

# Linguists in Hollywood

BY JIM WILCE

NORTHERN ARIZONA U

In May and June this year, the Lingham listserv gave itself to the renewed Star Wars frenzy. What follows draws on that discussion.

I admit to surfing the web recently, looking for C-3PO, when I turned up this potential depiction of a linguistic anthropology graduate (un)lucky enough to be hired by the US State Department: "C-3PO is a protocol droid whose primary functions are etiquette and translation, making interaction between the myriad races of the galaxy possible. Protocol droids such as Threepio are particularly useful to diplomats like Princess Leia, who must be especially aware of the subtleties of custom and language among the other cultures they encounter." On that site ([www.starwars.com/characters/c-3p0/](http://www.starwars.com/characters/c-3p0/)), I also hear an echo of the mythic depiction of linguists as gifted polyglots: "[He is] capable of conversing in six million forms of communication." But, if George Lucas would replace linguistic anthropologists with machines, other sci-fi writers feel it essential to put philologists, linguists or anthropologists (more accurately, "xenobiologists," per Meyers 1980) in their human space crews. Loosely speaking, sci-fi often has linguistic anthropologists in its sights.

## Universal Language

Sci-fi gives us not only a view of ourselves as ethnographers and human beings but also a particular view of language. It is preoccupied with the problematic of interspecies communication. Whorf's own unpublished sci-fi novel, "The Ruler of the Universe," was unsuccessful, but his other writings led some sci-fi authors to focus whole books on the problem of linguistic relativity. Still, not all writers display such proclivities. David Samuels (U Mass, Amherst), believes Lucas, like most of today's great Hollywood storytellers, has a fairly instrumental theory of language: Language is for communi-

cating ideas from A to B, and all languages are equally up to that task. Star Wars is thus like a huge SIL convention, where there are no untranslatable phrases, and everyone can understand everyone else. The idea that the Force is something that would be understood differently in the context of different grammars is never broached.

This spring, moviegoers got their first glimpse of Lucas' character Jar Jar Binks. The *Los Angeles Times* immediately ran a story critiquing Lucas's racial stereotyping. Eric Harrison's article, "A Galaxy Far, Far Off Racial Mark?," focused on

language was spoken in the barroom scene in "Return," to no avail. But Bruce Mannheim (U Michigan) had an answer. Relating his first viewing of "Return of the Jedi" in Peru with Quechua speaking friends, Mannheim remembers hearing Quechua spoken in the barroom scene: A green character with a long snout—Greedo—speaks Southern Quechua through electronic distortion, with English subtitles running below, while Harrison Ford sits across a table and replies in English. After watching the video again, Mannheim reported that the Quechua consists of snippets of morphologically well-formed phrases:

Voice: *ch'aska n-awi huch'usun*  
"star eyes (a Q flirt) we'll get small"  
Subtitle: I'm lucky I found you first.



JJB and stereotyping. But the line of the Lingham discussion carried us to the question of what human language might have been used to create the Otherness of Jabba the Hut, Greedo and the Ewoks in "Return of the Jedi." Some real language played backwards? Perhaps Tibetan, Luo, Mandarin, Swahili or Filipino? Ben Zimmer (U Chicago) reported lines, purportedly in Swedish and Kikuyu, translated as, "It smells of cereal in here," and "One thousand herds of elephants are standing on my foot."

## Meaningless Quechua

Given their concern with the empirical as well as the Empire, some linguistic anthropologists contacted Lucas's office to discover what

Obviously, such subtling is for effect, not accuracy.

How did Quechua show up in the film? Kit Woolard (UC San Diego) eliminated at least one channel of transmission: Allen Sonnefrank, a Quechua speaker and fellow graduate student in linguistic anthropology at UC Berkeley when the film was released, told her that he had been contacted by the Lucas folks and asked to record some Quechua. Woolard remembered him saying that the plan was to run it backwards. Sonnefrank refused, considering it a potentially exploitative move best made by one whose first language was Quechua, if at all. Why the Lucas people would go to the trouble of recording a native speak-

er of Quechua only to misrepresent it remains a mystery.



