

Subversion and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in Contemporary Science Fiction

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Abstract

This article points out the ways in which the relationship between language and political resistance are problematized in “meta-linguistic” science fiction novels after the 1980s. Although the 20th century anti-utopias tend to view language as a prison house for thought and self-determination under oppressive regimes, Suzette Haden Elgin’s *Native Tongue* (1984), Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* (1992) and China Miéville’s *Embassytown* (2011) are distinct novels in the tradition of language-related science fiction, in the sense that these texts imagine possibilities of resisting oppressive power structures by exploring similar conceptions of language as a way of transforming cultural, perceptual and political realities. The article analyzes these novels where resistance is enacted in the forms of language construction, digital world-making and metaphorical language, in order to question their political and fictional potentials for formulizing subversion in our imagined futures.

1. Introduction

Language as a means of political control has been a popular theme within the so-called science fiction canon. Language in various science fiction texts is often depicted as a mechanism used by political power to oppress the masses and crush individual self-determination. However, the thematizing of language and linguistics in certain important contemporary science fiction dystopias not only emphasizes the dangers of language viewed as the prison of the mind, but also offers thought-provoking ways in which language can be utilized for gaining freedom from and creating solidarity against political oppression.

While depicting future societies in which similarly oppressive forms of power attempts to control the human body and consciousness, Suzette Haden Elgin’s *Native Tongue* (1984), Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* (1992) and China Miéville’s *Embassytown* (2011) also present the reader with possibilities of subverting such established regimes. In these novels, various marginalized groups try to build their political struggles around linguistic and discursive transformations in the forms of language construction, world building and metaphorical thinking. They fictionalize the reality-altering or reality-constitutive function of language and imbue it with subversive potential.

The American linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf's theory of linguistic relativism, also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, had a wide influence on science fiction dealing with linguistics and language related themes due to the former's implications for perception, cross-cultural communication and political power. Whorf believed that "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" (1956, 214). Language determines the ways in which reality is organized; therefore it is possible to alter one's reality by changing the structures of language. The word "calibration" is crucial here for it simply suggests the fact that the language of a given speaker can be altered. He or she may be forced or persuaded to use a different linguistic medium so that the perception of reality is altered. Mark Bould notes that, "Sf has often deployed Whorf's linguistic relativism to imagine cultures or species determined (to varying degrees) by their language" (Bould 2011, 231). The power of such linguistic determination became a recurring theme in science fiction as, from the last century on, the genre writers have speculated on similar ideas of language as a tool for political and psychological control, and quite naturally, as an arena on which fighting back those who control the means of certain ways of writing, speaking, and as a result *thinking* in various future worlds is imagined and speculated.

Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) are the most renowned examples of science fiction anti-utopias of the last century, in which language is utilized by the hegemonic authorities in order to subdue the masses. Jack Vance's *Languages of Pao* (1958) tells the story of a planet where the government imposes on the population three different languages, each being suitable to engineer the minds of warriors, scientists and merchants as distinct social classes. Samuel R. Delaney's *Babel-17* (1966) and Ian Watson's *The Embedding* (1973) form similar images of the idea of language as a prison-house for thought. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) imagines an anarchist society that discourages the use of possessives to promote collectivism as opposed to private ownership. The individuals in these novels are often immersed in and manipulated by the language(s) of an authoritative ideology that is hard to resist.

The inclusion of language as a resisting force in language-related science fiction novels begins during the 1980s. This seems to coincide with the popularity of post-structural criticism in the West, and with the dissemination of Michel Foucault's theories on the *biopolitical*. Science fiction in its dystopian expressions shares similarities with Foucault's conception of power in the Western modernity as an all-compassing control mechanism from which there is no escape. Foucault's biopolitics is the intersection point between human life and politics. The latter's sole purpose is to order, control and shape the former. Political power here sees human life as the totality of a population that needs to be studied, counted, disciplined and kept *healthy*. The dominant political discourses define the general *well-being* of the society and political power is responsible for maintaining it. Foucault gives an historical trajectory of *biopower* in the last part of the first volume of his renowned work, *The History of Sexuality* (1976), entitled "The Right of Death and the Power over Life." He points to a rupture in Western politics starting in the seventeenth century, from the *ancien régime* towards modernity: "One might say that the ancient right to take

life or let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death” (Foucault 2013, 43). This means that sovereignty, or the dominant political powers in general, took a firm hold on all aspects of life, from birth to death. Although Foucault focuses mostly on certain institutions like prison, mental hospitals and schools as the sites where the individual is constituted and *corrected*, the reach of his conception of political power is even more pervasive because we tend to internalize dominant discourses and become docile subjects in relation to power. Therefore, it is not surprising that science fiction dystopias in general view Foucault’s conception of power, as the darkest threat to human self-determination. The three novels analyzed in this article suggest ways of subverting the oppressive forms of such political power and their resistance strategies entail creating and transforming already existing languages and discourses. Giorgio Agamben’s theory of biopolitics sheds light on the relationship between language and political control.

