Novel linguistics: Portraits of the field and practitioners in English long fiction

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Abstract. Folk linguistics properly encompasses not only popular ideas about language itself, but also opinions about the nature of linguistics itself and what a linguist does. In this study, I investigate portrayals of linguistics, linguistic topics, and linguists in ~100 English-language novels published over the last ~100 years. These depictions offer a window into the public's understanding of the field, while also shedding light on which linguistic topics capture the interest and imagination of writers and readers. The corpus reveals an overall increase in the number of linguistics-relevant works, which fall into the main categories of those involving signed languages and deafness, having a linguist protagonist, animal language, xenolinguistics and alien languages, lexicography, and language disorders. Observed changes within the categories track societal trends, starting from Cold War era interests in political control plus Space Race-driven interest in inter-species communication, and shifting in our current age of social media and AI hype to language commodification, control, and truth values.

Keywords. fiction; folk linguistics; literature

1. Introduction. For outreach reasons, among others, it behooves the linguistics community to be aware of our fictional image. In other words, a full approach to folk linguistics (Niedzielski & Preston 2000) extends to what people believe about us and our work, as well as about language in general. What aspects of linguistics and being a linguist come to mind for authors, editors, publishers, and members of the reading public? How accurate are these fictional depictions? How could this reflect and inform our attempts at science communication and promoting the field, in addition to providing reliable information to the public?

This study cannot hope to fully answer these questions. However, it is an attempt make addressing them possible, based on assembling a corpus of English-language novels featuring linguists and linguistics.

The corpus was assembled on an opportunistic basis, beginning with my own personal reading as well as works mentioned in prominent linguistics-oriented social media accounts, blogs, podcasts, and so on. Keyword searches were also conducted within web browsers as well as online sites such as goodreads (*https://www.goodreads.com*/). Memoirs and non-fiction works are excluded, and only works which have appeared in English were included. A small number were written in another language, after which an English translation was published.[1] Self-published works were not included, with one exception.[2] When a work is part of a series, it is counted only once, and its publication date in the figures below is based on that of the first book in the series. Short stories and theatrical works are not included, which means that certain well-known examples such as Ted Chiang's "Story of your life" (1998; the basis of the Hollywood

* I would like to thank audience members at the 2026 Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America (New Orleans, LA) for their interest, thoughtful comments, and additions to the list of novels discussed here. In addition, heartfelt thanks to all the novelists cited, who saw fit to include a bit of linguistics in their artistic endeavors, to whatever extent. Author: Mary Ann Walter, University of the Virgin Islands (mary.walter@uvi.edu).

[1] There were seven such works.

[2] Vyvyan Evans' novel *The babel apocalypse* (2023) was included despite being self-published, due to the author's status as a linguistics degree-holder and instructor.

film *Arrival*) and Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1916; the basis of the musical/film *My fair lady*) are not included.[3] Graphic novels are included, although possibly more likely to be overlooked due to my own reading habits.

Finally, a certain amount of subjective judgment was involved in terms of the necessary threshold of linguistic content. Therefore, the huge number of fantasy novels involving the concept of "true names" or lexical non-arbitrariness were not all included. Rather, I restrict my attention to those in which the concept is central to the plot or somewhat more explored linguistically – for example, Le Guin's *Earthsea* work (1968), Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992), and a few others, all discussed in more detail below.

Similarly, books with a linguist protagonist constitute one of the major categories discussed later. But when the linguist character dies almost immediately, as in Stephen Graham Jones' *Earthdiver* series (2025) or Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach series (2014), these are not included. Nor are those in which a linguist makes only a brief appearance, as Alfred Kroeber does in Francis Spufford's alternate-history novel *Cahokia jazz* (2023) and a thinly-veiled portrayal of phonologist Bert Vaux does in Elif Batuman's semi-autobiographical novel *The idiot* (2017).

Finally, works featuring translation are also numerous, but only those in which linguistic aspects are highlighted are included here, some of which are discussed in the miscellaneous category below. Those which merely assume or involve automatic translation as a background assumption, like the universal translator of *Star Trek* or the babelfish of Douglas Adams, are not considered to be sufficiently linguistic in nature. Nor is the presence of a constructed language or conlang, at whatever level of elaboration, sufficient for inclusion.

The resulting corpus numbers 87 items at the time of writing. Figure 1 shows the distribution of their publication over time by decade since the 1960s.

