

# Skxawng! - The New York Times

The New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/06/magazine/06FOB-onlanguage-t.html>) · by Ben Zimmer · December 4, 2009

On Language

## Skxawng!

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# SKXAWNG!

Credit...You Don't Matter

**When James Cameron's** science-fiction opus "Avatar" comes to the screen this month, audiences will witness meticulously conceived alien characters — speaking a meticulously conceived alien language. To lend extra authenticity to the Na'vi — the tall, blue-skinned, vaguely feline humanoids living on the distant world of Pandora — Cameron enlisted the help of a linguist to construct a full-fledged language, with its own peculiar phonetics, lexicon and syntax. From the mind of Paul Frommer, a professor at the University of Southern California, was born a Na'vi language, with mellifluous vowel clusters, popping ejectives and a grammatical system elaborate enough to make a polyglot blush.

Why go to all the trouble? Do audiences really care if aliens on the silver screen are speaking in well-formed sentences? When the extraterrestrial visitor Klaatu barked orders to his robot companion Gort in the 1951 movie "The Day the Earth Stood Still," nobody was too concerned about such linguistic niceties. Even with the "Star Wars" films, few moviegoers objected to the jabbering of the various alien races, which never amounted to more than a sonic pastiche. The films' sound designer, Ben Burtt, often just manipulated bits of audio from different human languages for the nonhumans to mouth: some Quechua from South America for the bounty hunter Greedo, some Haya from Tanzania for Lando Calrissian's odd little co-pilot, Nien Nunb.

Among discerning science-fiction movie fans, however, expectations are more sophisticated now when it comes to alien tongues, and for that we have the Berkeley-trained linguist Marc Okrand to thank. Okrand worked as a consultant on the "Star Trek" films, and his crowning glory is the development of Klingon, the most fully realized science-fiction language devised thus far. I asked Okrand recently about the legacy of Klingon, and he was modest about his accomplishments. He wasn't the first academic linguist brought on board for such a project, he explained — that honor most likely goes to Victoria Fromkin, a U.C.L.A. professor who fashioned a language for the apelike Pakuni creatures on the 1970s children's TV series "Land of the Lost." Okrand also spoke admiringly of the prehistoric languages that Anthony Burgess created for the movie "Quest for Fire" in 1981.

But it was Okrand's invention of Klingon, beginning with "Star Trek III" in 1984, that set the standard for cinematic xenolinguistics. Working from a handful of Klingon lines that James Doohan (the actor who played Scotty) came up with for the first "Star Trek" movie, Okrand concocted a rich, internally consistent language, with a dictionary that has sold more than 300,000 copies. In her entertaining new book, "In the Land of Invented Languages," Arika Okrent details how the rise of Klingon has spawned a passionate subculture of fans versed in the language. Now the guttural sounds of Klingon can be heard in everything from a coming opera by the Klingon Terran Research Ensemble in the Netherlands to YouTube videos of the inimitable Klenginem, a Trekkie who performs Eminem's rap songs in Klingon translation.

Cameron clearly had Klingon in mind when he began envisioning the linguistic landscape of "Avatar." About three years ago, he hyped Frommer's development of the Na'vi language by boasting to Entertainment Weekly that it would "out-Klingon Klingon." Frommer now dismisses this as a bit of Cameronian hyperbole, assuring me that he has nothing but respect for Okrand's masterwork. In fact, Frommer got the "Avatar" assignment in part on the strength of his work on "Looking at Languages," an elementary linguistics workbook that includes a student exercise in deciphering Klingon word order. (Klingon follows the unusual object-verb-subject ordering.)

While Frommer was working out the structure of Na'vi in 2005 and 2006, however, he studiously avoided looking at Klingon or any other constructed language (or "conlang" for short). Instead he drew on his mentor Bernard Comrie's work on linguistic typology and his own wide-ranging study of languages as diverse as Persian, Malay, Hebrew and Mandarin Chinese. The most exotic items in the Na'vi sound system are three ejectives — *kx*, *px* and *tx* — that require explosive bursts of breath. They come in handy for such piquant epithets as *skxawng*, loosely translated as "moron," which became a popular put-down among crew members during production.

Like Klingon, Na'vi needed to be exotic enough for audiences to recognize its alienness but not so exotic that it was beyond the ability of human actors to articulate. Despite the much-heralded visual effects of "Avatar," Cameron insisted that the sounds of Na'vi speech remain unmanipulated. What's more, the film depicts human characters with varying proficiency in Na'vi. Sam Worthington as Jake Sully must learn the language when he is projected into alien form to go undercover on Pandora. Meanwhile, an experienced botanist (Sigourney Weaver) schools an eager young scientist (Joel David Moore) in the finer points of conversational Na'vi.

It is in these linguistically credible interactions that "Avatar" may make its biggest contribution to science fiction. In her foreword to "The Encyclopedia of Fictional and Fantastic Languages," Ursula K. Le Guin mocked the conventions of pulp sci-fi perpetuated by films like the "Star Wars" franchise: "the permanent hegemony of manly, English-speaking men, the risible grotesqueness of non-English languages and the inviolable rule that pretty women have musical names ending in 'a.'" The linguist Harold F. Schiffman has similarly noted that alien languages in films are primarily designed to "confuse and amuse," with little or no attention paid to the nuances of cross-linguistic communication. Our sci-fi heroes may still be buff English speakers, but a little sensitivity across the human-alien divide could help them seem less like *skxawngs*.

