

Dothraki and the Clash of Literacies

Khal Drogo, leader of his people, lord of the plains claimed for generations by right of the sword, strides into the firelight. He circles the pit, thrumming his chest in a display of dominance and power. His words rumble from deep in his throat, a broken cadence of glottals, stop-plosives, and short, hard vowels. His voice growls out trills, and hisses sibilant affricates, a shower of spit punctuating each short, staccato burst of speech. Drogo is a Dothraki warlord, and he speaks in the tongue of his people (Minahan). More accurately, Drogo is a character from George R. R. Martin's series of novels, A Song of Ice and Fire, and he speaks in a language constructed specifically for use on HBO's Game of Thrones, an adaptation of Martin's novels.

HBO hired David J. Peterson, president of the Language Creation Society (conlang.org), to create the Dothraki language. Peterson began by expanding upon the basic vocabulary Martin outlined in his books (which were based largely on Mongolian dialect sounds). Peterson took Martin's work as canonical and added linguistic concepts from Russian, Turkish, Estonian, Inuktitut, and Swahili to create an entirely original language suited to the producers' aesthetic of the Dothraki people

(Rodgers, 54). The tension between orality and literacy between how Dothraki was created and how it came to be spoken by Khal Drogo around the fire, is the focus of this paper.

Dothraki was constructed in a hyper-literate manner. It was created using the phonetically inscribed form of existing languages as a basis for sound selection and distribution. Dothraki, whether inscribed phonetically or orthographically, has no spoken origin. It cannot be transmitted without some degree of reference to these inscribed prescriptions for sound formation. The written language Peterson used to compose Dothraki was the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), a system of characters designed to represent lexicographically every discreet sound used in human language. IPA is a unique language in that it is entirely scribal in nature. IPA cannot be spoken; to speak IPA is to speak whatever language has been transcribed.

As IPA exists to inscribe sound, it is a form of writing fixed in a troubling lacuna within Plato's *pharmakon*. As Derrida points out in his explication of Plato, memory functions through signification: whether spoken or written, our minds associate signs with ideas to achieve successful cognition (Derrida 108 - 120). Derrida seeks to undermine Plato's attempt to distinguish written signification from oral signification, and IPA adds another layer of complexity to this argument. In

IPA, the signified object is phonetic sound. These sounds can be combined into complex signs and lexemes, but these combinations occur on a second order of signification. IPA's primary layer of signification (the phonemic) appeals directly to Plato's intuition that there is a cognitive value to spoken language discreet from written language. Yet IPA makes this appeal through the use of inscription. This echoes Derrida's suggestion that the distinction between oral and written language is non-binary, and thus problematic to Plato (144 - 150).

Since IPA signifies sound, and sound only, its ability to produce meaning suggests that phonemes (as much as lexemes) possess cognitive significance that can be recognized by both the oral mind (through spoken phonetics) and literate mind (through inscribed phonetics). There is significance to phonemes beyond their vocal expression. The concept of a sound, as evidenced through our capacity to understand IPA in abstraction, is as much a part of the sound as its verbal expression. Here Plato is again confounded, and Derrida born forward to his conclusion that the spoken and written word, once married, cannot be brought asunder. The silent reader of IPA is not reading IPA, but rather translating the sound signs into lexemes that can function as cognitive signs. The reader

thereby creates meaning on multiple levels; translating a lexicographically signified verbal text back into a comprehensible written form and deriving meaning from each stage of the exchange. This process is highly literate in nature, but hinges on a dynamic understanding of utterance and the significance of spoken language sounds.

IPA demonstrates that the production of phonetic sound assigns meaning in a manner that is pre-lexical, yet cognitively inscribed. In Dothraki, as in English, sounds having meaning beyond their production or combination. In Dothraki, this meaning is deliberately selected. In this manner, Dothraki, and constructed languages like it, can serve as a guide to understanding how the production of sound--prior to the production of established lexemes--produces meaning.

Ong, much like Plato, struggles with language's refusal to fit into a tidy binary. Peterson's use of IPA to craft Dothraki confounds many of the delineations between orality and literacy that Ong sets forth in Orality and Literacy. Dothraki exhibits most of the characteristics Ong describes as proprietary to a primarily oral communication. It is cadence-driven, with a grammar that supports repetition of sounds and object nouns. Its vocabulary focuses on the life-world, with dozens of words for common objects such as "horse," and no words for objects

foreign to the Dothraki peoples' experience (there is no word for "throne," as the people have no king--a throne is instead called an "iron chair"). Highly combative in tone, Dothraki has an active verb construction that helps emphasize verbal conflict as an extension of martial conflict ("Creating the Dothraki Language"). Despite this, Dothraki is conspicuously literate in its origin, and indeed could not exist in anything short of a hyper-literate environment.

