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‘There is no word for thank you in Dothraki’: Language ideologies in *Game of Thrones*

Abstract: This chapter discusses language ideologies in the acclaimed HBO series *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) and the role which English vernaculars, foreign languages, and accented speech play in narrative characterisation of the protagonists. It focuses on language attitudes, including language stereotyping and linguistic discrimination, and shows the relationship the series establishes between varying degrees of language proficiency on one hand, and sophistication, culture, and humanness, on the other.

Language issues in high fantasy

With the release of the first *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*) season in 2011, the fictional world of George R.R. Martin’s fantasy saga *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-)¹ inscribed itself into the primary world of international viewership, becoming nothing short of a collective myth. While, unsurprisingly, *The Lord of the Rings* is often cited among the chief sources of inspiration for Martin, his work was also a significant departure from established conventions of the high fantasy genre, as espoused by its founding father, Tolkien, and many other subsequent authors. Indeed, *GoT* (and before it *A Song of Ice and Fire*) veers from a monolithic moral soundness of eucatastrophic fairy epics² to a degree of psychological and ideological twistedness rarely found in traditional heroic fantasy and entertainment media. Magic and fantastic creatures occupy relatively little space in the

1 Between 1996 and 2011, five volumes were published and, according to the author’s official website, two more are forthcoming (<http://www.georgerrmartin.com/bibliography/>, accessed on 13.11.2018).

2 The term ‘Eucatastrophe’ was introduced by Tolkien himself in *On Fairy-stories* – an essay in which he powerfully argues for the fantasy genre and postulates, among other things, that “the Consolation of the Happy Ending” be its necessary attribute ([1947] 2014: 75).

narrative which instead draws upon human fallibility, vice and virtue to underpin its relentless and brutal power struggles.

While Martin certainly gave the genre a new direction, he nevertheless also preserved some of its best and most unique features as set forth by Tolkien. One of these is, quite prominently, the attention to language in the overall fashioning of a full-fledged secondary world. Tolkien's linguistic concoction in his Middle-Earth saga served as a gold standard for subsequent high fantasy authors to look up to. As Shayne Dwyer (2016: 6) states,

[t]he real world has many languages which each serve to add to its depth and culture by allowing culture to grow and develop. In creating a world from scratch there must be a way to create some sort of constant. Language serves as the constant in which culture can build on and mature. In this way language creation is essential to world building, and Tolkien provided an extremely detailed and in-depth example of how to create language.

In fact, for Tolkien ([1931] 2006: 210f.), language was the very prerequisite of mythopoeia:

As one suggestion, I might fling out the view that for a construction of a perfect art-language it is found necessary to construct at least in outline a mythology concomitant. [...] The converse indeed is true, your language construction will *breed* a mythology.

Whereas Tolkien himself remained faithful to his language-based world-creation, subsequent generations of high fantasy authors (as well as their critics) eagerly upheld his famous “green sun” dictum³ and made it the manifesto of the genre, while at the same time dislodging it from its original context. Without a Tolkien-esque passion for linguistic creativity, such as the fourteen artificial languages in his Middle-earth saga (cf. Noel 1980), made-up tongues in ensuing works of the genre were treated more as exotic window-dressing that would enhance the plausibility of the secondary worlds in which they resided, and not as a primary nourishing

3 “Anyone inheriting the fantastic device of human language can say *the green sun*. Many can then imagine or picture it. But that is not enough [...]. To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief [...] will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft.” (Tolkien [1947] 2014: 61).

source of world-creation. Even such acclaimed high fantasy authors as Andrzej Sapkowski or Ursula Le Guin admit to the subordinate value of language in their otherwise highly complex fictional worlds. Sapkowski says with regard to his *Witcher* cycle that, unlike Tolkien, he merely created “a cocktail of languages” by mixing French, English, Latin and German elements so that an erudite (Polish) reader could get the gist of phrases in Hen Llinge, the Elder Speech of Aed Seidhe elves.⁴ Le Guin likewise refers to Tolkien as someone who “did it right”;⁵ and as for herself, she constructed the language of the Kesh from *Always Coming Home* only as Todd Barton had started composing the music for the songs that accompanied the book release, and texts in the fictitious ‘original’ tongue were requested (Le Guin 2006: xix). While the *Wheel of Time Companion* to Robert Jordan’s fourteen-volume saga, deemed the most successful fantasy novel after *The Lord of the Rings*, contains a separate section with a 1.000-word glossary as well as syntactic and grammatic rules of the invented Old Tongue (cf. Dwyer 2016: 7), it is nevertheless a far cry from Tolkien’s monumental project.

Multilingualism of the ‘Martinverse’

In many ways, Martin was no exception to this trend. While realising it necessary to reinforce the authenticity of his complex secondary world with a variety of languages spoken across its various lands, he never actually developed any of those in the same way as Tolkien had done, and, as it happens, he was not particularly interested in the business of language creation as such (cf. Tharoor 2013; Peterson 2015: 19). In line with the taxonomy of multilingualism in fictional texts proposed by Petr Mareš (2000a, 2000b, 2003) and further elaborated by Lukas Bleichenbacher (2008: 24) with regard to films, Martin’s strategy in dealing with various

4 An interview with Sapkowski (translated into Russian), online: <https://azatsh.livejournal.com/9143.html#cutid1> (accessed on 22.11.2018). His readers, however, also discuss the obvious appropriations from Gaelic and Welsh; cf. https://pikabu.ru/story/kak_sapkovskiy_starshuyu_rech_sozdaval5248014 (accessed on 22.11.2018).

5 <http://litseen.com/ursula-k-le-guin-breaking-the-boundaries-of-fantasy/> (accessed on 22.11.2018).

languages of Westeros and Essos can be described as *signalisation* through metalinguistic comments with occasional *evocative* interferences that are mainly limited to just one or two words in a foreign tongue (Dothraki, or, else, Valyrian).