Following Foucault’s theorization of the concept, Agamben builds his view of biopolitics as the dominant political regime in the Western modernity within which the individual human life is always secondary to political life as its object; as something to be ordered, ruled, manipulated and, if necessary, terminated. He locates this uneven relationship between the simple fact of life and political life as symptomatic of the so-called “democratic rule.” Agamben, in his seminal work entitled *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), notes the fact that the ancient Greeks used two different terms for what we call life: “*zoe*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (Agamben 1998, 5). Agamben claims that this dual understanding of biological life and political life as distinct categories must be problematized in our critical languages so that one can begin to question the authority that engages with and takes hold of life in contingent ways, such as legitimizing itself in ending certain lives, supposedly to protect an imagined, *healthy* entity called the general population. In this sense, viewing language as the very site of politics, and therefore as something that can be constructed and reconstructed, gives us possibilities for utilizing language for questioning and resisting oppression. *Native Tongue*, *Snow Crash* and *Embassytown* depict future societies in which political power is applied in such extreme forms as to foster and control life at once, yet various groups from precarious social positions manage to perform resistance to oppression by using language with an awareness of its linguistically relativist and truth-making character.

2. Language Construction as Resistance to Authority

Native Tongue (1984) by Suzette Haden Elgin, deals with the question of constructing a specifically “female” language for the use of women, a language by which women can contest their reduced status as living beings with no political agency for equality, self-determination and political participation. By creating a new linguistic medium, women attempt to appear as political agents before authority and demand the right to have rights within a system that does not recognize them as qualified for self-determination. Along with Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), which was published around the

same time, *Native Tongue* also addresses the feminist debate of the 1970s and 1980s, which claimed that patriarchy renders women voiceless and speechless. Being a professor of linguistics herself, Suzette Haden Elgin actually attempts to create a fully functioning “artificial” language called *Láadan*, with a grammar and dictionary, for women’s use in real life and tries to encourage its adoption and learning as a feminist act of resistance (Bray 1986, 51).

The novel is set in a twenty-second century North America where women are stripped of their political rights and live as entirely dependent on men. They are not allowed to have any meaningful occupation or control their own finances. The women in this society are valued merely for their reproductive functions and physical properties such as sexual appeal to the male sex. The global economy is based on trading with extraterrestrial civilizations that have contacted the Earth in the previous century. This form of transaction has resulted in the emergence of a distinct class of extended families, called “the Linguists,” whose job is to train their children in various alien languages starting from infancy, and employs them to work as interpreters in trade negotiations with other planets. Having been raised in these privileged families, yet still oppressed and treated like men’s property, a group of female Linguists decide to use their technical knowledge of linguistics to construct *Láadan*, a language specifically constructed to express the concerns and experience of women only. By doing this, they aim to transform their brutally patriarchal society into an egalitarian one. The women attempt to accomplish this by voicing their concerns in a language only at their own disposal. From the outset, this attempt seems rather idealistic, given the fact that these women resist to a world in which they are completely excluded from power.

Under such circumstances, the women believe that if they adopt *Láadan* as their native tongue, this will in turn enable them to promote equality and non-violence by raising awareness for the possibility of a future that can be thought outside the current, hegemonic language of patriarchy. After the female Linguists begin using *Láadan* among themselves, the male household members suddenly find it unbearable to live with them because the women do not conform to the established female image any longer. They give up trying to explain themselves or to change the attitudes of men towards them. Following this, the women are accused of acting like robots. After losing the traditional role patterns acted out in common language, the Linguist patriarchs decide to send their female counterparts to live in separate houses as a form of punishment, a punishment that ironically provides the women with more freedom to engage in language making.

The events in *Native Tongue* begin in the year 2205, when it has just been found out that the main female character, Nazareth Chornyak, who is nearly forty years old, has uterine and breast cancer. In accordance with the fact that the women are reduced to bare life as distinct from political life, Nazareth’s body is the discussion topic of an all-male meeting of the household in the opening chapter of the novel. The men are gathered around a table to decide what kind of surgery Nazareth will be allowed to have. Nazareth is granted a surgery that will remove her breasts but not the right to a breast-regenerative surgery. After the surgery, since she is no longer of any value for reproductive purposes, she is ordered to live in a “Barren House” with other discarded, sexually and biologically “useless”

women. This physical seclusion gives the women a level of freedom to engage in the so-called “encoding project”, that is, the construction of their new native language.

Whereas in the English language the male is normative, in Láadan the feminine is always normative. For example, the word “with” refers to a person or a woman in general, whereas one must say “withid” while referring specifically to a man because “-id” acts as the masculine suffix (Bruce 2008, 55). Any female Linguist taking part in the secret language project is expected to come up with concepts that cannot be expressed sufficiently in the patriarchal, dominant language. This is called lexical encoding and is defined as “the way that human beings choose a particular chunk of their world, external or internal, and assign that chunk a surface shape that will be its name; it refers to the process of word-making” (NT, 22). This sort of encoding is not of political urgency because it is viewed as a mere act of renaming. What is of subversive potential is the act of bringing previously unnamed concerns, injustices and experiences into the realm of reality by naming them. The female Linguists call this act “Encoding”:

When we women say ‘Encoding’ with a capital ‘E,’ we mean something a little bit different. We mean the making of a name for a chunk of the world that so far as we know has never been chosen for naming before in any human language, and that has not just suddenly been made or found or dumped upon your culture. We mean naming a chunk that has been around a long time but has never before impressed anyone as sufficiently important to deserve its own name. (Chornyak Barren House, *Manual for Beginners*, page 71) (NT, 22)

