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Does Alan Moore Have the (Untranslatable) Approach to Translation?

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Does Alan Moore Have the (Untranslatable) Approach to Translation?

We've all experienced it: that moment when we're reading a sci-fi story or watching a sci-fi movie about alien contact and we realize that everyone is speaking the same language....usually English. Early Star Trek episodes are sometimes lampooned for this Anglo-centric stance. So the question for us is this: how does everyone know the same language?

Authors and artists approach the problem of cross-linguistic translation in multiple ways. (In this post, I'm conflating translation and interpretation under the term translation, but these are different linguistic processes.) Fans of Doctor Who, for example, know that the TARDIS facilitates the 'automatic' translation of language. This allows the Doctor's linguistically ordinary human companions (usually monolingual) to participate in all of his adventures unencumbered by linguistic barriers that most of us would face in similar situations.

Translation, though, involves more than finding the right word to plug in or the right sentence structure. Translation also involves culture, e.g., understanding the value system or experiences that membership in other cultures rests upon.

One Green Lantern story, 'In Blackest Night,' incorporates both the linguistic problem of translation and also the cultural realities of an alien civilization. The Green Lantern in the story, Katma Tui, has been sent by the Guardians to a 'black and lightless void known as the Obsidian Deeps.' Katma Tui's task is to find a suitable candidate to become a protector for that region of space.



(<https://pencilpanelpage.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/ear-splitting-scream3.jpg>)
GL makes first contact

The being that she finds evolved in a lightless world — a world utterly dark, so dark that the life forms don't have eyes and have never seen light. Katma Tui quickly realizes that her ring cannot successfully translate concepts related to light or seeing. The ring cannot translate 'green' or 'lantern' because (1) there is no linguistic equivalent in the target language and (2) there is no cultural experience of light in the Obsidian Deep.



(<https://pencilpanelpage.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/untranslatable1.jpg>)
GL attempts to explain the ring

Katma Tui solves the problem in a creative way. Rather than appointing a protector as a Green Lantern, she draws on the culture and language of the candidate (a being called Rot Lop Fan) to adapt the oath and the uniform, yielding a protector whose power is symbolized not by a green lantern but a bell that rings in F-sharp.



(<https://pencilpanelpage.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/f-sharp-bell1.jpg>)

F Sharp Bell

My question for this blog relates to Moore's approach to 'translation.' Does Moore do justice to the complexities of communication during first contact? How do other comics artists approach translation/interpretation? Do they incorporate language? culture? physical environments?

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Posted by [Frank Bramlett](#) on [March 29, 2012](#) in [Alan Moore](#), [Green Lantern](#), [interpretation](#), [language ideology](#), [translation](#).

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About Frank Bramlett

Until June 2014, I am a visiting lecturer in the English Department at Stockholm University, where I offer seminars in Sociolinguistics; Language and Gender; and Language and Comics; among others. For Fall 2014, I will return to the English Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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