Although it is true that Martin did not engage in language creation himself, what he *did* invent, however, were language families. First and foremost among these was the Valyrian that reflected the course of historical and cultural development within his fictional universe (see Table 1). As observed by David J. Peterson (2015: 19), the linguist who was entrusted with the creation of languages in the *GoT* series, “the mere presence of a detailed language history elevates *A Song of Ice and Fire* above comparable works in regard to language (a notable exception, of course, being Tolkien)”.

Despite Martin’s extensive input on the linguistic complexity of his fictional universe, on the whole, language issues as such were of little importance for the plot. Yet, “while in the books Martin, as author, has the

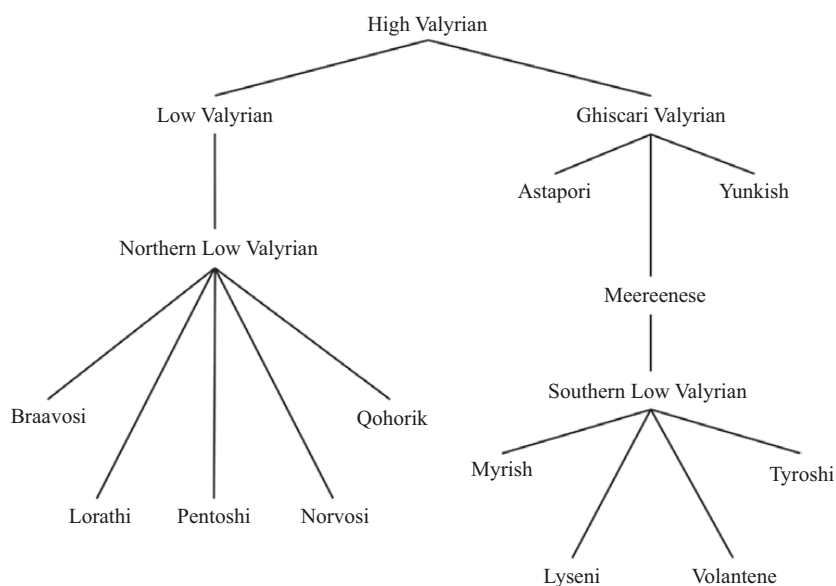


Figure 1. “A potential sketch of the Valyrian language family” (Peterson 2015: 18).

power of narrative convention to focus the reader's attention where he will, and to pass over non-English phrases in the course of narration, the camera has a much wider scope" (ibid.: 19f.), and it was in the transition from *A Song of Ice and Fire* to *Game of Thrones* as its audio-visual rendition that the former's implicit multilingualism became both a narrative challenge and a chance.

The producers' decision to commission an actual expert from the Language Creation Society for the exchanges in Dothraki as they were still preparing to shoot the pilot was, admittedly, one dictated by the high standards of quality that are expected from HBO original programming, as well as the aesthetic expectations of its presumed target audience. HBO's autonomy, made possible by a funding scheme that focuses on viewer subscriptions rather than sponsorship and advertising, has given rise to a new type of consumer, one who is oriented towards issues usually largely avoided by traditional television, and looks for unconventional and complex narratives (DeFino 2013).

The imperative to make the viewing experience immersive and realistic to its fullest extent – all the more important as *GoT* was actually a fantasy series, as opposed to HBO's customary real-life drama productions – also called for the multilingual makings of the 'Martinverse' to play an active role in the series' narrative and auditive aesthetics, reinforcing *GoT*'s claims of verisimilitude. Peterson's account of the producers' rationale behind the decision to commission an expert in language construction, his own tremendous effort in creating artificial languages,⁶ and the attempts of specialised speech coaches to trim the actors' natural English accents so as to best fit their roles (McNeil 2016) all attest to a wide spectrum of considerations at play within that process. Hardly any of those were arbitrary and ideology-free.

6 The languages Peterson developed for the series were Dothraki (appearing already in Season 1), High and Low Valyrian (featured, most notably, in Season 3), and Mag Nuk, a pidgin version of the Old Tongue still spoken by the giants and some of the Wildlings (a single phrase uttered by the giant Wun Wun in Season 5); see more on Peterson's blog under www.dothraki.com

Language ideologies of *Game of Thrones*

Before proceeding with the discussion of language ideologies in the *GoT* series – the subject proper of this paper – it is necessary to briefly touch on the term itself. At a very general level, language ideology connotes “shared bodies of common-sense notions about the nature of language in the world” (Rumsey 1990: 346), including “cultural conceptions not only of language and language variation, but also of the nature and purpose of communication, and of communicative behaviour as an enactment of a collective order” (Woolard 1992: 235; see also Silverstein [1987] 1996). The term as a whole, however, is no less vividly debated than both its semantic components, ‘language’ and ‘ideology’. Woolard & Schieffelin (1994: 57) point out that the numerous strands of respective academic inquiry hinge on two distinct understandings of ideology: as a neutral term encompassing “cultural systems of representation”, and as a negatively charged designation of a set of normative beliefs that underline social practices, particularly focusing on asymmetrical power relations between different groups. However, as she remarks elsewhere (Woolard 1998: 8), it is hard to come by any truly neutral uses of the heavily compromised term, so where a merely descriptive stance is called for, “other labels such as culture, worldview, belief, *mentalité*, and so on” are preferred.

In my analysis, I focus, for one thing, on different examples of linguistic behaviour exhibited by the protagonists as specific narrative elements supporting the plot. I also inquire into the nature of the value attributed to different languages in the series, as well as the multilingual competence that is on display, and in doing so I explore the cultural assumptions and power relations these reflect.

As already mentioned, the show contains exchanges in Dothraki as well as High and Low Valyrian, and occasionally offers further fragments of other languages such as Mag Nuk (the presence of the latter is, however, limited to one phrase only⁷) or Old Ghiscari (the word *mbhysa*, meaning “mother”, with which the liberated Yunkai slaves hail Daenerys; *GoT* 3, 10, 59:03). The wealth of languages spoken in Westeros and Essos is also

7 It is the Giant Wun Wun’s line “Lokh kif rukh?”, which translates to “What are you staring at?” (*GoT* 5, 8, 41:44).

indicated by metalinguistic comments. As Mance Rayder tells Jon Snow, the Wildling tribes under his leadership speak seven different languages (*GoT* 3, 2, 25:00). The language prodigy of the series, slave translator Missandei of Naath, admits to mastering no less than nineteen tongues (*GoT* 3, 8, 43:30).