It is important to note that a new lexical item is constitutive of reality as long as it refers to a hitherto unnamed “chunk” of culture. Encoding “with a capital E” must be especially relevant to women’s concerns. It is not a free-play of language, but a purposeful attempt for voicing the unvoiced and revealing what has been so far deemed unimportant and repressed by the male authority. Each encoding must deserve its place by being urgent but not brought forth *yet*. The concepts must come “naturally” and only to women, because they derive only from women’s own unique experiences. They yearn for being lexicalized and thus brought into being:

But there is no way at all to search systematically for capital-E Encodings. They come to you out of nowhere and you realize that you have always needed them; but you can’t go looking for them, and they don’t turn up as concrete entities neatly marked off for you and flashing NAME ME. They are therefore very precious. (Chornyak Barren House, *Manual for Beginners*, page 71) (NT, 22)

Although Láadan is a constructed language with a grammar and lexicon created by the author, it rarely appears in the novel. This can be seen as a strategy on the author’s part to direct the reader’s attention to the feminist movement itself rather than the cognitive estrangement that Láadan would likely cause. We are given an appendix at the end of *Native Tongue* titled “*A First Dictionary and Grammar of Láadan*” and it lists a number of Láadan words for the reader to get an idea of the language. The Encodings follow the same logic of belonging specifically to women’s experience. A few examples are as follows:

raheena: non-heart-sibling, one so entirely incompatible with another that there is no hope of ever achieving any kind of understanding or anything more than a truce, and no hope of ever making such a one understand why... does not mean "enemy" (NT, 303)

rarih: to deliberately refrain from recording; for example, the failure throughout history to record the accomplishments of women. (303)

wohosheni: a word meaning the opposite of alienation; to feel joined to, part of someone or something without reservations and barriers. (304)

These examples of encodings are often about emotions and interpersonal relationships. It is repeatedly emphasized that the language is so designed that it works as an instrument only for female expression and emancipation. This logic suggests an affinity with various 20th century forms of feminisms that are often criticized for being essentialist when it comes to sexual and identity differences.

The construction of Láadan can be better understood in relation to French feminism's preoccupation with *écriture féminine*, or "feminine writing." For Hélène Cixous, a major French theoretician of *écriture féminine*, there is a close link between female sexuality and feminine writing. They are both multiple and function in an excessive mode. On the other hand, the hegemonic male writing is always economic, calculated, goal-oriented and it is based on exchange value. In *Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays* (1975), Cixous locates excess in language and feminine writing. She contends: "Rare are the men able to venture onto the brink where writing, freed from law, unencumbered by moderation, exceeds phallic authority, and where the subjectivity inscribing its effects becomes feminine" (Cixous 1975/2003, 43).

While Cixous's feminine writing remains largely theoretical, one can see Láadan as an attempt to embody femininity in speech and writing. In line with Cixous's theory, Láadan is excessive for two reasons. First, it is very much uncalled for as far as the authority is concerned. It is also deemed subversive because the men are aware of the fact that a given language may incorporate a novel way of looking at the world, a lesson learnt from their experience with the non-human beings. Second, Láadan is excessive because it was constructed not only as a fictional novelty to make a point, but also as the female alternative to the languages of patriarchy already present in the real world. Like the female characters in the novel, Elgin's readers are encouraged to learn and speak Láadan to subvert patriarchy. The very act of renaming experience in supposedly female terms turns feminine difference into political statements. As Martin Halliwell and Andy Mousley point out, "Cixous externalizes excess by thinking about it less in terms of the unseen depths of the self, than in terms of language and its effects" (Halliwell & Mousley 2013, 35). Following in French feminism's footsteps, Elgin is engaged in making invisible differences visible in Láadan, so that they can disturb the male order and create change.

Apart from its political potential, Láadan can be said to ultimately replicate the binary pattern in language by its reversal of gender categories, instead of foregrounding the exclusion of women from politics. Nevertheless, the novel has the undeniable merit of viewing language as constitutive of thought, hence the political systems. Although the women's language reproduces the patriarchal gender essentialisms, the construction of Láadan allows the women to perform their embodied subject positions in new ways: acting as if they care about what men say while refusing to argue with them, and hiding their language construction process behind stereotypically female activities such as knitting, in order to keep their political agenda undiscovered.

In her reading of *Native Tongue*, Ildney Cavalcanti (2000) proposes a symbolic reading of Láadan. She believes that the language should not be seen as “a *literal* representation of empirical women's search for a perfectly true language, of perfectly naming of experience” (164). She suggests that instead of the plausible picture of a group of “real” women working on the construction of a common language for themselves, “Láadan is better understood as a metaphor for one version of a feminist ‘elsewhere,’ which serves as a source of inspiration for transformative action and without which feminism loses its *raison d'être*” (164). Although the foundational binary logic of the language corresponds perfectly to *écriture féminine's* essentialism, this performative premise of the act of construction itself works as a means of creating a site of performance for the women.

