

Conlangs as Speech Actions: Studying the pragmatics of Constructed Languages in Video Games

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ABSTRACT

Conlangs, or constructed languages, especially fictional conlangs have gained immense popularity due to TV, cinema and video games^[1]. This has become especially apparent in recent years (Swierstra, 2020). Since the first use of the term in 1928 (Adelman, 2014) fictional conlangs have been created not just as auxiliary languages^[2] but as tools, or results, of fictional world building in books, cinema, television^[3] and video games^[4].

According to Purnomo et al.'s proposed taxonomy (2017:51-55), fictional conlangs can fulfill an interpretive, explorative and configurative function^[5] in video games. Meaning that characters, including players themselves, can use conlangs in a game to both engage with and manipulate the goings on of the game's world. This taxonomy is based on design approaches that emphasize the level of interaction required by players to carry out a particular action or affect a particular outcome in a game. The interpretive function is used only to pass on information in a conlang and positions the player in a passive role. The explorative function involves limited action by the player, for instance using a conlang in a quest or fight. And the configurative function has the highest level of interactivity meaning that the player has a wider range of choice to use a conlang in a game. Hence, by dint of their creation, fictional conlangs have a distinct pragmatic purpose other than simply being dramatic tools that are used to provide credibility to a story^[6].

This study will view conlangs in video games through the lens of the speech act theory. First propounded by J.L Austin, the speech act theory comprises a set of approaches that "consider speech as action." (Sbisa, 2013: 25). In it, speech itself is considered an action and utterances^[7] consist of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts (Austin, 1975). Locutionary acts refer to the act of making an utterance (i.e. saying something). Illocutionary acts refer to the intent of the speaker and what they wish to achieve by saying something for instance warning someone of something and promising someone. And perlocutionary acts refer to the results, meaning the act performed by saying something (Droste, 2013) for instance, convincing someone of something, reassuring someone and lying. There is also illocutionary force, which simply refers to the speaker's ability to achieve their desired outcome through speech acts.

For this study, I chose to study conlangs that were either created specifically for a game or that had been created with the explorative and configurative design

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approaches in mind. Examples of this are Dovahzul from the Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011); Witcher Signs from The Witcher (CD Projekt, 2007, 2011, 2015) series, Al Bhed from Final Fantasy X (Square, 2001) and Final Fantasy X-2 (Square Enix, 2003) and Caryl Runes from Bloodborne (FromSoftware Inc, 2015). The treatment of fictional conlangs in TV and cinema has been more or less like that of a natural language. In the sense that, they are natural languages in the context of the game^[8] and therefore perform the same illocution and perlocution, i.e. characters use conlangs for promising, threatening, apologies and mitigation, as anyone would a natural language.

In this study, utterances in conlangs will be analyzed and classified based on their meaning, context, intent and effect. Then, through Speech Act Theory these utterances will be categorized further based on where they lie on the triumvirate of locution, illocution and perlocution. Although the above-mentioned conlangs will be covered here, the primary focus of this study will be Dovahzul, the most trenchant^[9], or most configurative, conlang that I have come across thus far. My aim here is to discern whether the use of explorative and configurative conlangs qua speech acts can postulate a new approach or a new set of speech actions.

BIO

I am a Linguist with a Master's degree and over 2 years of experience as an applied researcher working in the language automation industry. My academic research experience is limited to my M.A. dissertation which focused on the fields of morphology, syntax and semantics. In my professional career, my research has involved studying Discourse Analysis and Natural Language Processing meant mostly for building and improving tech products. I have maintained an interest in pragmatics and language philosophy through it all and wish to marry my love of gaming with that. I have no prior publications or experience in game development.

ENDNOTES

1 Observably, pop culture has caused increased awareness about constructed languages like Dothraki, High Valirian and Quenya among others.

2 Among conlang enthusiasts, the term 'auxiliary languages' refers to languages made to serve as a mode of communication between speakers that do not speak each others' languages.

3 Klingon is a fictional conlang from the Star Wars cinematic universe, Sindarin and Quenya belong to Tolkien's books and the films and TV that have borne from there, Nilfgaardian belongs to The Witcher books, games and TV series and probably the most well known example is of Dothraki and High Valyrian of Game of Thrones fame.

4 The most notable example of this is Dovahzul (dragon tongue) from The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim.

5 These functions are proposed as textonomic design approaches to conlang creation in games. It attempts to look at conlangs as a tool of player immersion rather than as narrative enhancers.

6 Beinhoff (2020) and Peterson (2015), both make a case for this. There is general consensus on this in conlanger and genre fiction fanatic circles as well. 7In pragmatics an ‘utterance’ refers to the act of uttering something (Huang, 2012), it could be a word, a phrase, a sentence or even a few sentences.

8 In the fictitious world of a game or film, fictional conlangs are naturally occurring languages, they are not engineered by anthropomorphic intervention. There are exceptions to this of course.

9 Many conlangs that are created specifically for games are often just ciphers and not central to the gaming experience, i.e. they form optional courses of action that a player can take to enhance their gameplay. *The Elder Scrolls V:Skyrim's* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) Dovahzul, however, is both tied into the game’s primary narrative and presents players with choices as to how they wish to use it.

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