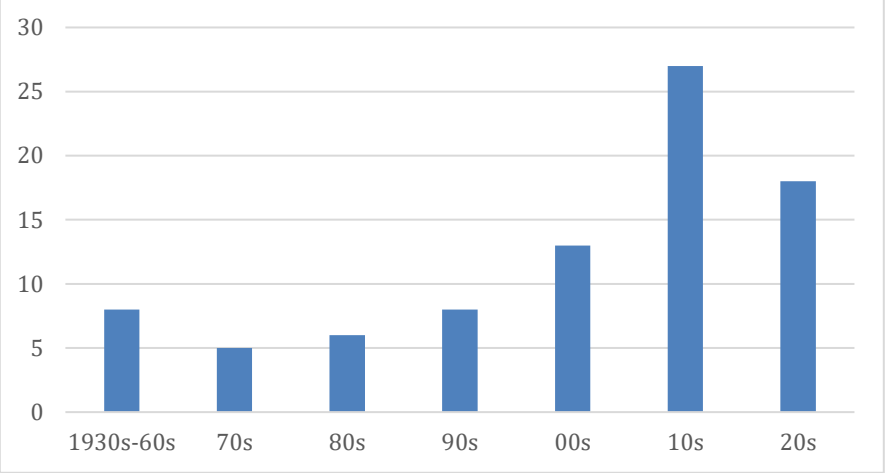

Figure 1: Number of linguistic novels by decade

The numbers reveal a steady increase over the last half-century – hopefully a genuine rise in the number of linguistics-themed works rather than an artifact of recency. The trend accelerates in

[3] However, lists of poems, short stories and films involving linguistics are also available on my website in the Ling in Film and Ling in Lit sections (https://sites.google.com/view/maryannwalter/). There are smaller numbers of each, compared to the list of novels.

the 2010s and the current decade is well on track to exceed previous ones over the next five years.

In an additional qualitative analysis, the linguistic theme, or way in which linguistics features in the novel, was identified for each book in the corpus.

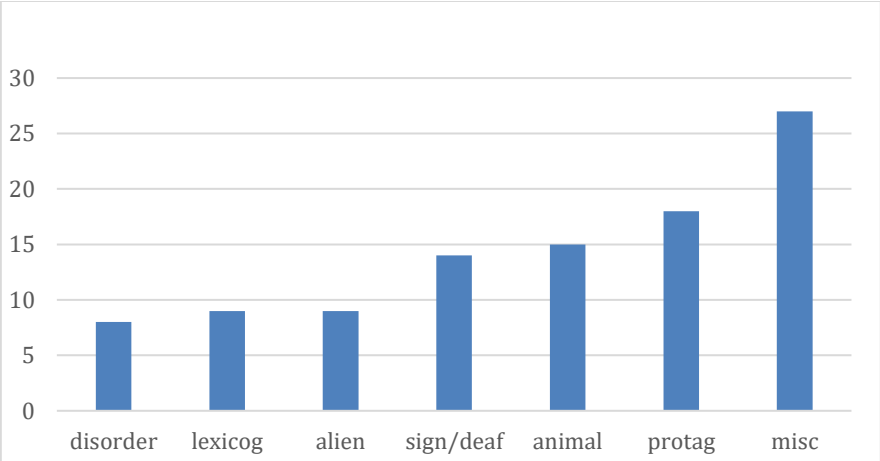

Figure 2. Number of linguistic novels by theme

Note that the total is higher than 87, due to some novels featuring linguistics in multiple ways – for example, a novel featuring xenolinguistics/alien languages which also has a linguist protagonist.

The emergent themes from this classification fall into six categories which reach the somewhat arbitrarily-established threshold of including at least seven or more novels. These are split between the "big three" and "little three" categories. In the little three, there are eight or nine novels each featuring speech/language disorders, lexicography, and xenolinguistics. In the big three, the number of novels is in the teens, and the categories are those about deafness/sign languages, animal languages, and having a linguist protagonist. The final, largest category is simply titled "miscellaneous" and includes all those not falling into one of the other categories.

Each of these categories is discussed separately in Sections 2-8 below.

2. Disorders. Figure 3 displays the number of novels featuring speech/language disorders by decade. The sudden emergence of this subgenre is very striking and, I hypothesize, co-occurs with the rise of the neurodiversity movement. This term came into general use at the end of the 1990s,[4] and the burst of novels addressing communicative differences could well reflect its spread thereafter. The sole early example is the young adult novel *Speak* (Anderson 1999), in which the protagonist experiences elective mutism after a traumatic sexual assault.[5]

A full decade later, other speech/language issues make an appearance. In Ruiyan Xu's novel *The lost and forgotten languages of Shanghai*, an aphasic Chinese businessman loses access to his native language and can communicate only in his rudimentary English, after which he enters

[4] See the history section of the Wikipedia article devoted to this concept (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neurodiversity).

[5] Pat Barker's earlier well-known novel *Regeneration* (1991) also features mutism as experienced by one shell-shocked World War I soldier, but this aspect is very marginal in the novel compared to *Speak*.

speech therapy (2010). Kim Fielding also features an aphasic protagonist in her gay romance novel *Speechless* (2012).