Additionally, the series features some script samples in Valyrian (Talisa Stark's letter to her mother in Volantene, a Southern Low Valyrian dialect) and the Old Tongue runes (as appearing in the heraldry of the House Royce). While the Old Tongue runes were adopted from the Anglo-Saxon *Futhorc* runic system,⁸ the scripts in Valyrian use the same writing system as the Common Tongue, i.e. a visually pseudo-medieval Latin alphabet,⁹ rather than glyphs, as described in the books. There are also occasional gaps in consistency within the series' linguistic universe. For instance, in several episodes that take place in Meereen, the protest graffiti "Kill the Masters" is rendered in modern handwriting in the Common Tongue (i.e. factually English), although the city population speaks its own dialect of Low Valyrian.

The rich linguistic variation in the *GoT* universe is also suggested by different accents. As speech coach John Fleming believes, the series' makers "separated the seven kingdoms [...] by dialect";¹⁰ others, however, disagree with the parallel drawn between the real-life distribution of (mainly British) accents and their allotment to the characters coming from different parts of the fictional universe. Chris Taylor (2017) forcefully argues that, in fact, "the show's seven accents do not map to its seven kingdoms in any way" (cf. also Lien 2016: 27ff.).

To someone who is not particularly dialect-savvy, the different English accents in the show may be reduced to 1) a 'Northern' English accent, 2) a 'Londoner' accent, 3) RP (Received Pronunciation, i.e. a 'posh' British accent), and 4) a non-native 'exotic' accent. The domination of British varieties of English in the American series could have been explained by the

8 https://gameofthrones.fandom.com/wiki/Writing_systems (accessed on 28.12.2018).

9 *ibid.*

10 <https://winteriscoming.net/2016/12/24/dialect-coach-analyzes-the-accent-on-game-of-thrones/> (accessed on 27.12.2018).

predominantly British origins of the main cast; however, the fact that most actors had to put on a regional accent different from their own, with the help of specialised speech coaches (cf. Peterson 2015: 21), points to a far more deliberate choice of the filmmakers in that regard.

The storyline of *GoT* is often associated with the medieval history of Western Europe (cf. DeFino 2014: 210), and more specifically, the English Wars of the Roses. Martin used this history as a primary source of inspiration (cf. Larrington 2016: 2), which makes the use of chiefly British regional accents plausible and authentic. Additionally, as recent sociolinguistic studies suggest, British accents are generally held in higher esteem by American listeners than American ones (cf. Anderson et al. 2007: 9; Smith 2017: 35; YouGov Poll *Accents* 2018: 8), and would possibly invoke positive responses from HBO's target audience. Finally, accents provide strong sociocultural clues about their speakers and have long been known to be deployed in film as important means of narrative characterisation.

Accented speech as means of narrative characterisation I: English vernaculars

Characterisation of film protagonists through accented speech is never an innocuous enterprise. In order to work, it draws upon, and often further reinforces, specific sets of linguistic ideologies and widespread stereotypes that are related, among other things, to class, race, and educational level. With regard to the English accents displayed by the *GoT* protagonists, several main functions of these can be identified. One is that of a *moral commentary* on the respective characters. It is best exemplified by the use of Northern accents, most notably Yorkshire.

Howard Giles's (1970) research on evaluative reactions to accents, whose main findings were reconfirmed in more recent studies by Bishop et al. (2005), Coupland & Bishop (2007), as well as Watson & Clark (2015), identified the RP-style accents as the most prestigious phonological variety of British English. While Giles's survey showed that Northern British accents did not rank very high on all three scores he employed (aesthetic, communicative and status-related), Coupland & Bishop (2007: 83) also discovered an age-related bias in the people's perception of different accents. Younger respondents tended to value Northern accents more than

older people, yet they felt, in comparison, less positive about RP. A broadly discussed study by Smith & Workman (2008) likewise demonstrated that out of three accents they assessed – Birmingham ('Brummie'), Yorkshire and RP – Yorkshire was favoured over the 'posh' accent and associated with high intelligence, while the speakers of Birmingham variety were negatively stigmatised.¹¹ Yorkshire-accented people were, on the contrary, "perceived as 'wise, trustworthy, honest and straightforward'",¹² and the choice of this accent for the series' most heroic (and nearly all male) figures – Ned and Robb Stark, Jon Snow, Mance Rayder, Ygritte, Lyanna Mormont – might be explained by this recent positive shift in its perception. Yngvild Audestad Lien (2016: 34) assumes that, "rather than portraying Eddard [Ned] Stark with a prestige accent which might cause the audience of the television show to focus on his position and power, his Northern English accent emphasizes character traits; namely his honesty and masculinity". The international acclaim of *GoT* has likely further reinforced the positive attribution of the Yorkshire accent. As Taylor (2017) humorously observes, the Yorkshire "now stands for unshakeable morality and doomed heroism".

There are also other main characters in the series who speak with markedly Northern accents not accounted for by their geographical origins, accents apparently deployed solely to highlight their moral integrity. For one thing, Samwell Tarly actually speaks with a Mancunian (i.e. Manchester) accent, although he was born in the South of Westeros and had not once been to the North before. Another character whose Northern, more precisely: Geordie (i.e. Newcastle) accent does not match his biography is Ser Davos Seaworth, born and raised in Flee Bottom before coming into the service of Stannis Baratheon. Likewise, the mercenary Bronn, "whelped and whipped" in the same slum in the South (*GoT* 5, 4, 33:41ff.) lacks in neither frankness and sense of justice, nor intelligence – and he, too, speaks with a Northern (in his case, Yorkshire) accent.

11 See <http://theconversation.com/how-outdated-stereotypes-about-british-accent-reinforce-the-class-ceiling-43683> (accessed on 30.12.2018).

