

# Playing God: World-Making Words

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When an author sits down to write a story or novel, s/he must become a god; living beings must be created, their lives must be meddled in, and on some occasions the author must step in to pull their fat out of the fire. This need to achieve divinity is true of any type of fiction an author chooses to write. For the writer of science fiction and fantasy, however, this step into divinity involves much more detail. The science fiction writer must create not only his characters, but also the very world that they will inhabit, complete with landmasses, rivers, mountains, people, races, governments, languages, history and culture. While each of these elements is important in creating a well-rounded novel, the use of created racial and cultural languages is one of the most important because it gives the world more depth and allows readers to judge and define the racial and cultural traits of the characters based on the language they use.

The Christian Bible states that the world began when God said “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3). The statement in itself insinuates that everything began not truly with light, but with language. This concept is particularly prevalent in the work of J. R. R. Tolkien. He stated in a letter to his friend, Milton Waldman, that “behind my stories is now a nexus of languages . . .” (“From a Letter” xiii). This concept that literature can be as much about language as it is plot, if not more, is an idea that he would repeat several times in communications about his novel *The Hobbit* and his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. In these four books, as well as in his novel *The Silmarillion*, language was not created to support the world; instead the world was created as a place for the already created languages to exist. Other writers of science fiction have also used created languages to broaden their invented worlds: among them C. S. Lewis, Stanley Weinbaum, Anthony Boucher, Isaac Asimov, Robert Nathan, George Orwell, and Dennis L. McKiernan (Barnes 392-94). In some cases the language use was integral in driving the plot, like in stories that focus on the difficulty of communication between two alien races. In others the created languages are used not to drive the plot, but to help create a more realistic world in which the action occurs.

I recently interviewed author Dennis L. McKiernan about his use of created languages in his Mithgar series. McKiernan states, “the use of other languages ‘richens’ the world, hence the writing.” While Tolkien used his races as a vehicle for his languages, McKiernan uses created languages to help develop and define the races and cultures as they are introduced. In this manner, he feels that he is able to create a “broader” and more believable world. The question arises, however, as to whether this use of created languages is actually beneficial in writing science fiction and/or fantasy, or if it is irritating and irrelevant to readers. There have been numerous studies regarding the attitudinal responses of listeners to foreign languages, but it is nearly impossible to locate any that have been done for the written word. While many researchers have studied the use of linguistics and phonetics in literature, none have considered how the reader judges the characteristics of culture based on the languages used.

The studies of linguistics, ethnology and sociolinguistics have provided reams of material that authors may consider as they create languages for use in a science fiction or fantasy novel. Ross Smith discusses Tolkien’s use and rejection of popular linguistic theory. He states that according to two of the most prominent linguists, Steiner and Chomsky, “the linguistic sign (i.e. word, utterance) was arbitrary and wholly unrelated to the referent (i.e. thing referred to)” (Smith 2). Tolkien and McKiernan, however, both claim that they selected words that “fit” or belong because of their sounds. According to Smith, “That Tolkien believed firmly in the direct link between sound and sense is beyond doubt; it formed the basis of his linguistic investigations, as he readily acknowledged” (4).

The studies of Chomsky and Steiner focused primarily on the spoken word. For authors such as Tolkien and McKiernan, the written word and how readers evaluate it is far more important. For these authors there is a dearth of information, however, as “the speaker-evaluation methodology holds center stage in the social-psychological and communication tradition” (Gal 630). For a writer, the way a

language sounds acoustically is not as important as how it appears in print, or how a reader may sound it out. For example, many readers of pagan or wiccan literature sound out 'samhain' as 'sam-hane', unaware that in the Scots Gaelic language the 'amh' phoneme is pronounced /aʊ/ and that 'ai' is not pronounced /eɪ/ but rather /ə/. In the International Phonetic Alphabet, or IPA, this word is often read as [səm'hɛɪn] instead of the correct Scottish Gaelic pronunciation of ['saʊ ɛn]. These difficulties in translating print to sound are important for the creator of a language to be aware of, but are generally not covered in existing studies.