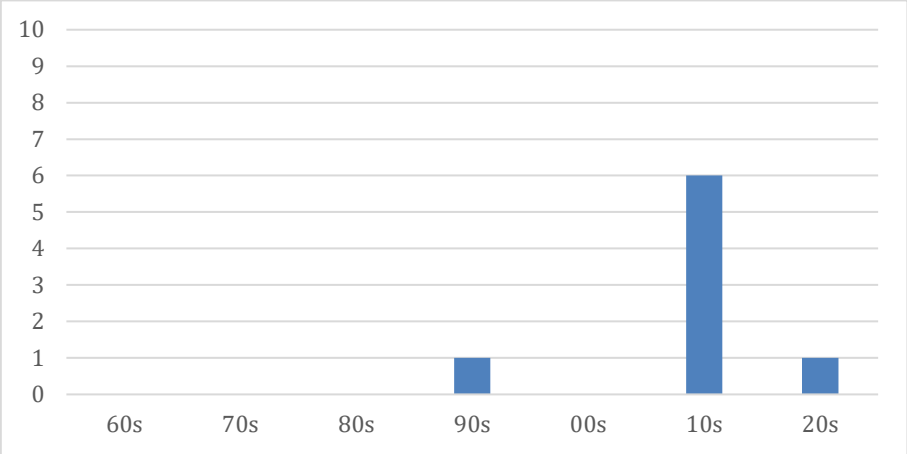

Figure 3. Number of disordered language novels by decade

In best-selling YA author Sharon M. Draper's novel *Out of my mind,* the main character is "locked-in" by her cerebral palsy, which renders her nonverbal. However, she has an active interior life and becomes adept at the use of augmented communication, which is portrayed very accurately. Stuttering features prominently in Vince Vawter's award-winning YA novel *Paperboy*, in which the protagonist comes to terms with its role in his life (2013). Ginny Rorby's 2015 YA novel *How to speak dolphin* does not actually feature dolphin language, unlike some others to be discussed in Section 6 – rather, it revolves around a non-verbal child with autism and his and his sister's adaptation to his condition partly through dolphin therapy.

More recently, mutism reappears. Maryam Master's 2022 middle-grade novel *No words* features a refugee child with the disorder, and Oda's manga *Komi can't communicate* also has a child protagonist who is admired at school but unable to speak (2025).

3. Lexicography. Novels involving lexicography also seem to be a welcome trend. After a couple of isolated early examples, we see a steep increase distributed over the past two decades.

The first is Lillian de la Torres' golden age detective series in which famed lexicographer Samuel Johnson solves mysteries around London, starting with *Dr. Sam Johnson, detector* (1946)[6] – although there is little discussion of actual lexicography.

The other relatively early example is Andrew Clements' charming middle-grade novel *Frindle*, about a boy's quest to get his invented word added to the dictionary. Along the way, interesting points are made about linguistic arbitrariness and the nature of lexicography and language change. There is also a posthumously published sequel.

The remainder of the novels in this category are intended for adults. Samuel Johnson returns to the stage in Beryl Bainbridge's 2001 literary novel *According to Queeney.* At the end of the decade, Emily Arsenault's *The broken teaglass* features a novice assistant lexicographer who ends up involved in mysterious doings at the office (2009). The combination of mystery and lexicography seems to be irresistible – Susie Dent's *Guilty by definition* is another example, where a

[6] In Figure 3 and subsequent figures, the leftmost bar labeled "60s" includes works published up to and including the 1960s, as well as in that decade itself.

murder mystery plays out in a thinly-disguised version of the Oxford English Dictionary (2024). Her novel is reviewed from a linguistics perspective by Walter (2025b). *The yield* by Tara June Winch (2019) also involves a mystery, in which a young Aboriginal Australian woman comes home after the death of her grandfather and must discover the fate of the dictionary manuscript he'd created for his indigenous language.

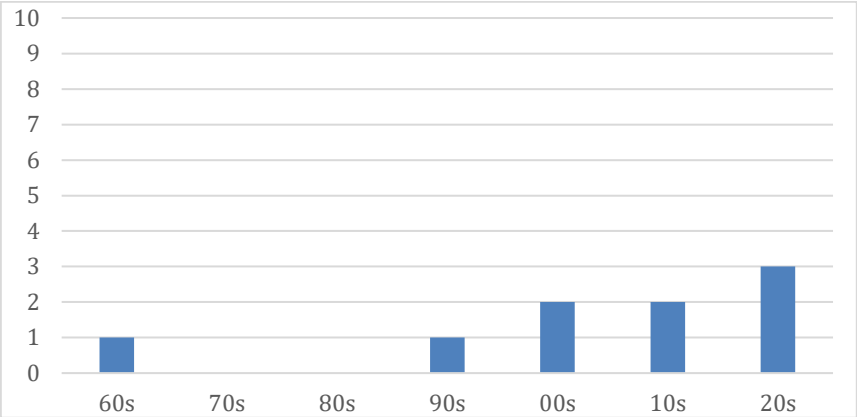

Figure 4. Number of lexicography novels by decade

In Eley Williams' *The Liar's dictionary,* another novice lexicographer must track down the invented words that a predecessor inserted into the earlier editions of their dictionary (2020). *The dictionary of lost words,* published by a different Williams in the very same year, is another book that takes place in a fictionalized OED. In this case, the story is told by a young woman who comes of age in the era of suffrage and World War I. Growing up in and around the dictionary, she ruminates insightfully on register, inclusion and gendered language in particular as it relates to the creation of dictionaries. Rounding off this category is Miura's *The great passage* (also an animated series and live-action film), a novel about a retiring lexicographer who recruits a failed salesman/linguistics student as his successor (2011).