12 See <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2008/apr/04/6> (accessed on 30.12.2018).

While Ser Davos is endowed with “the most attractive accent in England”,¹³ his rather charmless liege speaks with a non-prestige accent otherwise reserved for the soldiers and guards. “To British ears, Stannis sounds a little like a character from *Eastenders*. This is a long-running, hugely popular BBC soap opera about the east end of London, home of bruisers and gangsters who dispense rough justice – perfect for Stannis” (Taylor 2017). Remarkably, while there are different opinions on that score, all associate Stannis with accents traditionally ranking very low in prestige and social attractiveness such as the working-class vernaculars of London, Norwich, or Black Country (cf. Smith 2017: 25; Coupland & Bishop 2007: 79).

Conversely, Stannis’s brother Robert Baratheon has the same marked Yorkshire accent as his boyhood friend Ned Stark. His speech performance is often praised as one of “the best deployments of accent-as-characterization in the series [...] [,] their similar accents reflect[ing] their shared past, communicat[ing] their rapport, and warn[ing] of the distance between the two men and the posh, RP southern-accented Lannisters” (Read 2013).

The use of RP (and, as a linguist would discriminatingly point out, SSBE – Standard Southern British English) in the series posits somewhat of a conundrum. While its name – Received Pronunciation – indicates its rootedness in elite educational practices associated with class and/or socio-economic status rather than geographical origin (the latter being the case with SSBE, if only to a degree), in *GoT* it is not always spoken by the characters one would actually expect.

In her paper on accents in the first season of *GoT*, Lien (2016) outlines two dimensions of narrative characterisation associated with RP: ‘masculinity’ and ‘sophistication’. Here Lien references earlier research on language attitudes by Giles & Marsh (1979) and Trudgill (1983). While the former study found RP speakers to be perceived as more ‘masculine’ in comparison with the speakers of non-standard language varieties regardless of gender, Trudgill asserted that the reverse be true. Furthermore, several other sociolinguistic studies attest to negative stereotyping of speakers

13 <https://www.scotsman.com/news/uk/scots-accent-is-uk-s-second-favourite-1-1092147> (accessed on 05.01.2019).

of non-standard varieties as ‘less sophisticated’ than their RP- or SSEB-spoken counterparts. However, neither the ‘masculinity’ nor the ‘sophistication’ hypotheses really hold up in regard to the *GoT* main characters. For instance, in comparing Viserys and Daenerys Targaryen, or Arya and Sansa Stark, all speak ‘posh’ British English yet score very differently in these two dimensions.

The apparent lack of consistency in the deployment of the RP-type accents in *GoT* likely reflects their twofold reputation. While they traditionally stand for an elevated social origin and/or level of education (or, else, ‘sophistication’) of their speakers, RP is also an accent that is deliberately used by those aspiring to ‘fine society’, and is thus associated with snobbery (cf. Taylor 2017).¹⁴ Speculating on the conscious decisions of the filmmakers behind *all* the language varieties in the show is, of course, an exercise in futility. However, I hold it that while in some cases, RP provides a commentary on the *social self-promotion* of its speakers, e.g. the Lannisters, Catelyn and Sansa Stark, as well as Viserys Targaryen, who are all well aware of their privileged status and eagerly underline it, in others, it is either a *meritocratic educational statement*, with Varys and Missandei as its two paragons, or a *proof of truly noble, moreover: royal descent*. The last function is exemplified both by Robert Baratheon’s bastard son Gendry from the Flea Bottom slum¹⁵ and Daenerys Targaryen, whose RP accents appear to be accounted for by the regality (and perceived magical power) of their blood alone. The case of Daenerys is particularly special, as her linguistic performance is explicitly put into connection with her ancient aristocratic descent – an issue that will be further dealt with later on in this chapter.

The connection the series makes between the identity of a character and the language variety she/he speaks is particularly strong in the case of Lord Bailish ‘Littlefinger’. It has often been observed that Littlefinger’s accent undergoes a major change throughout the series. “Baelish’s accent literally wanders. Watch his scenes in Season 1 and he appears to be doing

14 As Chris Taylor (2017) mockingly notes, “if Catelyn Stark had a phone instead of ravens, she’d probably answer it speaking *extra* posh”.

15 On one occasion, Ser Davos Seaworth apologizes to Daenerys for his “Flea Bottom accent” (*GoT* 7, 3, 08:55); however, Gendry uncannily did not pick it up.

a bad London accent. By Season 4, however, he has slipped into something that sounds sort of like a Welsh accent. Or maybe it's half English, half Irish" (Taylor 2017). While dialect coach John Fleming describes Littlefinger's King's Landing accent in the first season as "quite close to RP", he agrees with Taylor that after the character had left the capital, his accent started showing some of its "Irish qualities" (seeing as Lord Bailish is played by the Irish-born Aidan Gillen).¹⁶ In an interview with *Den of Geek!*, Gillen admits that his character's morphing accent indicates that Littlefinger "pretends he's other things all the time so [...] [his accent is] just not defined. And yeah, it has, it has changed with him. I have done that intentionally, but it's not radical".¹⁷ As sociolinguistic surveys show, speakers often display an "own-accent bias", that is, a strong preference toward accents identical to their own, awarding them an increased social attractiveness (if not social prestige; cf. Coupland & Bishop 2007: 79, 84). In his ever-shifting accent, Littlefinger thus continually betrays not only numerous other protagonists but also the audience and their linguistic expectations.

Accented speech as means of narrative characterisation II: foreign accents

My discussion of accented varieties of English in the language ideologies of *GoT* would not be complete without a comment on foreign-accented speech in the series. The fact that the Common Tongue, i.e. the main language spoken onscreen, is English, the prevalent language in the global film industry, has been met by some with harsh criticism. Dan Hassler-Forest (2014: 169f.) sees in the language-based organisation of the narrative space a normalisation and furthering of "the Eurocentric perspective over its available alternatives", which thereby relegates the non-native accents and foreign tongues to the territories to the East of the 'Empire',

16 <https://winteriscoming.net/2016/12/24/dialect-coach-analyzes-the-accent-on-game-of-thrones/> (accessed on 01.01.2019).