The existing linguistics studies are still useful to the author who wants to create a full-bodied language. For example, Alford points out that even those who are language learners can often distinguish the differences in regional accents. This study, with a difference noted between first and second year students, can help writers discern when a character should be able to recognize the origin of another character. In separate studies, Victor J. Callan and Cynthia Gallois and Lesley and James Milroy confirmed that individuals judge the characteristics of not only the speaker but also of his/her culture of origin. Callan and Gallois state that "language is flexible and dynamic enough that ethnic membership can be implied through a variety of phonological, grammatical or other speech markers" (2). Milroy and Milroy found that by using these speech markers, many listeners can accurately judge socio-economic class and, with some knowledge of the culture of origin, can make value judgments on those cultures and the morals of the speaker.

Both J. R. R. Tolkien and Dennis L. McKiernan seem to have read some of these studies or others from the past, among them the seminal work by Dr. Leo Bloomfield, since their use of created languages often correlates with the findings of several recent projects. Asif Agha discusses the use of honorific language and the human tendency to classify and stereotype speakers based on language. Not only do we rank people by class according to the honorifics they use, as well as those used to refer to them, but we also determine the "properties in relation to the rest of social life" based on the honorifics used within the languages of a culture (Agha 167). Both Tolkien and McKiernan use at least one created language with honorifics. While nearly every language presented in his work uses honorifics to address royalty, McKiernan's elves utilize a speech system that is extremely complex. A highly formalized language, nearly all other characters that come in close contact with the elves of McKiernan's world Mithgar are referred to as "Sir" or "Lady." Throughout the books this respectful behavior is responded to in a positive and reciprocal manner, similar to what Agha suggests is the common reaction to outsiders in highly honorific languages and cultures.

McKiernan's sci-fi novels also seem to have considered the linguistic principles of cultural change, which have been explained by Bonnie Urciuoli and T. A. Taha. Both of these researchers proposed a massive change when cultures divide geographically and the process of language creation that causes the two cultures to develop related but distinct languages. Within the millennia depicted over the course of the Mithgar series, the people of Jord and the people of Valon were once a single culture that divided when new territory was won. While many of their cultural characteristics remain similar and the two languages show similar roots, they eventually develop into two distinct nations with their own language. This division fits with the part of Urciuoli's research that claims, "When languages take on sharp edges, i.e. borders, they are mapped onto people and therefore onto ethnic nationality (which may or may not map onto a nation-state)" (533). Taha also supports this division and follows the process of such a nation-building divide through semantic changes. He states that as time passes "sometimes the original meanings of native words and other borrowed lexical items may undergo semantic change; some words may lose their original meanings, become obsolete, archaic, rare, or even just disappear" (87).

Both Tolkien and McKiernan have also used linguistic traits to show distinct cultural thought patterns. For Tolkien, the most dramatic example is in the language of the Ents. The Ents are a slow moving race for which hundreds of years are equivalent to our days, weeks or months. This race is often unable to understand the thinking and beliefs of the faster living hobbits. While the words are comprehensible, they do not have the frame of reference in their thought patterns to grasp the speed of actions or the need for such a hurry. McKiernan's Utruni, Elves, Chabbians and Dwarves all show traits throughout the books that are singular to their cultures. In some cases more experienced characters will show to novices that these behavioral traits are cultural and because of this difficult, if not impossible, to

explain in any other language. This impossibility supports Anna Wierzbicka's argument that "language carries with it some ways of thinking that are peculiar to that language . . ." (256).

Tolkienian scholars have studied the languages used in science fiction extensively, though primarily in its development and use inside and out of Tolkien's novels. This research into Tolkienian linguistics has covered a fairly wide spectrum since the first publication of his work. Carl Hostetter follows the study of Tolkienian linguistics through four distinct stages separated by what he calls five interludes. The stages of study are the "Readers and Correspondents," "Journals and Books," "Conceptionists and Unifists," and "Scholars and Speakers; or Elvish and Neo-Elvish" (Hostetter 1, 4, 9, 17).