Native Tongue ends with the idea that although it is possible to affect and resist the status quo by transforming language, that is never enough to revolutionize the deeply established patriarchal capitalism. Soon after they begin to use Láadan, the women are seen as robots or aliens by their husbands and other male family members. When it is seen as in this novel, as a lens for seeing the reality anew, or even changing it, is not language yet another technology that stands between the given and constructed? Marking themselves as self-constructed aliens in the eyes of men, the women blur the boundaries between what is human and non-human. Rosi Bradiotti (2013) claims that in our contemporary world “the binary opposition between the given and the constructed is currently being replaced by a non-dualistic understanding of nature-culture interaction” (3).

In the case of the Linguist women, putting into operation a constructed *native* language to speak of their experience and replicating the binary logic of the existing, dominant language does not solve their problems and transform their society into a non-violent one. The reason is that the Linguist women attempt to reach a totality, a wholeness of an all-women multitude, without considering that such an idea of wholeness is the very humanist and anthropocentric premise with which the men operate. Like Katherine Hayles (1999) rightly asserts: “We do not need a totality in order to work well. The feminist dream of a common language, like all dreams for a perfectly true language, of perfectly faithful naming of experience, is a totalizing and imperialist one” (31). I partly agree with Hayles that aiming for a faithful naming of experience is in its essence a totalitarian project because it disregards differences within a group. The novel does not include non-white women, foreigners, LGBTQ individuals or any other group that may be even more oppressed in their society. This lack or silence can be seen as the end-result of such dream of a totality.

On the other hand, the very attempt of creating a counter-language is a crucial first step in any movement of political resistance. It not only promotes solidarity and connectivity, but also attacks and transforms the oppressive concepts embedded in the languages of authority. So the essentialist nature of the language project in the novel can be ignored only in the beginning as a strategy. Yet, any transformation of the discourse on sex and gender has to be non-essentialist so that the constructed character of such grand categories as sex, gender, human and the other can be revealed.

3. Language as a Model for Resistance in Digital Worlds

Similar to *Native Tongue*, the political discourse and practices that divide life into the bare life of the marginalized and the political life as its ultimate determinant, shape the resistance built around language in Neal Stephenson's cyber-punk novel, *Snow Crash* (1992). The novel is set in a near-future North America where the private sector has dismantled the federal government almost entirely. Life is partly lived in real world and in Metaverse, the latter being a virtual platform on which people "materialize" in a digitally generated environment simulating an urban landscape, through their personal representations called avatars. The daily life is centred on real-virtual and human-machine oppositions and their fusion. In this dual environment, a media mogul called L. Bob Rife, who owns the network infrastructure of Metaverse, attempts to control the masses by affecting their language faculties. To this end, he introduces a virus into the human bodies, a virus that affects people both in reality and virtual reality.

Rife plans to spread the virus called snow crash, which destroys the immune system of the body, switching the human brain back to its pre-Babel state. In this state, the human mind is susceptible to being programmed by the ur-language, or the "logocentric" Sumerian language, in which the word is merely the manifestation of the single, all-encompassing truth. The virus is disseminated by an addictive drug and by infected blood. There is also a digital version of the virus and it affects the minds and bodies of hackers, since their brains are used to thinking in the binary logic of computer languages. The novel revolves around the story of how a group of hackers and a female courier join their efforts to make people immune to the virus, with the help of an artificial intelligence and a cyborg/animal hybrid. While the hacker Hiro Protagonist and the courier Y.T. try to destroy the virus, they realize that both are exploited and marginalized as vessels for information in the capitalist system. It is only when they learn to collaborate with each other as well as with the other marginalized characters that they succeed in preventing Rife's scheme to turn people into biological machines.

The protagonist, aptly named Hiro Protagonist, is both a hacker and a pizza deliverer. As a hacker, his job is to gain unauthorized access to various data and sell them to others to make a living. Only when he connects into Metaverse and "materializes" in it as his self-created avatar does Hiro experience a sense of fulfilment. His sense of existing in a community is different from the negative one in "Reality," for the former is based on a shared culture of experts, and it only suggests positive qualities such as self-expression, creativity and helping one's fellow hackers. Self-creation is seen on par with "writing." The

bodies embodied in the form of language in this disembodied platform are open-ended and can become different any minute. By writing for himself an avatar that looks almost the same as his “real” body, Hiro asserts his authenticity in the virtual space and attains a sense of continuity between reality and virtual reality.

Your avatar can look any way you want it to, up to the limitations of your equipment. If you're ugly, you can make your avatar beautiful. If you've just gotten out of bed, your avatar can still be wearing beautiful clothes and professionally applied makeup. You can look like a gorilla or a dragon or a giant talking penis in the Metaverse. (SC, 44)

Hiro fashions himself as a Japanese samurai to stress his Japanese heritage as well as his resilience. In this way he resists the social inscription on his body as a marginalized pizza delivery person in reality. His virtual body gains a freedom of movement and access to knowledge as well as opportunities for self-creation by language not possible in the material world. To repeat Christopher Breu's (2014) commentary on our historical moment, our era is “simultaneously an era preoccupied with immateriality and one defined by biopolitics” (1-2). Breu also claims that “Both the privileging of the so-called immaterial or virtual and the idea of complete biopolitical control imagine a material world that is a passive site of inscription and unproblematic manipulation” (1-2). Yet the existence of such a platform as Metaverse complicates the relationship between the material and immaterial by giving the political agents opportunities for engaging in subversive action while remaining physically intact. They can communicate, assemble, plan concerted action and elude the state mechanisms.

