

# Constrained Creativity: Towards a Natural History of Language in Fantasy Novels

Humanities Research Centre Seminar

Tuesday 14 March 2017, 4.30–5.45pm

---

## Speaker

**Professor Jane Simpson, Australian National University**

---

Seminar Room 1, Level 3, Sir Roland Wilson Building, 120 McCoy Cct, ANU

Any fiction writer creates an alternate world, but in some genres, the alternate world is intended to be different from the novelist's own society. This is most noticeable in science fiction, historical novels, fantasy novels, steampunk, and novels set in non-English speaking countries. Creating a believable alternate world involves paying attention to the languages spoken by the characters, and the place of languages in the world. The characters may speak different languages from each other and from the readers ('alternate world languages', AWLs, a type of 'conlang'), but this must be represented through the language of the readers (the conceit of translation). Within this limitation, writers have some freedom to use words, phrases and sentences that readers won't know, whether invented, archaic or from another language. These have communicative, symbolic and aesthetic functions. The symbolic functions are most obvious - marking the world-building by showing that this world has a different geography and ecology (and so has different place-names, plant and animal names), that there are different groups speaking different languages, that people in this world have different social structures, different practices and material culture. But the communicative and aesthetic functions are also important - the invented words of the AWL name these unfamiliar things and practices, and the reader must notice them. Writers often make use of sound symbolism, building 'art-languages' where the structure and forms symbolise attributes of the alternate world.



**Can we use the fragments of invented languages in novels as evidence of anything of interest to linguists?** I suggest that the answer is a qualified 'yes', based on a survey of 50 novels, with more detailed study of three novels, along with consideration of parodies of fantasy novels, and discussion of reception, and comparisons with Peter Carey's "Ned Kelly" and Dylan Coleman's "Amazing Grace." I show how authors represent language ecologies and attitudes towards languages ("folk linguistics"), what tacit linguistic knowledge (in the form and structure of the invented words) can be inferred, and of how linguistic creativity is influenced by the practices of English speakers. All of this is subject to the conventions of the genre, the influence of predecessor writers, and the presumed expectations of their readers.

**Jane Simpson** is Chair of Indigenous Linguistics and Deputy Director of the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language at the Australian National University. Her first degree was at ANU in Middle English literature and Chinese. Then she moved to linguistics, graduating in 1983 from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a PhD. She works on structural and social aspects of traditional and new Australian Indigenous languages. This includes word-meanings and dictionary-making, and has led to an interest in linguistic creativity, fuelled by a long-held addiction to fantasy literature.

Presented by the

Humanities Research Centre  
Research School of  
Humanities & the Arts  
ANU College of  
Arts & Social Sciences

Enquiries

[rosemary.shepherd@anu.edu.au](mailto:rosemary.shepherd@anu.edu.au)

*This lecture is free and all are welcome.*

Please visit our website for further information:

[hrc.anu.edu.au](http://hrc.anu.edu.au)

CRICOS# 00120C

PUBLIC SEMINAR