The Readers stage began with the publication of the novels. When readers found the created languages and began to make an effort to translate and understand them and the writing used within. This stage is highly flexible since it is one experienced by many first time readers of the books. While professional study may pass into the fourth stage and eventually beyond, theoretically there will always be new first-stage readers. The second stage, Journals and Books, began with the introduction of journals and books dedicated to the study of Tolkien's languages. These include a variety of magazines and linguistic journals, societies of scholars dedicated to studying the work of Tolkien and even some papers and letters written by the author about his own work. It was in this stage that Quenya and Sindarin, the "historical" languages within the books, started to be compared with modern languages and analyzed for changes and discrepancies. The third stage, Conceptionists and Unifists, involved a debate over whether the aforementioned discrepancies were because of the conceptionist assertion that they were the result of the fact that Tolkien continually changed his languages, even after publication. The Unifist argument claims that such discrepancies are the fault of the reader or researcher's inability to correctly and fully translate quotes due to the lack of a full lexicon for the languages.

The fourth stage, Scholars and Speakers, is one of the most popular stages with researchers. In this stage writers attempt to complete or "finish" the Tolkienian languages in the apparent goal to develop a living, usable language that they and others can speak. This stage has led researchers to trace the "roots" of various words, phonemes and grammatical rules in the hopes of accurately translating and eventually expanding the language. For example, although Tolkien specifically states that his languages are wholly created and not derivative of Earth languages, Michael D. C. Drout traces the roots of several Tolkienian words to Old and Middle English. He follows Tolkien's life before he became an author, traces his work and life experiences through the study of Old and Middle English, and discusses Tolkien's work with the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

This extensive research still leaves the author of science fiction and fantasy unaware of how the reader of such created languages responds to them. Tolkien and McKiernan both believed that the languages improved their books and helped to create worlds that were broader, more realistic and more believable to readers. Yet without research into this belief there can be no definitive answer as to whether or not created languages are a positive aspect of such books.

To find answers, I conducted two surveys following the pattern of T. A. Taha. Respondents were asked to grade excerpts of writing in created languages on a five point, Likert scale grading system. Because, as C. F. Voegelin and Z. S. Harris point out, the "practical divorce of linguistic work from cultural investigation often means that the final linguistic statements and the final cultural statements are incomplete" (457), I used two distinct surveys to explore the differences in language both with and without contextual information.

In the first survey, respondents were asked to judge the speakers based solely on excerpts of selected languages with no background information or translation. In the second, respondents were given longer excerpts: some include actions or descriptions of the speaker, others include descriptions of the locations in which the excerpt was spoken, and some contain the reactions of any listeners to the speech. Both studies present respondents with the same six languages: McKiernan's Sylva, Châkka, Sluk and Old Pellarian and Tolkien's Quenya and Numenorian. Respondents were asked to judge the speaker on four categories and to select the number that best represented where the language fit on the Likert scale between two categorical opposites. The categories were peaceful/warlike, intelligent/stupid, casual/formal and the traditional fiction dichotomy of good/evil.

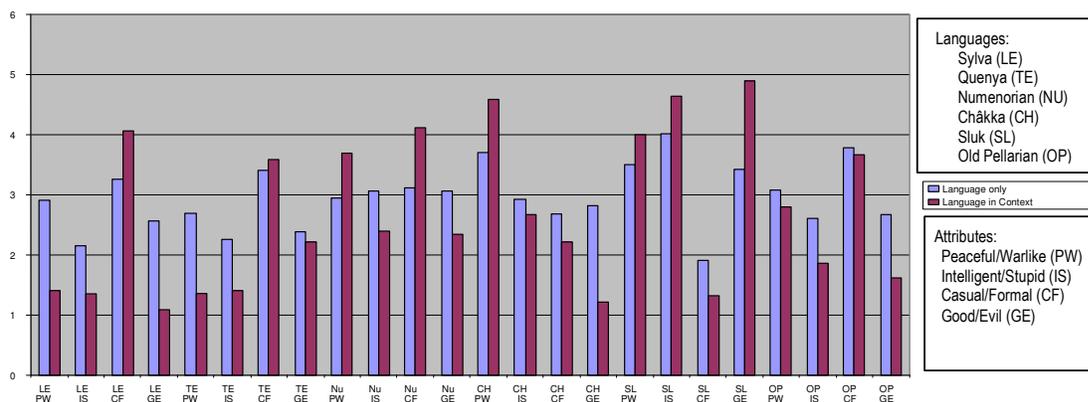
The first survey, in which respondents judge the characters based on language alone with no other context, was given to students at USC Upstate and posted in online writers' groups. One hundred forty-six people responded, twenty-three from USC Upstate and one hundred and twenty three from the Internet groups. Ninety-five respondents were female and fifty-one were male. Twenty-three were African American, ninety-nine were Caucasian, twenty-three were Hispanic and one was Asian. One hundred twenty-two spoke English as a primary language while twenty-four spoke other languages such as French, German or Spanish as their primary language. Fifty-eight spoke a second language and nine spoke a third language.