The new ways of mobilizing against authority, introduced by such technologies as Metaverse, are only meaningful when coupled with the awareness that language makes reality. The novel uses the Judeo-Christian account of Babel in order to form its central, structuring analogy that the human beings are computer-like in the sense that both humans and computers are both “spoken to” through languages so that they perform certain actions. As in the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis, it is only through linguistic communication that experience attains meaning. The virus in the novel works to restore the human masses back to their pre-Babel status of linguistic monologism, which the novel explains as a machine-like state due to the lack of other languages, meaning here the lack of subversion.

While searching for the virus's origin and possible cure, Hiro comes across a computer program called *the Librarian* that seems to contain all the historical knowledge concerning the character of the virus. As the Librarian explains, Bob Rife has discovered that although the analogy between computers and humans is a new one, its origin is as old as the human civilization itself:

Computers rely on the one and the zero to represent all things. This distinction between something and nothing—this pivotal separation between being and nonbeing—is quite fundamental and underlies many Creation myths. (...) Even the word “science” comes from an Indo-European root meaning “to cut” or “to separate.” (SC, 249)

According to the Librarian, it is not the Judeo-Christian God that destroyed the original linguistic wholeness of humanity as told in the Biblical myth of Babel. Preceding the collapse of the tower, the people in Babel were merely “biomass” unable to formulate metaphors and novel ways of making sense of their world. Therefore, the Sumerian hacker/God Enki created “a speech with magical force,” a software to make language diverge rather than stay monolithic. In this account, Enki was the first one to realize the dangers of language as mind control. It was possible to control the human body by controlling its language. This linguistic prehistory of the human community was the ideal state for totalitarian rule because the absence of different languages equaled the absence of opposing political views. Simply put, we owe politics to the fact that human beings tend to speak different languages, and perceive the world differently through the lens of their languages. In this sense, those who spoke the Sumerian language were not qualified as political agents, but they were merely living organisms to be exploited. The word of God is constitutive of reality. The language of the Logos is fully and ideally performative as it does what it says in the moment of utterance:

Early linguists, as well as the Kabbalists, believed in a fictional language called the tongue of Eden, the language of Adam. It enabled all men to understand each other, to communicate without misunderstanding. It was the language of the Logos, the moment when God created the world by speaking a word. In the tongue of Eden, naming a thing was the same as creating it. (SC, 330)

Bob Rife formulates the Snow Crash virus in order to make people return to the time before Enki intervened. The Librarian explains that this virus was still latent in the human brain after the Tower of Babel was abandoned. This virus is what renders the human brain susceptible to “viral ideas” such as conspiracy theories, religions and political ideologies. The only thing preventing the world from being taken over by such metanarratives is that we share a mutual incomprehension with one another. Incomprehension is not a negative quality but the very source of political life. Stephenson celebrates the diversity of languages as the source of resistance to the society, which encapsulates the individual as a consuming and consumed body within the language of segregation and advertisement. Communities resist being taken over by the viral discourses of capitalism through linguistic diversification. We manage to have a political existence in addition to our bare lives due to this diversification.

With the efforts of Hiro and his friends, the infested people, or “the biomass” stop speaking in tongues in a climactic moment at the end of the novel. Being no longer under the effect of the virus, they stop speaking in tongues, the ur-language of Babel. They can once again speak their diverse tongues and this brings back the immunity against being controlled without resistance. Interestingly, Hiro at this point stresses the importance of a creative and multiple use of language as a hacker/world-builder. Hackers are the new intelligentsia of the digital age who understand that language is power, because only by creating his/her reality within language can one have a resisting force as a political agent:

Rife's key realization was that there's no difference between modern culture and Sumerian. We have a huge workforce that is illiterate or aliterate and relies on TV which is sort of an oral tradition. And we have a small, extremely literate power elite, the people who go into the Metaverse, basically, who understand that information is power, and who control society because they have this semimystical ability to speak magic computer languages. (SC, 483)

It only stands to reason that one can extend this new form of literacy to millions of people today. The creative function of language as a means of building the virtual reality is, thankfully, not confined to a power elite in the twenty-first century. Today, more and more people have access to new communication technologies and they participate actively in the production and circulation of discourses. The idea of language as constitutive of reality expands into the sphere of our digital existence. The message of the novel is that having an awareness of the constitutive character of language is key to resistance against mind-control. Not only our in-built faculty of processing languages, but our modes of creating multiple realities through linguistic means is what makes us political agents in the end.

4. Language and Metaphors as a Means of Creating Solidarity

It can be claimed that China Miéville's *Embassytown* (2011) brings together the idea of language as a strong determinant of the perceived reality, as it is explored in *Native Tongue*, with the idea that language can have a unique potential of bringing together distinctly different species with worldviews shaped by mutually incomprehensible biological and linguistic factors. The distinction between the alien and human worldviews in this text can be viewed as a metaphor that stands for the supposedly unbridgeable gaps across species and opposing political groups. Stressing the metaphor-making function of language, the novel sets out to claim that it is language that shapes both our political situation and hence our material conditions. Language and discourse shape politics because they make truth claims by signifying, reformulating or making things up. These truth claims in turn constitute the life worlds in which we are embedded as living beings.

