

# Book Review

***Fictional Languages in Science Fiction Literature: Stylistic Explorations* by Israel A. C. Noletto.** Routledge, 2024. ISBN 9781032688886, 256 pp.

The literary phenomenon of *glossopoesis*, or language invention in fiction, has often been relegated to fandom discussions, being as a result underrepresented in academia despite its disproportionately higher occurrence in speculative fiction (e.g. science fiction, fantasy, and dystopia). With *Fictional Languages in Science Fiction Literature: Stylistic Explorations*, Israel A. C. Noletto offers a critical intervention, proposing that fictional languages be regarded as key stylistic devices within science fiction narratives. Rooted in literary stylistics and informed by narrative theory, semiotics, sociolinguistics, and even historical linguistics, Noletto's survey is both rigorous and ambitious, providing an analytical framework for understanding the role fictional languages have in narrative while proposing stylistic approaches for critiquing narratives that feature glossopoesis.

By itself, the introductory historical overview of fictional languages across different genres and media types is enough to warrant reading the book. However, the bulk of Noletto's argument is set around his model for reading fictional languages in science fiction literature, laying the ground for meticulous analyses accompanied by numerous examples applying stylistic concepts that help the reader appreciate glossopoesis as a relevant literary phenomenon worthy of systematic analysis.

The model Noletto proposes builds upon previous studies, such as Stockwell (2006) and Cheyne (2008), and comprises five key functions:

Journal of Languages, Texts, and Society, Vol. 7 (2025), 1-5 [online].

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speculative, rhetorical, descriptive, diegetic, and paratextual. This model serves as the foundation for this particular textual approach to analysing fictional languages, enabling Noletto to shed light on the ways in which glossopoesis can shape a text's thematic dimension, storytelling, world-building, and reader engagement. From iconic works like George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) to more contemporary examples such as China Miéville's *Embassytown* (2011) and Ted Chiang's 'Story of Your Life' (1998), Noletto presents eighteen case studies with a wide temporal and thematic range, making the book both comprehensive and compelling.

A particularly striking aspect of the study is Noletto's examination of glossopoesis' speculative and rhetorical functions. Notably, Chapter 2 situates glossopoesis within the science fiction tradition of thought experiments, drawing on linguistic theories such as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and Chomsky's generative grammar. Through close readings of *The Embedding and Snow Crash*, Noletto demonstrates how invented languages can operate as *nova*, 'the main source of the difference between the actual world and the world of a tale' (4).

In Chapter 3, he turns to the rhetorical effects of fictional dialects, or dialectal extrapolations in his terminology, exploring their capacity to immerse, disorient, or repulse readers. His analysis of Nadsat in *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) is especially insightful, illustrating how Anthony Burgess's hybrid argot alienates readers while reinforcing the novel's themes of youth rebellion and systemic control using political power and brainwashing techniques.

The book's engagement with world-building and storytelling is equally thorough. Chapters 4 and 5 delve into the descriptive and diegetic functions, with case studies such as Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* (1996) and Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17* (1966). Noletto argues that the languages featured in those stories do more than embellish their fictional worlds, contributing also to characterisation and narrative progression. His discussion of Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), for instance, highlights how the conlangs (*constructed languages*) of the Fremen not only create a cultural identity but also underscore the ecological and political tensions central to the narrative.

One of the book's most original contributions lies in its exploration of *paratexts*, Genette's (1997) term for textual elements that surround a particular narrative and tend to predispose how the reader regards a text, be it favourably or otherwise. In line with this concept, Chapter 6 considers how fictional languages extend beyond prose into maps, glossaries, and scripts, examining works like Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* (1985), Suzette H. Elgin's *Native Tongue* (1984), and Will Self's *The Book of Dave* (2006). Noletto's analysis highlights the transmedial potential of glossopoesis by means of exploratory materials found on webpages and elsewhere, briefly commenting on contemporary science fiction cinema and television, through which languages like Na'vi and Heptapod B have become cultural phenomena.

While the book's scope and depth are commendable, some limitations are nonetheless still worth mentioning. The emphasis on English-language texts, for example, leaves something to be desired in non-Anglophone science fiction texts, which might expand the book's perspective on glossopoesis. Noletto presents eighteen case studies with a wide temporal and thematic range, making the book both compelling and comprehensive within the British and American literature.

Although Noletto does mention his model can extend to the analysis of texts in any language, this remains to be tested. The emphasis on literature has also limited the exploration of languages found in filmic productions; this Noletto has left for future research, as he mentions in the conclusion. Additionally, the theoretical density of certain sections may deter readers less familiar with stylistics or linguistics. Despite the many definitions, examples, and explanations, the book is still complex and can be demanding. However, these are minor criticisms in what is otherwise a richly detailed and diligently argued study.

*Fictional Languages in Science Fiction Literature* is hence an indispensable resource for scholars of stylistics, science fiction studies and narrative theory. While the book may prove challenging for undergraduates in the fields of linguistics, literary studies, communication studies, and English studies, they too should find it highly informative and engaging. Despite being a work of literary criticism and not a manual, the study may equally appeal to conlangers

(language inventors), both professionals and hobbyists, in addition to fiction writers interested in learning from examples of how to integrate glossopoesis and narrative. Furthermore, the book fits neatly within the collection that hosts it, *Routledge Studies in Speculative Fiction*, enriching its already diverse line-up of important titles. *Fictional Languages in Science Fiction Literature* is a landmark achievement that is likely to impact future discussions of language and literature involving glossopoesis for years to come.

Glacilda Cordeiro  
Federal Institute of Piauí

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