17 <https://www.denofgeek.com/uk/tv/game-of-thrones/51657/game-of-thrones-season-7-aidan-gillen-on-littlefins-accent-and-hidden-warmth> (accessed on 01.01.2019).

displaying the same Orientalist tendencies as much of popular culture (cf. also Hardy 2015).

The examples set by local and standard varieties of British English became a yardstick for the perception of non-native accents. Non-native accented speakers are generally much more likely to experience prejudice than those with native pronunciation and are frequently regarded as less refined, intelligent, or laborious (cf. Kozłowski 2015: 14). Also, they are often perceived as untrustworthy, even if there may be no specific prejudice against the respective outgroup. Research relates this phenomenon to an increased difficulty in processing acoustic signals, which leads to misattribution: “even when speakers just deliver information from others, people perceive this information as less truthful when the speaker has an accent. They misattribute the difficulty of understanding the speech to the truthfulness of the statement” (Lev-Ari & Keysar 2010: 1094). In popular cinema, foreign accents were often linked to ludicrous or evil characters. For instance, in her acclaimed study of accents in Disney, Rosina Lippi-Green (2012: 117) shows that about two-thirds of the villains in the cartoons are dubbed with non-American accents.

Within Westeros, only people from Dorne in the far South speak with a foreign (more precisely: Hispanic) accent, explained out of the original Rhoynish language substrate in that part of the Seven Kingdoms. As Charles Ramírez Berg (2002: 66) shows, in mainstream Hollywood films, male Latino characters mainly cater to three stereotypes: *el bandido*, buffoon, and Latin lover; “[s]ometimes the stereotypes were combined, sometimes they were altered superficially but their core defining-and-demeaning-characteristics have remained consistent for more than a century and are still evident today”.

The *GoT* series is no exception in this regard. As Bronn explains to Jaime Lannister, “[t]he Dornish are crazy. All they want to do is fight and fuck, fuck and fight” (*GoT* 5, 4, 03:44 ff). His judgment is echoed by *Vanity Fair* journalist Joanna Robinson (2014) as she swoons over the charismatic Oberyn Martell: “The Dornish prince swung from sex to violence back to sex again without breaking a sweat. Impressive”.¹⁸ Ironically

18 Remarkably, as Pedro Pascal, the Chilean-born actor playing Oberyn, admitted in an interview, it had been his conscious decision to adopt a “bi-warrior Latin lover

enough, in the same breath, Robinson praises the representation of the Dornish in the series as a token of cultural diversity: “It’s refreshing to see actors of color on this show who aren’t slaves or crooks”. Other critics are, however, less rose-coloured:

[i]f you were looking to write a paper on unconscious racism in *Game of Thrones*, this is where you’d start. All the swarthy-looking characters — the Dornish, the people of Slaver’s Bay and Qarth, the token black pirate (Salladhor Saan, who is still criminally under-utilized in the show) – have been given the same accent that has been used for the better part of a century to signal untrustworthiness or villainy in movies. (Taylor 2017)

Prince Oberyn’s representation as a sophisticated and language-savvy person who writes poetry and has “an ear for accents” (*GoT* 4, 6, 28:40) ostensibly challenges the prejudice against Hispanics as uncouth and primal. Yet on the whole, his prodigal life, and even more so his death at the hands of Ser Gregor Clegane ‘the Mountain’, fall in line with stereotypical expectations. While seeking to avenge the murder of his sister Elia and dancing around his already dying opponent, the deadly ‘Red Viper’ Oberyn gets so carried away by the phrases he repeatedly chants at the Mountain: “You raped her! You murdered her! You killed her children!” (*GoT* 4, 8, 47:53ff.)¹⁹ that in his triumph, he lowers his guard and gets himself killed. With all his outstanding valour, honour and sense of justice, the hot-tempered Oberyn crucially fails to show vigilance and restraint (or, simply, ‘reason’), which leads him to an unbecoming and dehumanising end.

The three most important non-Westerosi figures in the series are Red Priestess Melisandre, assassin Jaqen serving the Many-Faced God, and Tyrion Lannister’s ‘whore lover’ Shae, and they do not speak with an English accent. Rather, their speech reflects other Germanic tongues: Dutch in the first case and German in the latter

accent” in his interpretation of the character; see https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/03/game-of-thrones-pedro-pascal-oberyn-martell_n_5440890.html (accessed on 02.01.2019).

19 The whole scene is strongly reminiscent of the combat between Inigo Montoya and Count Rugen in the classic *The Princess Bride* (1987), in which Montoya keeps repeating the same lines: “My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die”, while sparring with the Count.

two.²⁰ While it corresponds to their exotic origins (Melisandre comes from Asshai, Jaquen from Braavos and Shae from Lorath) and thus may fit the indiscriminating category of “vaguely Mediterranean” accents of the Essosi, Chris Taylor (2017) poses a guess that the decision to let these three actors speak with their actual offscreen accents might as well be a tribute to the history of Westeros as paralleling that of Britain and its Germanic invasions.

However, Taylor’s hypothesis leaves open the question as to why only these characters should speak this way. I argue that these marked accents were employed to acoustically single out the three most enigmatically ambiguous figures on the show. Melisandre and Jaquen both dispense and control life and death, entertaining a direct connection to the divine powers they serve and standing above any personal sentiment. What is most striking is the inhumane brutality of the means with which they pursue their missions – missions they declare to be profoundly humane.

Shae, on the other hand, presents a different kind of enigma. While in *A Song of Ice and Fire* books she is depicted as a prostitute whose only craving is money, the *GoT* series gives her character an unsettling edge, which does not allow for an indisputable interpretation of her ultimate motives. She might equally well be a gold-digging camp follower who betrays Tyrion in the hopes of a lavish reward by his father, or perhaps a fallen noblewoman hell-bent on revenge for Tyrion’s treatment of her as a ‘disposable good’ and his own betrayal of her love. The strong foreign accents of Shae, Melisandre and Jaquen can therefore be interpreted as a linguistic marker of the indeterminate legitimacy of their claims (cf.