The novel is set in Arieka, a faraway planet located on the edge of the known universe. The human population called Terre lives in the eponymous town, which is a colonial outpost of an imperial and expansionist human federation. The humans are able to survive in Arieka with the help of the Arieke, or the "Hosts," the indigenous species of the planet. The imperial federation rules this distant settlement with a few appointed officials from the center, as well as with "the Ambassadors," a special group of people who work as intermediaries between the Arieke and humans. The Ambassadors are bred in human farms from infancy; they are genetically engineered and enhanced, so that they can speak the alien language of the Hosts and communicate with them. This image of the genetically engineered Ambassadors shows how political power manipulates the body for its purposes and uses these posthuman bodies for political purposes.

The story is narrated from the perspective of the protagonist, Avice Benner Cho, a female Embassytowner. Avice is a young girl when the narrative begins, and she is at first representative of the common human attitude towards the Hosts. Avice, like any other

child, was born and raised in a communal children's home by "shiftparents," a group of employees whose job is to take care of the human children. This social formation is very much an indicator of the oppressive character of power in the human society in the novel. The traditional family structure that is responsible for raising infants is replaced with a disciplinary state apparatus. Similar to many canonical, early twenty-century dystopias, such as Huxley's *Brave New World*, it is the state power that has the absolute control over the entire life cycle, from conception to death.

In this strictly controlled environment, the division between power and those who are shaped and kept alive by power is accompanied by another stark separation: the human and non-human beings. As children, Avice and her friends often play in areas near the air-walls dividing the alien Host areas and the human settlements. This is a dangerous act due to the fact that the natural atmosphere inhaled by the Hosts is lethal for the human body. Despite this danger, Avice one day finds herself beyond the walls while trying to help a poisoned friend. Her first encounter with the alien bodies around her defies her ability to make meaning out of it. Her human language cannot describe the encounter. On the other hand, it is not only the human language that is insufficient in signifying alterity. Language of the Hosts is also portrayed as impossibly strange in the narrative. The strangeness of their "Language" reflects the indescribable alterity of the alien body and mind. Since the alien language lacks the ability to form metaphors, the Hosts require concrete human bodies and acts so that they can use these as basis for certain allusions they need to make. For us humans, a non-signifying language bereft of metaphorical structures is quite impossible to imagine. This is, however, exactly the point that the novel tries to make. The question here, as in *Native Tongue* and *Snow Crash*, is whether or not it is possible to imagine a world beyond language. This also reveals the underlying paradox for any science fiction narrative dealing with alien alterity. How can an extraterrestrial phenomenon be conceived or represented by the human mind and language?

In line with this seeming impossibility, the political arguments raised by the novel also centre on the idea of language as the basis of reality. After her puzzling encounter with the aliens, Avice is somewhat picked by them to be a "human simile" so that they can use her as a reference point in their speech. Avice is asked to perform certain acts for the Hosts in order to become a living figure of speech. A few government officials accompanied by an ex-ambassador take Avice to a derelict restaurant between Embassytown and the Host city. Avice, though she endures this *ordeal*, sees it as "the least comprehensible event" in her life. The Hosts give Avice certain things to eat and she is otherwise expected to remain quite passive during the entire event. The tasks Avice must fulfil are supposed to hurt but we are not told what these hurtful tasks are. The enigma posed by the fact that this performance requires her tolerance of pain is clarified only later when Avice finds out that her performance is used by the aliens for referring to passivity, obedience and resistance to change in their language. In this mysterious set-up, the actual bodily acts are incorporated into a language that otherwise lacks the means of uttering abstractions. The fact that her own language fails to describe the event frightens her more than the bodily pain she endures:

It was quite bearable. It was, however, the least comprehensible event that had or has ever happened to me. I was surprised by how much that upset me. For a long time the Hosts didn't pay attention to me, but performed precise mimes. They raised their giftwings, they stepped forward and back. I could smell their sweet smell. I was frightened. I'd been prepared: it was imperative for the sake of the simile that I act my part perfectly. (E, 25)

The whole incident is used to reverse our traditional anthropocentrism that supposes anything non-human is an object for the human being to perceive and understand. However, this time the human body itself is the object of a language that it cannot even comprehend. Avice has to be made into a "human simile" because the aliens are unable to utter lies and construct metaphors. They need literal references to speak their Language. Avice becomes "a figure of speech" in Language and begins to be "spoken." Although the Ambassadors tell her that a literal translation of her role in Language is not possible to convey, Avice is referred to as "the girl who ate what was given to her." Avice gets physically hurt during the ordeal. As a result she gets embodied in Language as a simile used to mean those who submit, conform to the status-quo or do as they are told. The event also gives her status among her friends because even being in the same room with the Hosts is of great importance for the commoners. Perplexed by the event and eager to find out what this means, Avice asks an Ambassador about her new status as a part of Language when she is invited to the Embassy the following day. They try to explain to her what she "means":

The Ambassadors spoke to me in the language of our Hosts. They spoke me: they said me. They warned me that the literal translation of the simile would be inadequate and misleading. There was a human girl who in pain ate what was given her in an old room built for eating in which eating had not happened for a time. (26)