The second survey, in which respondents judged the characters based on language with the context given, was posted in online Yahoo groups for readers and writers in a variety of locations. Two hundred forty-five people responded. One hundred sixty-seven respondents were female and seventy-eight were male. Seventy-eight were African American, one hundred and twenty-three were Caucasian, forty-one were Hispanic and three were Asian. Two hundred spoke English as a primary language while forty-four spoke other languages like French, German or Spanish as their primary language. Eighty-seven spoke a second language and fourteen spoke a third.

In the first survey, answers varied widely and most categories averaged just slightly above or below average. Surprisingly, when the excerpts are considered in relation to the characteristics of the races as presented in the books of Tolkien and McKiernan, the study found that while individual readers may not be able to ascertain characteristics from language alone, the languages were effective overall. For example, both elven languages (Sylva and Quenya) were rated as formal (3.25 and 3.41 respectively) and peaceful (2.90 and 2.70 respectively). These languages, while distinct, have similarities in the use of certain phonemes. Neither uses hard /g/ or /k/ phonemes extensively and both rely largely on the use of fricatives such as /f/, /v/ and /s/ as well as nasal stops like /m/ and /n/. The language evaluations do match the two elven races which are presented very similarly by McKiernan and Tolkien, both show formality and peaceful natures (though both are excellent warriors as need dictates).

In the second survey answers were still somewhat varied, but more consistent with the depicted characteristics of the authors. Even in cases where the contextual information was little more than a description of the speaker's surroundings, readers were able to define the characteristics of Intelligent/Stupid and Good/Evil most accurately. While respondents to the first survey tended to average within a point and a half from the middle score of 3, respondents to the second survey were more comfortable to give ratings on the far ends of the scale and scores tended to be further from the median when context was included. Interestingly enough, while respondents were able to select characteristics with stronger certainty, in only three cases (Old Pellarian and Numenorian, in regards to Peaceful/Warlike and Numenorian Intelligent/Stupid) did the addition of context change the average scores to the opposite side of the spectrum. In nearly every other category the addition of context merely shifted the average score closer to the polar ends of the spectrums for whichever side of the mean the non-context language scores had already graded. In fact, the mean differential between scores given with and without context was only 0.781.

Table 1. Contrast in Ratings With and Without Context



Interestingly, there was some difference in how certain languages were judged by speakers of different primary languages. German speaking respondents rated Chakka and Sluk, both languages that frequently use the velar stops /k/ and /g/ as well as the bilabial stops /t/ and /d/, more positively than did the speakers of English, French or Spanish. The German response to these languages was typically at least a point more towards the positive end of the scale than the response given by other language speakers, while French respondents were the harshest on these same languages. When the second survey was used, this discrepancy decreased, which shows that the target audience's primary language should be considered with the creation of fictional languages. There were no apparent differences noted in the ratings when categorized by gender. Both males and females tended to rate equally. Scores between males and females averaged a 0.14 difference when no context was given and a 0.6 difference when the context was revealed to respondents.