20 While many critics have also remarked on Jaime Lannister’s Germanic accent (his character is played by Danish-born Nikolaj Coster-Waldau), in his case, the accent appears to have less to do with a conscious decision on that score than with limitations of his speech performance which have been continually improving; as Chris Taylor (2017) observes, the actor “has come a long way since Season 1, in which you basically have to put the subtitles on to understand him”. Chris Anderson (2016) is even more appreciative about Coster-Waldau’s language effort, saying that the actor “does a fairly good job of bringing out his inner RP”.

Lev-Ari & Keysar 2010) and, in the case of the latter two, their ambivalence is also reinforced by their outer appearance.²¹

Multilingualism and linguicism

As the above discussion shows, different accents are not just powerful signals of linguistic diversity in the ‘Martinverse’, but also reflections of the existing real-world stereotypes and attitudes toward different speech varieties and foreign tongues. The same holds true regarding the invented languages. With the domination of the Common Tongue paralleling that of English as means of global communication, the series offers implicit judgment on the level of civilisation, as based on the protagonists’ degree of its mastery, with ‘fine distinctions’ made between its native regional-accented speakers as measured against the standard varieties. Those who do not speak the Common Tongue at all – the Dothraki and much of the Slaver’s Bay population – represent the Oriental, quintessentially barbarian Other, even though the sophistication of the Masters’ age-old civilisation, as shown in their mannerisms, customs, artistry, and architecture, rivals that of Westeros, and the possible actual complexity of Dothraki culture is easily overlooked just because it manifests itself in practices that radically differ from Western norms. In fact, as we learn to know at the very outset, “[t]here is no word for thank you in Dothraki” (*GoT* 1, 1, 55:00ff.). The succinct metalinguistic comment of Ser Jorah is at the same time a telling commentary on the horse-lords’ civilisational level and social relations. Marcel Mauss’s *reciprocity* as an anthropological universal and a prerequisite of mutual recognition and moral commitment is most certainly not at play here. The gaping hole left by the concept’s sheer absence in the Dothraki language does not only leave Daenerys entirely stripped of psychological and social power on this occurrence, but also relegates the Dothraki to the very border between humans and animals. Many scenes

21 Jaqen’s hair has black and white strands, and Melisandre has hair of unnatural red hue. As Ralf Junkerjürgen (2009: 230) observes in his analysis of the cultural history of hair colour, in the portrayal of red-haired women as *femmes fatales*, the symbolic association of red with unrestrained lust is amalgamated with the symbolism of fire as an ambivalent element *par excellence* that can give both life and death.

filled with animalesque sex and gore that follow only reinforce this judgment. A pivotal transformation of the Dothraki way of life is brought about by Daenerys after she has learned their language and introduced some novel concepts into the communication, including, at least implicitly, a notion that resembles gratitude.

While there are many protagonists fluently speaking more than just one language, their multilingualism does not all have the same value, revealing the discriminating tendency to privilege ‘elite’ multilingualism over the ‘folk’ one. In fact, while knowledge and language proficiency acquired through guided study go hand in hand with high social status, most of those who have learned foreign tongues in a purely experiential way are hardly ever credited for it. The polyglot wonder Missandei is a former slave liberated by Daenerys less out of awe for her linguistic skill than out of a feminism-tinged ‘white Messianism’ (cf. Hardy 2015: 417). Her proficiency in 19 languages is merely acknowledged by the latter with “How can anyone speak nineteen languages?” (*GoT* 3, 8, 43:31), and the conversation shifts immediately to Daenerys’s own learning of Dothraki, which she starts explaining with a tell-tale remark: “Yes, well, it was either learn Dothraki or *grunt at my husband and hope...*” (ibid. 43:37ff., emphasis added). Missandei’s earlier comment that Daenerys speaks Dothraki only “reasonably well” provokes the Queen’s vanity; however, she waves aside the discovery of her actual shortcomings in that tongue by saying that she probably is just “a bit out of practice” (ibid. 44:15). After that, Missandei immediately tries to smooth over her criticism with a praise of Daenerys’s outstanding mastery of High Valyrian.

Their brief exchange stands in contradiction to Peterson’s (2015: 20f.) lengthy deliberations on the producers’ efforts to avoid any negative stereotyping of the Dothraki through the language they were supposed to speak in the pilot already: “It would seem, at the least, culturally insensitive, and at the most, downright offensive to have the only occurrence of a non-English natural language in the show be introduced by such acts [as Khal Drogo’s rape of Daenerys]”, and, should they be made to speak English with an identifiable foreign accent, it “might [also] very well cause offence” (ibid.: 21). Yet the conversation between Daenerys and Missandei reveals much linguistic snobbery, negative stereotyping and language-related power hierarchies that are inherent in the series. Daenerys

uncritically assumes her own Dothraki – the only foreign language she has learned – to be impeccable, and is taken aback by Missandei’s carefully worded reservation. It is, however, less her linguistic shortcomings that irk her, than the fact that the critique is expressed by a subaltern (for, as we know, the subaltern cannot speak). Indeed, Daenerys does not seem to care for proficiency in Dothraki as a valuable skill; she could as well have dispensed with learning it altogether, just “grunting” at Drogo and “hoping [*it would do well just the same*].²² While Daenerys’s efforts in learning Dothraki, quite in line with Eurocentric language ideologies, are strongly emphasised and given a privileged depiction over the linguistic biographies of all other multilingual characters, it is worth noting that she gains legitimacy with her Dothraki tribe not by speaking their language but by her re-emergence from Khal Drogo’s funeral pyre flames as the unscorched ‘Mother of Dragons’.²³

Daenerys’s actual lack of genuine appreciation of her ex-slave confidante’s linguistic skill is betrayed both by her vocal intonation and by

22 The Orientalist notion of linguistic superiority of the enlightened West over its Eastern counterpart, showing in Daenerys’s dehumanising metalinguistic comment on Dothraki which virtually equates its native speakers to hogs is also subtly reinforced on two more occasions related to this character. As the warlocks of Qarth plot her assassination, one of them appears to Daenerys as a waif, inviting her to play with a wooden ball concealing a deadly magical scorpion inside, but Ser Barristan Selmy manages to prevent the attempt, causing the waif to hiss menacingly (*GoT* 3, 1, 51:37). While her snake-like hissing might be ascribed to the inhumanity of the warlocks, we are yet to hear the very same sound once again. As Daenerys orders the execution of Mossador, an ex-slave who murdered a captured Son of the Harpy in the cell, despite her decision to subject the latter to a lawful official trial, the Meerenese slaves start hissing at the queen in protest of what they had hoped would end with a royal pardon (*GoT* 5, 2, 51:15). Especially in this last episode, the paralinguistic characterisation of the Essosi as capable of *acting like snakes* not only serves to dehumanise them but also further underscores Daenerys’s (and with her Western) civilisational supremacy over the mean and vindictive ‘savages’.