4. Xenolinguistics. The third and last of the "little three" categories involves alien languages and xenolinguistics. These are distributed remarkably evenly over time – shown in Figure 5 – but with interesting changes in focus.

The earliest work in this category is *Out of the silent planet* (1938), the first of the "Space Trilogy" by C.S. Lewis, better known for other work. It features a linguist (or rather "philologist") protagonist Dr. Elwin Ransom, who is abducted to Malacandra/Mars, where he must use his linguistic skills to establish communication with the Martians, as well as survive a battle between good and evil. In the actual 1960s appeared Delany's novel *Babel-17* (1966) – social control through Whorfianism in space! Vance's novel *The languages of Pao* puts forward a similar scenario (1958).

Ian Watson's 1973 novel *Embeddings* is one of the most linguistically informed novels discussed here, making actual reference to syntactic theories of the time. It features a conceptual trifecta of separate storylines braided together: linguistic fieldwork with aliens on first contact, a "forbidden experiment"-style research study involving children and language deprivation, and an endangered Amazonian language which relies entirely on syntactic center embedding and the strangeness of which both breaks human brains and confers psychic powers.

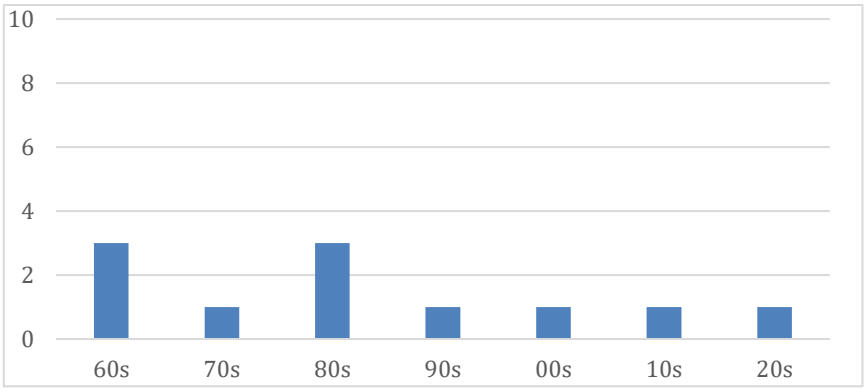

Figure 5. Number of xenolinguistic novels by decade

The 1980s saw the publication of two substantial series of xenolinguistic novels. Sheila Finch coined the word itself in her series of novels and stories featuring members of the "guild of xenolinguists," specialists in the analysis and acquisition of alien languages (1986). In Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native tongue* trilogy, female members of a similar guild secretly decide to construct a gender-neutral language which in turn is expected to change behavior, leading to gender equality (1984). Later in the same decade, Walter Jon Williams' science fiction novella *Surfacing* involves the use of language-using whales as intermediaries with an aquatic species of alien. The protagonist of Lola Robles' translated work *Monteverde: Memoirs of an interstellar linguist*, on the other hand, works on languages which are human, but have developed in isolation on another planet (1999).

In the twentieth century, the plots of two almost-simultaneous novels crucially rely on alien languages without the "deception" design principle of human language. For the species in Liu Cixin's *Three-body problem* trilogy, thought is equivalent to language and the entire concept of deception is…alien. The linguistics of the series has been discussed online in Dr. Daniel Hieber's linguistics newsletter, *Linguistic discovery* (2025). China Mieville's *Embassytown* features a linguist protagonist who works with the Ariekans, another alien species who cannot express or conceptualize deception – at first – but develops the ability through extending the use of figurative language. Most recently, Andy Weir's *Project Hail Mary* involves a non-linguist in a monolingual elicitation situation with an alien whose language he must learn. Like Mieville's Ariekan, it is a polyvocal language crucially relying on the production of musical chords. Hieber (2026) discusses it from a linguistic perspective.

Overall, over time, the themes of these xenolinguistic novels show a shift from interest in sociopolitical control through Orwellian constructed languages, to the significance of truth and deception in cross-cultural contact.

5. Animal language. In the first of the "big three" categories, we see approximately double the overall number of works. Novels involving animal language demonstrate a U-shaped curve over time, with a heyday in the 1970s at the time of Cold War, Space Race government funding for such research endeavors, then a lessening of interest, then a recurrence in literature in the 2010s and 2020s.