Table 2. Châkka by Language—No Context

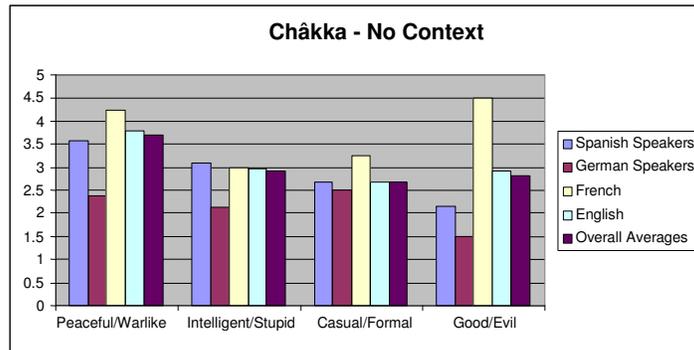


Table 3. Châkka by Language—With Context

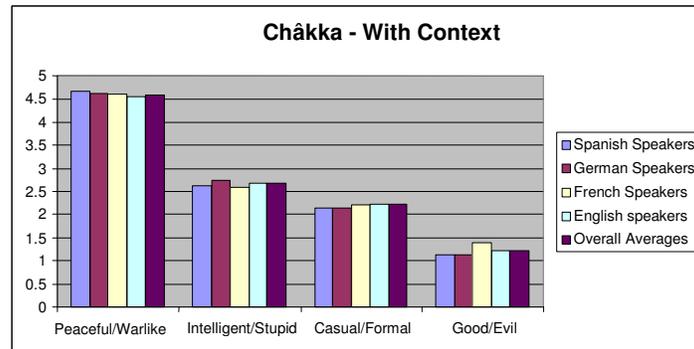


Table 4. Sluk by Language—No Context

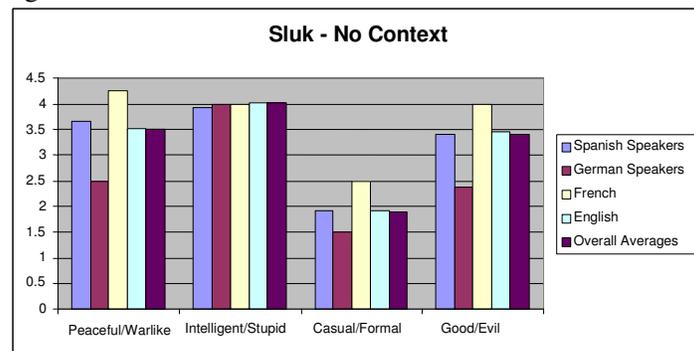
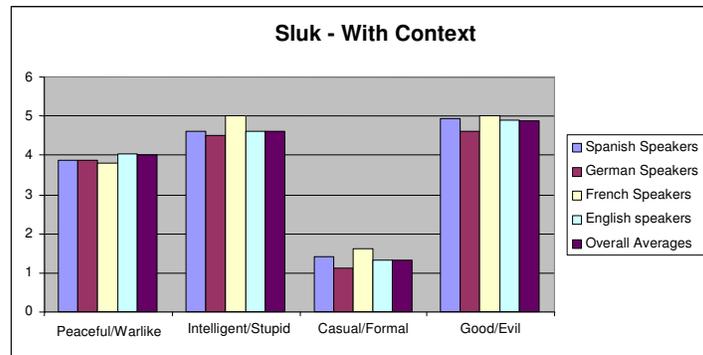


Table 5. Sluk by Language—With Context



The two surveys show that readers were able to evaluate and judge characteristics of speakers and races from the languages they speak. This result implies that authors of science fiction and fantasy should use created languages in their work to develop a broader world full of different cultures. Because of the differences in how certain languages were rated, it would be highly beneficial for writers to be aware of attitudinal studies regarding phoneme use and listener response. For example, the Dwarves of McKiernan's books are a race that fit in the fictional dichotomy of good and evil as a "good race." Due to the strong use of harsh sounds, selected to fit the dwarves' underground life and affinity with stone, many respondents rated the dwarves as evil unless the context material showed attitudes or behaviors that helped to develop the impression of the respondents.

Extensive research still needs to be conducted to ascertain more fully which phonemes are optimal for creating languages with a specific intended emotional response for readers. Such a study could not only help to create the perfect created language in fiction, but could also be adapted for use in persuasive speech and writing. The study can also be used by linguistics and English literature teachers in understanding how students view foreign languages and foreign characters based on the appearance of the language spoken by those characters as it is written. This study has shown that the use of created languages is beneficial to the science fiction fantasy writer. Eighty three percent of respondents to the second survey stated that the created languages made the worlds more believable. With such broad numbers, it is obvious that when we begin to create a world and play god, before we can call for light, we must have the language necessary to speak the command.

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