This inadequate and hidden meaning of herself as a human simile, or "the girl who ate what was given her" haunts Avice into her adulthood. In order to understand what this means she eventually marries a foreign linguist named Scile who has a scientific interest in the alien language of the Arieke. Scile's explanation of the Arieke Language points towards a logocentrism because the alien language is not a means of conveying thoughts about reality, but the literal representation of reality itself. Language does not signify but it rather points to the soul speaking it. Scile explains that the alien language can only work when the speaker is present. Meaning cannot be conveyed in writing or in recorded speech:

"But the Ariekei . . . when they speak they *do* hear the soul in each voice. That's how the meaning lives there. The words have got . . ." He shook his head, hesitating, then just using that religious term. "Got the soul in them. And it has to be there, the meaning. Has to be true to be Language. That's why they make similes." (56)

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is taken to an extreme point here. The properties of a given language not only shape the ways in which reality is formulated; language itself is the only reality there is. This is the point at which language gains its political significance. If the alien language in question is unable to form metaphors, simply suggesting that something is indeed something else, how can the aliens have truths? As Friedrich Nietzsche famously declares in his *On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense* (2010), all truth claims are illusions

because language is nothing more than a conglomeration of metaphors, that can be interpreted as lies depending on one's perspective. Truths that are made of "metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms..." are regarded as such only because the society has the legitimacy to declare them as such. In this sense, language for Nietzsche is a site of power struggle where different versions of truths and lies are in a constant battle for legitimacy. Language is the basis for political existence.

As the fairly dense plot of the novel unfolds, we find out that the human government ruling the settlement has colonial ambitions regarding the planet. Since politics is only possible with the ability of producing lies/truths, the aliens have no choice but to transform their language so that they themselves can become a political force against the human government. A group within the aliens struggle to utter lies in their language so that they can become a resisting force. The alien named surl/teshecher becomes the leader of the rebellious group as the most successful liar among the aliens. Consequently the human government sees this movement as a threat to their existence on the planet. The human community led by Scile and the Ambassadors decide to crush the movement. In order to eliminate the threat, the humans and Ambassadors rely on the intoxicating effect of lying on the alien brains.

The only humans who can speak the alien language are the Ambassadors because they speak the language in pairs with modified and synchronized brains. When the Ambassadors lie in the alien language, this gives the effect that their speech is there and not there at the same time. As a result, the aliens experience the untrue statements as hallucinatory. The speech by a pair of Ambassadors called Ez and Ra (EzRa) makes the aliens especially addicted to its hallucinogenic effect, because their mental link as a modified pair has a defect. The aliens initially become ecstatic when they hear the voice of EzRa but later they become delirious due to withdrawal symptoms. This puts the human government officials in a difficult position because the Hosts soon begin to demand new doses of EzRa's speech. The aliens soon begin to show violent behavior towards the humans. The two species get to the brink of war.

In this war, Avice takes side with the aliens, after realizing that they actually suffer and they are not intentionally violent. An alien, which Avice names Spanish Dancer, shows strong desire to change and break the addiction. As mentioned earlier, Avice is part of the alien language as a reference point, a simile that the aliens use to mean helplessness and passivity. Yet her recent active resistance to her own species contradicts Avice's initial meaning for the aliens. This contradiction inspires Avice to "use" her in two different meanings: submission and resistance. She thinks that this will enable the aliens to utter lies themselves and stop being addicted to the human speech. As Spanish Dancer tries hard to lie, the contradiction in language hurts its body:

It's not good that we are this. We wish to be other than this. We're like the girl who was hurt in darkness and ate what was given her (...) There was a long silence. We want instead to be like the girl who was hurt in darkness and ate what was given to her in that we want to be . . . and then there was silence again, and Spanish Dancer shook its limbs. (E, 261)

Avice realizes that by using her as a simile, the aliens all along have been trying to lie and make their own truths: "I had to be hurt and fed to be speakable, because it had to be true. But what they say with me . . . That's true because they make it" (E, 296) Similes are a gateway to lies, "a route from literal description to signifying." She now wishes to become a metaphor instead of a simile for the aliens. Metaphors, as understood in the novel, have political importance because they allow the self to claim to be someone or something else, making solidarity between different groups possible. If the self can be the other, it opens up possibilities for assembling against authority, and consequently for change. We see Avice and the hosts striving to transform the alien language from an essentially logocentric one into a language devoid of a transcendental signified. Jacques Derrida, in *Of Grammatology* (1997), identifies logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence as "the exigent, powerful, systematic and irrepressible desire" for a transcendental signified that "would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign" (49). The reassuring end here is the soul behind speech in the alien language. Removing this endpoint of signification, this ultimate assurance for meaning becomes the aim of the aliens' rebellion, because only with the reality-making power of language comes self-determination.

As Avice forces Spanish Dancer, the alien fails to form sentences that can mean that he (or it) is metaphorically Avice, or "the girl who ate what was given her in darkness." Spanish Dancer can be "like Avice" but cannot "be Avice." When Avice insists that the Hosts say that they are not like her but her, the aliens start shaking. An Ambassador who is helping Avice objects: "What've you done? (...) You've driven them mad", and Avice answers: "Good (...) We're insane, to them: we tell the truth with lies" (E, 308). Finally, after being pushed by Avice further and further, Spanish Dancer manages to omit "like" and can finally tell Avice: "I am you."