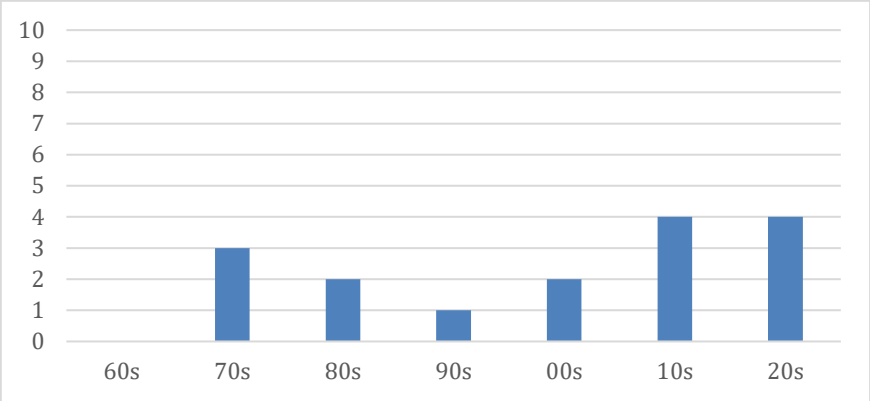

Figure 7. Number of animal language novels by decade

There is also a qualitative change in the type of animal represented over time. The category kicks off with Dickinson's 1974 novel *The poison oracle*, in which a linguist protagonist working in the United Arab Emirates teaches sign language to a chimpanzee, who then becomes the only witness to a murder. Goulet's novel *Oh's profit*, published the following year, also features a signing primate, though this time a gorilla (1975).

Attention then shifts to aquatic mammals. *King of the sea*, written by creolist linguist Derek Bickerton, features dolphin communication and discusses his bioprogram hypothesis of language (1979). Mooney's *Easy travel to other planets* involves a love story between a woman and a dolphin in which linguistic questions are central (1981). Williams' novella *Surfacing*, mentioned in Section 4, has whales instead of dolphins (1988).

There is then a shift back to primates. *Jennie* (1994) fictionalizes the story of a chimpanzee raised with a human family to acquire sign language, as was attempted in reality with Gua, Washoe and Nim Chimpsky. It was later made into a film. *Hurt go happy* is a YA novel by Ginny Rorby, with a deaf protagonist who is raised in an oralist environment lacking sign language, but encounters a signing friend and his signing chimpanzee, going on to gain both confidence and knowledge of ASL (2006).[7] *We are all completely beside ourselves* (Fowler 2013) is another story of a chimpanzee growing up signing in a human family, and also includes a character with elective mutism. Sara Gruen's *Ape house* is the weird and gripping story of a group of signing bonobos who escape their research facility and become the stars of a reality show (2010). Finally, in *We love you, Charlie Freeman*, an African-American family moves to a Massachusetts research facility specifically in order to be the signing family for a chimpanzee. Racial tensions and other community weirdness follow (Greenidge 2016).

An outlier in this period is Carolyn Parkhurst's *The dogs of babel*, which features both a linguist protagonist and another example of the animal witness to a death. In her novel, a widowed linguistics professor tries to teach English to his dog, so that the dog can explain the circumstances of his wife's death (2003).

Within the last ten years, the set of species involved has again diversified. This starts with the rollicking manga *Heterogenia linguistico* (Seno 2018), in which the main character is an academic linguistic fieldworker investigating various language communication systems of

[7] Rorby is also the author of *How to speak dolphin*, discussed in Section 2, in which dolphin therapy aids a nonverbal autistic child.

intelligent animal species ranging from wolves to slimes to dragons. *The dolphin house* is a fictional retelling of the infamous military-sponsored and drug-ridden research project to teach language to dolphins in the U.S. Virgin Islands, with a deaf protagonist (Schulman 2022). *Lessons in chemistry* contains relatively little linguistic content but does include a dog who comes to understand at least a thousand words of English, and has been made into a Netflix television series (Garmus 2022). In *The mountain in the sea*, a marine scientist discovers and learns a visual language system used by a super-intelligent octopus species (Nayler 2023). Finally, Natasha Pulley's *The Mars house* has not only a linguist protagonist – a specialist in mammoth language – but also crucially relies on that language at its climax (2024). This novel is reviewed from a linguistics perspective by Walter (2026).

Notably, there is considerable overlap between this category and that of sign/deafness, since animal language novels involving primates typically involve the use of a human sign language rather than one stemming from the animal species itself, and often include deaf and/or signing human characters

6. Deafness and sign languages. This category makes its appearance in the 1970s, a time of social ferment and justice movements, including in the Deaf community. After a lull, there is a surge of relevant novels with the start of the 21st century, which persists into the subsequent decades.

Things kick off with the publication of *In this sign* (Greenberg 1970), an astoundingly compassionate and well-informed rendition of a deaf couple's family story and the transition from an oralist society to one more accepting of sign language and difference in general. Written by an anthropologist with professional and social ties to the deaf community, it was reprinted in 2024 and has been reviewed from a linguistics perspective by Walter (2025b). The other two novels from this decade involve signing primates and are briefly discussed in Section 5 (Dickinson 1974, Goulet 1975), as is the sole example from the 1990s (*Jennie*; Preston 1994) and a few from the following decades (Gruen 2010; Fowler 2013; Greenidge 2016).