23 With regard to gender and power in *GoT*, Ingrid Fagnastøl maintains, on the contrary, that the scene is indicative of women’s limited access to power: “[e]ven when she so clearly has broken all expectations people still try to pin motherhood on her and *she* seems to take on that role as well” (2014: 37, emphasis in the original).

an impersonal form of her rhetorical question (“How can anyone speak nineteen languages?”). As a privileged *native speaker* of the Common Tongue and High Valyrian, the two *linguae francae* of Westeros and Essos, Daenerys’s disinterest in Missandei’s linguistic credentials verges on contempt towards those who have inborn ‘deficiencies’ on that score, which the mastery of any number of non-prestige languages would never overcome.

In another scene (*GoT* 4, 10, 20:37ff.), Daenerys politely compliments the former slave teacher Fennesz on his proficiency in the Common Tongue (which he speaks with a distinguishable accent). But her respect for the man’s intellect vanishes the moment he asks for permission to return back to his master, where he had admittedly been held in high esteem. While Daenerys is presented here as a (if still somewhat naïve) champion of a progressive liberal ideology, Fennesz’s own mindset, already betrayed by the accented speech, is shown as ‘Oriental’ and ‘backward’.

One of the narratively most powerful scenes in Daenerys’s storyline is that of her acquisition of the Unsullied slave soldiers in Astapor. Her negotiations with Kraznys mo Nakloz take place in the Common Tongue spoken by Daenerys and Low Valyrian spoken by the slave owner, with Missandei interpreting the exchange for both parties (and glossing over the slaver’s most outrageous remarks). The words of Kraznys are also subtitled, so that while the spectators are let in on his outspoken disdain for Daenerys, whom he repeatedly insults, they are also called on to sympathise with her, as she finds herself in a seemingly weak position due to her lack of means to pay for the Unsullied on one hand and her supposed ignorance of the Astapori Valyrian dialect on the other. Her offer to trade in her largest and strongest dragon for the army, which Kraznys accepts, appears as Daenerys’s last desperate concession that would effectively decimate her military and symbolic power. Yet, as Daenerys receives the whip as a token of her ownership of the Unsullied, and gives Kraznys the enchained Drogon in return, she pulls off a coup, all of a sudden addressing the army in High Valyrian. Kraznys, who is struggling to force Drogon down, remains at first oblivious to her linguistic ‘coming out’ and orders Missandei to “[t]ell the bitch her beast won’t come” (*GoT* 3, 4, 48:15). Daenerys replies to him directly in Valyrian: “*Zaldrīzes buzdari iksos daor*” (“A dragon is not a slave”; *ibid.*, 48:19) and subsequently counters Kraznys’s

incredulous exclamation “*Ydra ji Valyre?!?*”²⁴ (“*You speak Valyrian?!?*”) with the famous line ultimately sealing her power claims: “*Nyke Daenerys Jelmāzmo hen Targārio Lentrot, hen Valyrio Uēpo ānogār iksan. Valyrio muño ēngos űuhys issa*” – “I am Daenerys Stormborn of the House Targaryen, of the blood of Old Valyria. Valyrian is my mother tongue” (ibid., 48:24ff.). While Kraznys is still grappling with his shock, Daenerys commands the army to slay the Masters and orders the dragon to set the slave owner ablaze: “*Dracarys!*” (“Fire!”; ibid.: 49:00).

As Zoë Shacklock (2015: 269) observes, Daenerys’s

triumph over the slave master is simultaneously a triumph over the audience. The audience have been privy to Kraznys mo Nakloz’s Valyrian insults through the subtitles, enjoying a powerful feeling of knowing more than Daenerys and her retinue. However, by speaking in an unfamiliar language, Daenerys reclaims this power, becoming unknowable to us on the level of sound. This doubled experience of comprehending, yet not understanding, Daenerys’s speech creates a strong sense of disorientation, enhancing the power of the scene.

Yet, whereas in this scene, much like in *Braveheart* (1995), the protagonist’s multilingualism serves as “an unexpected weapon” that produces a powerful dramatic effect and restores and augments Daenerys’s symbolic power, it has no lasting value of its own. Moreover, the explanation Daenerys provides for her fluent mastery of Valyrian makes it additionally clear that her authority is legitimised by her ancient aristocratic lineage, which also accounts for her inherited language proficiency. The conjecture that Daenerys’s knowledge of Valyrian actually *lies in her blood* as a ‘genetic heirloom’ may at first seem far-fetched, yet the series offers no other viable explanation: she was exiled while still a baby and, with her mother dying shortly after her birth, it could have only been her elder brother Viserys left to impart on her their “mother tongue”. However, all the conversations between the siblings onscreen take place in the Common Tongue and we only come to know that Daenerys considers Valyrian her native language in the above-described scene.

On one hand, in *GoT*, High Valyrian has much the same status as Latin in the Middle Ages: once the language of a powerful empire, it is long

24 This and other lines in Valyrian are rendered as on David Peterson’s personal blog in the entry dedicated to the scene; see <http://www.dothraki.com/2013/04/sesir-urnebion-z%C8%B3hon-keliton-issa/> (accessed on 04.01.2019).

extinct, having given rise to numerous (and partly mutually unintelligible) modern Essosi tongues, and at the time of the narration, it is only used by scholars and priests of R’Hllor, the Fire God. On the other hand, it can only become an effective vehicle of power through the ancient aristocratic pedigree of those who speak it via ingrained birthright. “[A] central concern of ASoIaF [*A Song of Ice and Fire*] is family and bloodline” (Hardy 2015: 419; cf. also Donecker 2016), and even Tyrion Lannister’s “reasonably well”-spoken scholarly High Valyrian, as Missandei might put it, does not specifically endear him to Daenerys, nor does it gain him but an amused smile from her translator (cf. *GoT* 5, 10, 32:10ff.).