You are the girl who ate. I'm Spanish/dancer. I'm like you and I am you. Someone human gasped. Spanish craned its eye-coral and stared at its own fanwing. Two eyes came back to look at me. I have markings. I'm a Spanish dancer. I didn't take my eyes off it. I'm like you, waiting for change. The Spanish dancer is the girl who was hurt in darkness. (E, 309)

To everyone's astonishment, by assisting the aliens from their journey from literalness to metaphorical language, Avice indirectly manages to stop the aliens from destroying the Embassytown. It can be said that this ending has multiple meanings. The Arieke has to adopt the human ability to tell lies in order to resist the status quo. Only when they start using metaphors they can start imagining themselves as a group with shared interests. In the concluding chapter of the novel, Spanish Dancer gives a speech to its fellow Arieke and promises change and unity like a political orator:

Before the humans came we didn't speak (...) We didn't speak, we were mute, we only dropped the stones we mentioned out of our mouths, opened our mouths and had the birds we described fly out, we were vectors, we were the birds eating in mindlessness, we were the girl in darkness, only knowing it when we weren't anymore. (336)

This resistance can only be actualized when the self and the other mutually include and represent each other and their shared status of being the centre of objectification by the language of power. This language of power is, of course, laden with the tradition of Western metaphysics that is based on a clearly cut distinction between the human self and the non-human other. By extending the capacity for a signifying linguistic medium to the sphere of the non-human, the novel ultimately contests the parameters for defining the human as the sole giver of meaning in the universe. As a user of metaphors, Spanish Dancer tells Avice at the end of the novel that language is a “lie that truths” or a “truthing lie” (E, 337), and the alien gives Avice these expressions as a gift; a token of their shared struggle against the human truth which has, up to that point, claimed that they cannot understand or feel for each other. The novel ultimately suggests that resistance to dominance is only possible with the very human ability of imagining different futures.

5. Conclusion

Taking the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as a starting point and working out the idea that language structures the ways in which reality is perceived, these three futuristic science fiction novels ultimately suggest that if the perception of reality is affected by language, this function of language can be thought in potentially subversive ways. Simply put, reality can be transformed via linguistic transformation. This also leads to a realization that politics is always a constructed discourse and can be countered with language. Although the future societies depicted in these works are very different in terms of setting, inhabitants and political formations, they all share a starkly similar logic of political power. The lives of both human and non-human sentient beings are equally subjected to absolute authorities that set the norms in which language should be used. By controlling language, power not only legitimizes its rule, but also excludes certain marginalized groups from politics as passive subjects to be exploited. Language in these novels is the site of power in which the separation between political power and the docile individual is enacted. In the languages used by the oppressive powers in these novels, women, aliens and outcasts need to be represented in such ways as to keep the power structures intact. Contrary to the idea favoured by the political power, however, language is never monolithic and immutable, but it is always multiple, dynamic and protean.

The marginalized groups in the novels reject their silenced and subjugated status and speak back to power in order to demand self-determination. They attempt to actualize their subversion through language use. In *Native Tongue* it is the women who are objectified and severely punished for being the so-called second sex. They resist patriarchy by constructing a language of their own so that they can transform the dominant discourse and eventually the world. In the cyber-punk world of *Snow Crash*, anyone refusing to obey to the dominant power network is automatically marginalized as an outcast. The resistance is formed in both virtual life and real life to subvert a system aiming to destroy the diversification of language and thought, and finally any opposition to authority. Finally, *Embassytown* emphasizes the fact that reality is nothing more than discursive formations in the form of truths and lies. The human ability of speaking in metaphors allows the language user to imagine the world otherwise. A given signifier can stand for something that it is not

in metaphorical thinking. Inspired by this logic, the novel suggests that we can always imagine ourselves in a metaphorical ways as the other. This in turn creates solidarity among marginalized groups, against established power structures that control language as well as the objectified masses.

Using of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as a trope of science fiction takes the form of language construction in *Native Tongue*, and it transforms the embodied action of the characters, turning them into a subversive group that rejects the dominant language. The linguistic relativity at the centre of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, meaning that each language interprets the world differently, is itself a subversive value to fight for in *Snow Crash*. The marginalized characters in this novel fight for multiplicity of languages, which ultimately means the possibility for different opinions in the face of a monolithic authority. *Embassytown* fictionalizes the hypothesis by assigning two completely different ways of viewing the world to two different species with fundamentally different languages.

In the last instance, these three novels point out to the fact that the hypothesis of linguistic relativity allows us to realize that the politics of life itself is no less constructed than language. This opens up possibilities for concerted, subversive action and for utopian thinking. Ludwig Wittgenstein famously declares in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922): “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (74). We can claim without doubt that these three novels venture to go beyond such limits by daring to imagine other languages and other worlds in which they constantly shape one another. The novels that are the focus of this article deal with such perplexing questions as whether we can talk about a reality beyond the realm of language, and which forms of resistance and subversion can be formed and directed against those who dominate the political discourses favouring certain groups while oppressing others. Any science fiction narratives dealing with linguistics and politics in the near future are likely to encounter similar questions and luckily offer new possibilities for thinking beyond our current politics and our accustomed ways of making sense of the world.



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