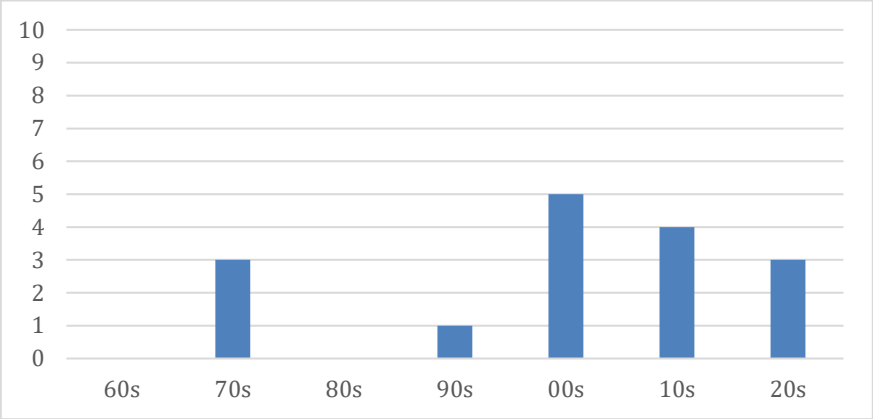

Figure 6. Number of sign novels by decade

Deaf actress Marlee Matlin's YA series starts off the 21st century with her *Deaf child crossing* (2002). *Feathers* by award-winning African-American author Jacqueline Woodson features two signing children who develop a cross-racial friendship in a newly integrated school in the American South. Ann Clare LeZotte's *T4* is a poem-novel about the experience of the deaf and hard-of-hearing in Nazi Germany (2008). She is also the author of *Show me a sign*, a YA novel

set in Martha's Vineyard, featuring its local sign language (as well as the indigenous language Wampanoag, to a lesser extent; 2020).

The doyen of the academic novel, David Lodge, has one with both a linguist protagonist and deafness. In his *Deaf sentence*, a retired linguistics professor who feels isolated due to his progressive hearing loss is drawn into a forensic linguistics research project on the discourse analysis of suicide notes. He briefly explores sign language but instead gains social connections primarily through a community group for learning and practicing lip reading (2008). The protagonist of Callahan's *The hearing test* also experiences catastrophic hearing loss and is similarly uninterested in sign language in any way – then miraculously regains hearing anyway (2024).

7. Linguist protagonists. In addition to C.S. Lewis' linguist protagonist, discussed in Section 4, another early example is the main character of Anthony Burgess' *The doctor is sick*, who undergoes a delirious breakdown in London that involves some discussion of his work and career with other characters (1960). In spite of this character, it remains less linguistically interesting that Burgess' other famous work, *A clockwork orange* (1962).

In the 1980s, Malcolm Bradbury's *Rates of exchange* has a linguist protagonist who is sent on a cultural tour behind the Iron Curtain (1983). A pair of novels by David Carkeet featured linguist protagonists. In his *Double negative*, the director of a research center for psycholinguistics and language acquisition, whose project involves teaching nonce words to toddlers, becomes a suspect in a murder and must solve the crime to clear his name (1980). In his *The full catastrophe*, a discourse analyst moves into a couple's house in order to repair their relationship by improving their communication style, but things go very wrong. The late 1980s feature female xenolinguist protagonists, discussed in Section 4 (Elgin 1984; Finch 1986; later, Robles 1999).

The protagonist of Alexander McCall Smith's gentle comedy *Portuguese irregular verbs* and its sequels is an absent-minded professor of Romance linguistics (1997). With the turn of the century, another linguist appears in Mieville's *The scar* (2002) as well as in previously mentioned *Deaf sentence* (see Section 6; Lodge 2008), *Embassytown* (Section 4; Mieville 2011) and Parkhurst's *The dogs of babel* (Section 5; 2003).

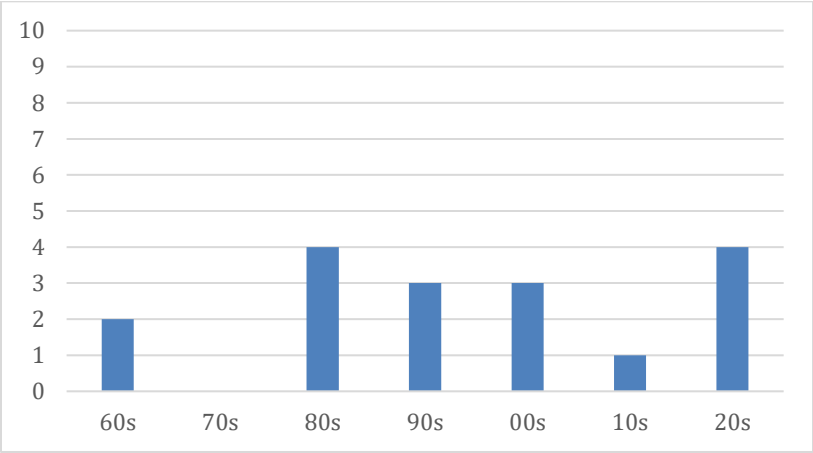

Figure 8. Number of linguist protagonist novels by decade

Within the current decade, Audrey Magee's *The colony* features a linguist working on Irish Gaelic on a remote island during the troubles, and includes insightful conversations among characters about attitudes towards language loss (2022). In Erica Ferencik's *Girl in ice*, published the

same year, a linguist protagonist works in the Arctic with a cryogenically preserved girl from the ancient past. Perhaps the most charming linguist protagonist of all, the one in Pulley's *The Mars house,* is discussed in Section 5 (2024). Having abandoned linguistics for politics, he continues to frustrate his friends and colleagues (though not linguistics-oriented readers) with long dinner-table digressions about historical linguistics and phonetics.

