatic language during the time of the Old republic, and has

remained in use to the current day”.

For the speakers of Galactic Basic, the same Anglophone, and specifically US-centric, equation applies – at least in the early films. A standard US accent is the unmarked code, and the more ‘foreign’ the accent sounds, the more alien it is. Lucas said that in the first film he tried carefully “to balance the British and American voices” so that both good guys and bad guys had British accents. But the impression to many is still that the Imperial characters speak Received Pronunciation, while the Rebels have American accents.

This Anglocentric issue was even more pronounced in the second trilogy, where characters’ pidgin English and stereotypically ‘foreign-sounding’ accents led to charges of racism. For example, to many viewers Gungan, spoken by the aquatic people from the planet Naboo – including the much reviled Jar Jar Binks – sounded very similar to an exaggerated Jamaican patois, while many also felt that the depiction of the Trade Federation officials was based on crude and negative Asian stereotypes, including a broken Asian-English accent.

This has, perhaps, been balanced out with the most recent film, *Rogue One*, in which the band of Rebel fighters opposing the Empire represent a mix of nationalities and cultures. Much was made in the press of the fact, for example, that one of the stars, the Mexican actor Diego Luna (who plays Cassian Andor), used his real-life accent for the part. This was a departure not only for the franchise, but also for a lead in a Hollywood film more generally. In fact, the way the film portrayed a diverse universe, with the Empire being frustrated by a multicultural

group of insurgents, resulted in it becoming the target of an Alt-Right boycott for supposedly promoting an ‘anti-white agenda’.

And then there’s Yoda of course. While his English hasn’t been the subject of any political controversies, it has become a much imitated part of modern popular culture. This is due to the way it very markedly differs from standard English and upends the normal subject-verb-object pattern of English. Tim Conley and Stephen Cain, in their *Encyclopedia of Fictional and Fantastic Languages*, suggest that perhaps Yoda’s Basic is “inflected with a language he acquired before it” – that there’s some “crosslinguistic influence” that has shaped the way he speaks the language. This is obviously speculative – there’s nothing in the saga that touches upon this – and whatever the practical reasons, the main purpose seems to be to use his speech to reflect the sage-like nature of his character.

And so back to (the original) Basic. One of the main aims of Ogden’s Basic English was to create a culture-free language that would be happily adopted around the world as a universal lingua franca. Although Basic English was initially supported by various luminaries – including Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt – it never managed to fulfil its own ambitions, and soon faded from popular consciousness. By the end of his life, H. G. Wells conceded that his dreams of a single world language were unlikely to be realised: “It is quite conceivable that the happy and united world which may be possible ahead of us, will never have one universal speech at all”.

Yet English itself, in all its diverse forms, has continued to flourish. In the second half

of the twentieth century it emerged as the pre-eminent world language, in great part due to the political status of the US and the influence of Anglophone culture. Today it is spoken in some form or other by up to two billion people. But it exists as a diverse entity, with more non-native speakers than native, and with countless different varieties and uses, reflecting the cultures of the various communities who use it.

Galactic Basic is very much in the tradition of the idea of a single world language. And although for the makers of the films it began as a solution to a tricky plot point, the way it is used reflects the many issues relating to the adoption of one particular language as a world standard, with all the cultural politics that this would involve.

It’s worth noting that it also offers a very different view on intergalactic harmony from that imagined by Wells. The series is not called *Star Wars* for nothing, after all. Instead, the picture is closer to Douglas Adams’s prediction for how universal understanding might turn out. As the entry in the *Hitchhiker’s Guide* for his version of the universal translator explains: “Meanwhile the poor Babel fish, by effectively removing all barriers to communication between different cultures and races, has caused more and bloodier wars than anything else in the history of creation”. ¶

Find out more

Books

Benjamin Burt (2001) *Star Wars: Galactic Phrase Book and Travel Guide*, Del Rey.

Tim Conley and Stephen Cain (2006) *Encyclopedia of Fictional and Fantastic Languages*, Greenwood Press.

Philip Seargeant is Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics at the Open University. His most recent books include *Taking Offence on Social Media* (with Caroline Tagg and Amy Aisha Brown), and the edited volume *Creativity in Language: From Everyday Style to Verbal Art* (with Zsófia Demjén).
