Title: Linguistics and Empathy in American Science Fiction

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Abstract:

Although science fictional works are imaginary, they stage interactions between different cultures and species and can have influence in understanding real-world problems. One of the most common challenges that takes place in science fiction is overcoming linguistic barriers. Works such as “Story of Your Life” by Ted Chiang, The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin, the movie Arrival can all be viewed as thought experiments about the complexity of language and how it is more than merely a tool for communication. While these science fictional works seem like completely different texts on the surface, they all foreground the relationship between language and empathy, demonstrating how language is intricately bound with intercultural understanding, as learning someone else’s language becomes the primary tool that allows us to understand their species or culture. Furthermore, these works resonate with real-world experiences, especially for multilingual speakers and learners. This paper explores the challenges of communicating across cultures, and shows how reading science fiction closely, as well as learning new languages, can help us understand the unique role that language plays in developing empathy for others.