Finally, Sands' *Wordhunter* (2024) has a graduate student and forensic linguist protagonist, although the work displays little of Lodge's familiarity with the academic context, or with linguistics in general (a page of text is devoted to the linguist character's prescriptive rant about non-use of "whom" and her hobby is drawing Reed-Kellogg sentence diagrams, while seeming completely unfamiliar with syntactic trees or X-bar theory).

As Figure 8 shows, the number of works with linguist protagonists has remained quite steady over time. Nevertheless, a significant shift is seen in terms of gender. Female linguists do not appear until the late 1980s – and when they do, it is only in the science fiction genre. Not until the 21st century does a somewhat more balanced picture appear (with female linguists in Mieville 2002; Ferencik 2022; Sands 2024; versus male in Parkhurst 2003; Lodge 2008; Mieville 2011; Magee 2022; Pulley 2024).

8. Miscellaneous. Remaining works of linguistic interest are assembled in this catch-all category, numbering 26 in total. The two earliest are overtly political works by powerhouse players. The first, Orwell's *1984* (1949), surely needs no introduction or discussion here. The second is Vaclav Havel's *Memorandum* (1965). Just as Orwell does, Havel introduces a planned, "perfect" language imposed by a totalitarian government. Rather than calling attention to the dangers of thought control, however, Havel uses the situation to expose the absurdity and corruption at the core of the Communist system. It is well worth reading as another perspective on the era and political control of language in general.

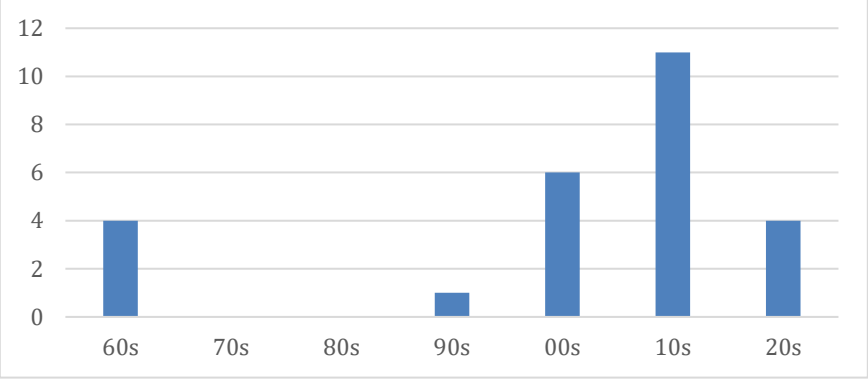

Figure 9. Number of miscellaneous linguistics novels by decade

The 1960s also saw the publication of Clive King's charming middle-grade book *The 22 letters* (1966), which tells the story of the invention of the alphabet and spread of literacy, as well as Le Guin's first *Earthsea* novel (1968). Like so many others, these novels depend on the idea of some words – and one particular language – being more magical and powerful than others – in fact, a total rejection of Saussurean arbitrariness. Rather, knowing the "true name" of something grants the speaker power over the referent, and over reality as a whole. Le Guin did it perhaps first and best, and is included here as a typical example for which the conceit is more plot-relevant than in most.

As Figure 9 demonstrates, a long lull follows, during which most activity occurred in the xenolinguistics and animal language categories. The year 1992 sees another standout example of the anti-arbitrariness concept – Neal Stephenson's *Snow crash*, which casts Sumerian in the role of a language with special power – a kind of command-line language which can crash human minds and autonomy. Max Barry's *Lexicon* (2013) has the similar idea that words in a pre-Babel language (called "barewords") amount to a kind of mind control, and that history goes through cycles of enough people learning enough barewords to cause collapse before restarting the cycle. Scotto Moore's *Battle of the linguist mages* is another in the same vein, with a fun gonzo VR/videogaming twist – alien "power morphemes" can control human behavior, and the aliens are able to spread them and their use through a gamified platform, unbeknownst to its human users (2022).

Two novels imbue their special words and phrases with power due to usage factors, rather than inherent magic. In Rainbow Rowell's *Carry on*, magic spell phrases work according to their collocation frequency – so, idioms and set phrases have magical effects related to their semantics, but this can change over time as they go in and out of fashion (2015). Rowell's book was discussed online by linguist Gretchen McCulloch, but the discussion seems to be lost to the internet due to the demise of Storify. R.F. Kuang's *Babel* is a steampunk fantasy novel in which (magical) technology works by exploiting the lack of complete semantic overlap between translational equivalents (2022). It also has a lot to say about lexical semantics, etymology, the history of linguistics as a field, and the effects of colonialism.