A relation established between ‘legitimate blood’ and ‘prestige tongues’ is a rather common trope in high fantasy. Tolkien’s Aragorn, the last living descendant of the ancient rulers of Númenor, the first human civilisation of the Middle-earth, *naturally* speaks the old elvish tongues Quenya and Sindarin; in Sapkowski’s *Witcher* saga, Princess Cirilla of Cintra, the Child of the Elder Blood and likewise the last offspring of the royal elvish line, suddenly slips into the Elder Speech when prophesising in a trance and revealing her unique identity. Prior to this, she had little to no knowledge of that language. We encounter an Old Tongue in Robert Jordan’s novel cycle *Wheel of Time* as the nearly defunct language of the long-gone Age of Legends that is yet still mastered by some nobles and scholars.

In these (and many other) examples, it is, remarkably, an age-old lineage that raises the insight of the native speakers of ancient (‘Old’, or ‘High’) tongues, altogether reinforcing their claims to power. Likewise, in *GoT*, while the knowledge of High Valyrian does not augment the wisdom, nor the actual might, of the Maesters (cf. Cowlshaw 2015), it works well with Daenerys (the Yorkshire-accented Jon Snow, alias Aegon Targaryen, does not reveal any Valyrian language skill along with his true identity in the last season; however, the show has already entered those waters with his aunt).²⁵

25 The third remaining descendant of the Targaryan dynasty, Maester Aemon, certainly speaks High Valyrian due to both his family history and his life-long studies. However, at the beginning of the series, he is already one hundred years old and, even more importantly, had voluntarily renounced his claims to political power.

Parole, language, and humanity: conclusive remarks

All this has shown that language ideologies displayed in *GoT* reiterate and also reinforce many ideologies that exist in the offscreen sociocultural reality of their makers and consumers. Their most conspicuous trait is, arguably, the language hierarchies applied to both real-world and invented languages and speech varieties. While the righteous in *GoT* are ostensibly bent on a respectful and egalitarian treatment of all the people regardless of their socio-economic status, descent, and cultural heritage, the series nevertheless reveals ingrained prejudices against certain groups which are reflected in the linguistic comments the series makes about them.

With High Valyrian at the top of the ladder, it is the Common Tongue, rendered in English, that comes after it. Though it is situated at the second spot within the language hierarchy, this 'slight' is counterbalanced by its clear dominance both in the onscreen and the offscreen world, and its civilisational status is additionally emphasised by the proliferation of texts and inscriptions in English (or, else, Latin alphabet). Its importance and sophistication is furthermore asserted by the attention paid to its different vernaculars, with 'fine distinctions' in their treatment that reflect specific language attitudes.

While in *GoT*, numerous forms of native-accented speech enjoy a higher prestige and their speakers are depicted with a deeper psychological nuance, foreign accents are on the whole employed as typification markers of backwardness, untrustworthiness, or downright villainy of their speakers (most of them are also stigmatised in the real world), and these occupy the lowest rungs of language hierarchies in the show. Foreign languages as featured in *GoT* are High and Low (also termed 'bastard') Valyrian, Mag Nuk, and Dothraki, and all but High Valyrian clearly rank at the very bottom, with the Giants' tongue probably closing the list. In fact, the only phrase so far pronounced by Wun Wun in the series also appears to be the sole indication of his race's human(oid)ness revealing itself via the (seemingly very limited) ability to speak.

Those who possess no language whatsoever are, by this token, both inhuman and inhumane – the profound, insuperable Other. While in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the White Walkers are said to have a language of their own, and David Peterson had created its rudimentary version (Skroth) for the series pilot, Weiss and Benioff decided against its actual use, opting for

mere ice-cracking sound effects instead.²⁶ The White Walkers' Wights still utter sounds, if not human ones; their commanders, on the contrary, are not just enveloped in glacial silence: it is a radical absence of any form of speech that indicates their impenetrable alterity (cf. Grizelj 2016: 97f.). This precludes any dialogue or communication and extinguishes any glimmer of hope that the men and the White Walkers could ever reach an understanding.

Raymond Williams (1977: 21) famously remarked that “a definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world”, and this is all the more true for audio-visual media. “There is no word for thank you in Dothraki” is not just an impartial linguistic comment. With its language ideologies on display as a set of normative beliefs about different tongues and vernaculars that pass judgment on culture, degree of cultivation and even humanity of their speakers, *GoT* lends itself well to critical inquiries of assumptions made by its creators and spectators alike.²⁷

Filmography

Game of Thrones. Season 1 (2011). Dir. Tim Van Patten et al.²⁸ Amazon Instant Video Germany GmbH.

Game of Thrones. Season 2 (2012). Dir. Alan Taylor et al. Amazon Instant Video Germany GmbH.

Game of Thrones. Season 3 (2013). Dir. Daniel Minahan et al. Amazon Instant Video Germany GmbH.

Game of Thrones. Season 4 (2014). Dir. D. B. Weiss et al. Amazon Instant Video Germany GmbH.

Game of Thrones. Season 5 (2015). Dir. Michael Slovis et al. Amazon Instant Video Germany GmbH.

Game of Thrones. Season 6 (2016). Dir. Jeremy Podeswa et al. Amazon Instant Video Germany GmbH.

²⁶ <https://gameofthrones.fandom.com/wiki/Skroth> (accessed on 05.01.2019).

²⁷ The author would like to thank Jeffrey Karnitz for constructive criticism of the article.

²⁸ As there were four to six directors involved in the making of each *GoT* season, only the director of the first episode is explicitly mentioned.

Game of Thrones. Season 7 (2017). Dir. Jeremy Podeswa et al. Amazon Instant Video Germany GmbH.

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