## All Humans Speak English

To Hal Schiffman (Pennsylvania), of even more interest than the verisimilitude of languages used is the sociology of language (who speaks what to whom, when, where and why) in sci-fi films like Star Wars. Schiffman made five important observations:

1. All humans speak English; no human speaks anything but English. No French, no, Swahili, no Huttese, no nothin'.
2. Although Han Solo understands Chewbacca's Wookiegab, they carry on their conversations in a kind of mutual passive bilingualism.
3. Creatures may have their own languages, but they are translated by C-3PO.
4. Other creatures vocalize, but when it's not translated, it's used to confuse or amuse us rather than as actual representations of real language. Subtitling is used very sparingly.

5. Even in multilingual situations where C-3PO acts as translator (protocol droid), characters such as Jabba are expected to understand English, so C-3PO doesn't translate for them.

In support of Schiffman's fourth claim, Ben Zimmer points to the descriptions of alien languages given by Lucas in his original Star Wars script: "One of the vile little Jawas walks ahead of the farmer spouting an animated sales pitch in a queer, unintelligible language." And, "The Sandpeople speak in a coarse barbaric language as they get into an animated argument."

## Aliens Speak English, Too

The movie "Contact"—based loosely on Carl Sagan's book—on the other hand, is an account of Others who see human languages and technologies (including earthlings' paltry attempts to contact and understand those Others) as barbaric, though worth encouraging.

Samuels, adding a nuance to the discussion of English and aliens, argued that the tension surrounding English works itself out a little more richly than simply a human/alien dichotomy because aliens speak English, too—if we need to know what they're saying. The

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human/alien distinction, Samuels claims, works along the lines of feeling. There's a historical arc in the movies, from "if it's human it has feelings" to "if it has feelings it's human" (or humanizable).

Laada Bilaniuk (U Washington) found much linguistic, racial and gender stereotyping in "The Fifth Element." Evil mercenary aliens can morph into human appearance—always as African Americans. The aliens have their own language but are able to speak a very guttural English with humans while in alien form. They were hired by a Caucasian man in direct service to Evil—the only one in the movie who speaks with an obvious Southern US accent. The Fifth Element—the supreme being, played by Mila Jovovitch—purportedly speaks an ancient language (Bilaniuk recognized an Indo-European root here and there) until she learns English from a computer. She then speaks English with an accent in a very childish way, demonstrates super-human physical power, but in the end needs a man to unlock her power to save the world. She vacillates between seemingly incredible mental power and utter naivete—both marked linguistically in ways that reflect Hollywood notions of language.

I close with the observation that Jovovitch's rescue of the world also depended on Cornelius (played by Ian Holm), the linguist-priest who kept alive knowledge of the ancient tongue transmitting the Fifth

Element's secret. This French production thus takes its place alongside "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" and "Stargate," having placed the fate of the world on philologists' shoulders. Such films not only play with common conceptions of academic versus useful knowledge, but retain linguistic expertise as the domain of the few. Still, Hollywood's idea of a language and culture expert is the Orientalist, preoccupied with the exotic and with ancient dust, astoundingly ignorant of both the best of written science fiction and the last hundred years in anthropology.

*Jim Wilce is author of Eloquence in Trouble (1998), which is based on his five years in Bangladesh, and teaches linguistic anthropology at Northern Arizona U. Wilce notes that a serious classroom discussion of language and sci-fi should include Walter E Meyers' classic book, Aliens and Linguists (1980), and David Samuels' 1996 article highlighting what ethnography can learn from the way sci-fi presents otherness (Cultural Anthropology 11, 1, pages 88-118). Cinematic representation of languages other than English should be discussed in light of Jane Hill's analysis of Mock Spanish (www.cs.uchicago.edu/l-c/archives/subs/)—Hasta la vista, baby, and No problemo (sic)—in, for example, the Terminator films, and Rosina Lippi-Green's English with an Accent (1997), which analyzes linguistic stereotyping in Disney films.*

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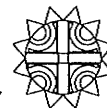
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