Ayesha Manazir Siddiqi's *The Centre* also involves translation and multilingualism, as the protagonist is a professional translator who goes to a secret language school that guarantees nativelike fluency in ten days. Beyond its well-informed focus on the process of language learning, the book is wonderful on the power relationships between (speakers of) different languages and related sociolinguistic issues (2023). A translator protagonist also appears in Diego Marani's 2004 novel *The interpreter,* in which he starts producing gibberish which he insists is the primordial language, and turns out to be contagious. Language learning also features in his *New Finnish grammar,* in which an amnesiac WWII soldier is found and learns Finnish, thinking that it was his native language, lost only due to aphasia. In his remaining novel, *The last of the Vostiaks*, the last surviving speaker of a language is brought to Europe by a researcher – crime and intrigue follow (2012).

On the other side of the coin from translation and multilingualism, in Yoko Tawada's futuristic novel *The emissary* (2018), a neo-Edo Japan closes itself off, forbidding knowledge of foreign languages and also eliminating loanwords – difficult to discern in a translation, however.

Additional noteworthy examples of magical languages are found in Ann Leckie's *The raven tower* (2019) – in which gods can only speak truth, and the magical cost of having to change reality excessively for that to be the case, can also cost them their lives – and Julie Czerneda's *The gossamer mage* (2019), in which each use of an ancient magical language drains a certain amount of life from its users, non-replenishable.

Twin/secret languages appear in renowned children's author Kate de Goldi's *The 10 p.m. question* (2008) as well as Cathleen Schine's *The grammarian*, in which the twins share an obsession with the dictionary and grow up to be a prescriptivist grammar columnist and a non-prescriptivist poet, respectively (2019).

A grab bag of early 21st century novels revolve around the childhood quest of a linguistically savvy Mills-style polyglot (Helen Dewitt's *The last samurai*; 2000), a town conflict in 19th century Edinburgh over which artificial language to adopt (Andrew Drummond's *A handbook of*

Volapük; 2006), DNA changes in humans that result in the immediate creation of new languages and speech sounds (*Darwin's children*; Bear 2002), and a fascinating portrayal of the early days of computational linguistics in Liz Moore's *The unseen world* (2016), featuring a child prodigy who grows up helping her professor father develop an interactive chatbot on the model of Eliza, then must cope with his mental and linguistic deterioration.

Finally, a recent group of novels examines issues of language control and commodification. Patricia Forde's *Wordsmith* YA series (2014) is by far the least realistic of these in terms of human behavior and language use. Its dystopic society permits the use of only 100 words from an approved list, and the teen heroine is charged with keeping the secret records of all the others, as well as enforcing (but of course eventually subverting) the list.

Alena Graedon's *The word exchange*, published in the same year, is also a near-future dystopia. Her protagonist's father, a linguist and lexicographer, has mysteriously disappeared. While searching for him, she learns more about the harmful effects of reliance on ubiquitous AI smartphones for paid reminders of word meanings, as well as the "word flu" they spread, causing first aphasia and then deadly fever, and gets involved in the Diachronic Society resistance movement, secretly backed by the OED.

All rights reserved and its sequel also involve commodification and dynamic pricing of speech, charged by the word as soon as teenagers reach the age of adulthood (Katsoulis 2017). The YA protagonist adopts selective mutism as protest. In Evans' *Babel apocalypse* series, language is no longer learned, but accessed via paid streaming services to neural implants. But the dangers of outsourcing language to profit-motivated tech companies are obvious, as are the risks of the inevitable software crashes and cyberattacks.

9. Conclusion. No doubt every linguist has encountered the common assumptions that linguists are the ultimate prescriptivists who are always on the lookout for grammar mistakes (hence the merch offered by popular linguistics podcast *Lingthusiasm* in response, with the slogan "not judging your grammar, just analysing it"); that linguists are always polyglots (the perennial "how many languages do you speak?" question); and that linguists are translators (still the dominant meaning of "linguist" on job search websites).

This compilation of linguistics novels has revealed other stubborn ideas about language that persist in the public imagination. The concept of linguistic arbitrariness, in particular, is one which many resist and prefer to fantasize away.

At the same time, focus has clearly shifted. In the realm of animal language, initial novelizations based on highly publicized primate projects has yielded to a more imaginative and diverse array of fictional options. Cold War interest in top-down state-driven political control and Space Race interest in inter-species communication shifts toward portrayals of capitalism-driven control via language commodification, in tandem with the rise of social media and generative AI large language models. Perhaps more positively, there is clear progress in terms of representation of cognitive differences in language use, including sign languages, and the appearance of women as linguist protagonists – as well as an odd liking for lexicography, with or without murder. Our aspirations and anxieties are clearly revealed through these changes.

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