The Dothraki text for Game of Thrones is first rendered as Standard English text by the program's screen writers. This script is delivered to Peterson, who then creates new Dothraki words or employs existing words and grammar construction to approximate the scripted text. This approximation is shaped by the artificial limitations of Peterson's constructed grammar and the life-world-specific lexicon of nouns, adjectives, and verbs likely to appear in common usage for nomadic desert dwelling horse warriors.

This step in the process further blurs Ong's attempted distinction between oral and written language. While the meaning of the script is fixed by its writers, its literal translation is rendered dynamic when filtered through the artificially oral medium of Dothraki. Despite Dothraki's hyper-literate construction, it is impossible for the scripted text to remain

fixed in translation. This unfixed quality is another characteristic Ong ascribes to primarily oral literacies. Yet, this characteristic is the product of conspicuous application of a non-English (in this case constructed) standard of written literacy on to English language text. Orality, here, is the product of the dynamic application of non-standard inscription and signification to reproduce meaning. In this manner, Ong's tenuous distinction between orality and literacy is turned against itself.

This process of re-signification is intensified by both performance of Dothraki and its presentation on air. Once the script is rendered into a Dothraki approximation, it is delivered to the program's set in two forms. The first form is given to the performers: an orthographic representation of the Dothraki text side-by-side with an English translation. Dothraki's grammar structure is not directly comparable with English, and so a direct translation does not correspond word to word. It is the actor's task to use the English text to dictate their performance of the Dothraki language, without being able to draw meaning from the Dothraki itself. The performers speak words without semiotic significance to approximate a scripted signification that goes unspoken. By performing Dothraki, the actors are creating meaning and assigning significance to

Dothraki lexemes to best convey the emotional content of their lines. In this manner, the performance of Dothraki comes perilously close to Plato's ideal of spoken language as intimated in the *Phaedrus*. This Platonic state of expression, divorced of inscribed meaning and impulsive by nature, is achieved by virtue of the actors' having little to no sign structure attached to the majority of their spoken text. They know only what they wish to communicate, and must assign that meaning to the arbitrary lexemes provided. The meaning has primacy over the words. However, Dothraki is comprehensively literate in its construction and application. Even as it approaches Plato's impulsive, expressive truth, it does so through the careful manipulation of inscription. This inscription is reinforced by the second form in which Dothraki arrives on set: as an IPA transcription delivered to the on-set language coach, Brendan Gunn. Gunn's primary task is to ensure faithful and consistent pronunciation of the Dothraki, and to aid actors in producing sounds foreign to their native language. Even the spontaneous creation of meaning within the actors' emotional experience is regulated by the fixed, inscribed signification of phonemic sound as prescribed by Peterson through Gunn, and through the complex literacy of IPA. The actors are coached by ear between takes, and often shoot lines

out of sequence or with frequent cuts to allow for correction and quick memorization of unfamiliar lexemes. Dothraki's literate nature interrupts its orality, while at the same time reinforcing the cognitive significance of phonemes and the cognitive insignificance of lexemes. The performance of Dothraki is as constructed as the language itself. It is likewise as rife with the interdependence of oral and literate concepts of sound and language, both of which are needed to create its meaning.

The presentation of Dothraki offers a final layer of complexity. The scripted English text is first approximated into Dothraki. The Dothraki is then performed as a re-approximation of the translation. Finally, the performance is subtitled in English for the show's viewers. This subtitling provides a final fixed inscription of meaning. However, the subtitles are generated through a complex process of translation and oral re-signification. While the subtitles are obviously inscribed, their meaning diverges from the original text presented to Peterson. Rather than prescribing meaning on to the text, the subtitles reflect the new meaning generated by the interplay between literacy, Dothraki's constructed orality, and the spoken performance text of the actors. This meaning, however, is then prescribed to the viewer. In a final clash of literacies,

mediating Dothraki through subtitles privileges literacy over orality, and demands the text be read and understood as subordinate to English language signification. That subtitling is at all necessary to achieve this subordination is a testament to the complex negotiation between oral and literate construction Dothraki encapsulates.

Dothraki is a literate language by construction. Yet, it behaves like an oral language, and indeed successfully models an oral language on all major accounts per Ong. In this manner, the example of Dothraki demonstrates the inextricable nature of oral and literate communication. It is the conspicuous hyper-literacy of Dothraki that allows it to reassign text into an oral paradigm. It is a literacy that produces orality that, in turn, asserts its literacy. Due in part to the conspicuous nature of IPA, Dothraki beautifully conflates oral and written assignation of meaning, destroying any sense of binary or continuum. Rather, the example of Dothraki demonstrates a total interweaving, or stacking, of orality and literacy. In protest of Plato, Derrida conflated inscription with memory, and signs both written and spoken with the fundamental cognitive process. The example of Dothraki calls the discreet nature of orality and literacy even further into question by demonstrating a way in which the tools of literacy can impose a form of orality. From

Peterson at his desk to Drogo at his fire, the complex relationship between oral and written literacy, and how that relationship impacts the mediation of language and communication, boils down to the assignation of meaning through multiple literacies operating in concert.

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