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Elvish and Ethnography: Creating Factual Groups from Fictional Language

 Recently there has been a fairly large amount of focus on discourse communities of a different nature. Previously, much of the focus on discourse communities was placed on communities of a higher caliber of language, as well as a focus on reading and writing communities specifically; however, lately more focus has gone into discourse communities not normally thought of as legitimate discourse communities. In his essay on the discourse community of being a waiter in a restaurant, Tony Mirabelli writes that:

There is a decided focus on printed texts over other mediums of communication like visual and audio. Such a focus limits our understanding of literacy in terms of its use in specific situations in multiple modes of communication. The New Literacy Studies orientation that shapes the work reported in this book argues that literacy extends beyond individual experiences of reading and writing to include the various modes of communication and situations of any socially meaningful group or network where language is used in multiple ways (Mirabelli 542).

While online communities are not outside of the realm of reading and writing entirely, the way in which reading and writing take place still differs from the standard idea of discourse communities, as the genres used and the overall level of language use vary with online communities compared to other discourse communities. Mirabelli’s research indicated the validity of the waiter and waitress discourse community, thus paving the way for additional non-traditional discourse communities to be validated.

 In this paper I argue that the online community of the language forum section of the Council of Elrond website, a group dedicated to the learning J. R. R. Tolkien’s fantasy language of Elvish, is a discourse community based on John Swales’ six criteria for a discourse community, and that the ways in which the online community is unique in its existence as a discourse community affect the ways in which the community operates. This paper details the research I conducted on the community in November of the year 2014, including the observation and analysis of forum posts made by community members, my own experiences with the website and community, and an interview of one of the members of the community more knowledgeable than myself in regards to the Elvish language. The outcome of my research suggests that language forum of the Council of Elrond website satisfies all the criteria of a discourse community, and that the problems presented by the methods used by the community which make it a discourse community affect the way the community operates, but still allows it to exist as a discourse community. This essay is structured with an initial introduction giving background to the research, as well as the group itself, followed by points detailing how the group meets the criteria of a discourse community. After each criterion, I present possible conflicts within the discourse community that are created as a result of the points which make it a discourse community. Finally, I analyze the way in which the level of language and the structure of the community affects interactions within the community.

 J.R.R. Tolkien’s fantasy series *Lord of the Rings* and other works which tie into the *Lord of the Rings* universe have been the subject of scrutinizing analysis and study, with the various languages of Middle Earth being of particular interest to many people. The Council of Elrond website is a host to a large part of this community. The Council of Elrond website consists largely of Tolkien fans, but more specifically contains a group largely interested in the various languages Tolkien has created. The members range in their abilities with the languages, with some members being proficient while others are still novices. In addition, some members of the community can volunteer to be reviewers of the various language exercises available to users. A community such as this matches the criteria for a discourse community in the following ways.

In his essay “The Concept of Discourse Community,” John Swales identifies six key characteristics which he considers necessary to identify a group as a discourse community. For the sake of clarification for future references within this essay, when referring to the concept of a discourse community, it will be in reference to the definitions and characteristics provided by Swales within his essay.

 According to Swales, “a discourse community has a broadly agreed set of common public goals” (220). Within a topic on the website, titled “Language Forum Guidelines,” a statement about the agreed upon mission of the language portion of the forum and the community in general can be found, and is as follows:

The main mission of this forum is to help beginning Elvish scholars learn and discuss some of the basic ideas and theories involving Tolkien's languages. While there is room for deeper debate within these forums, those involved in such debate need to remember the main mission of this forum, and keep in mind the limited knowledge of many of the forum participants, the average age of most site members (teens), and the general lack of experience with scholarly debate and discussion. The Languages Area at CoE in general is intended for students to learn the practical use of Elvish as far as it possible with the limited information that Tolkien has left us, and the main goal of this forum is to help with that mission (Council of Elrond).

Therefore, the main mission of the forum is presented as a goal to helping people learn how to use and speak Tolkien’s Elvish language, while simultaneously avoiding delving too deeply into the specifics of the language that are still up for debate and the subject of advanced study, due to the nature of the language, as the language changed over time because of Tolkien’s tastes. In addition, the language was never actually finished, as Tolkien’s works that others used as a reference were limited in their use of Elvish, both in regards to the grammatical rules and the vocabulary of terms; however, even with these limitations, the group developed greatly through its goal of helping others to learn Elvish with the constrained amount of information available to them.

One thing to note about the mission statement is the fact that the mission statement was publicly released and clarified within the forum, specifically mentioning not only what the goal of the community is, but also what the goal is not. What this means is that there must be or have been some members within the community who did not realize what the main mission of the community was, which was shown by those people either by posting information in contribution to a different goal, or disagreeing with the goal completely, thus resulting in the clarification of the goal within the community itself, thereby reducing or removing such behaviors which did not match up with the goals of the community. One potential reason for this incongruity between some of the community members, in regards to the main goals of the community, is that the nature of the Internet and online forums in general allows users to post what they want and decide what they want to discuss, a type of communication special to Internet groups. People can feel free to discuss anything with others and can potentially engage in deep and active discussions with many people while having a reference to everything that was said in the discussion. One problem is if this type of communication is not regulated by keeping subject matters within a reasonable area related to the subject matter of the forum, or by keeping responses made by other users meaningful and non-offensive to others within the community, then the potential for reasonable and legitimate discussion is constrained by non-contributive posts, commonly referred to as “spam.” While online communities such as this language community are known for allowing people to speak their mind on anything, some amount of order and guidelines must be kept in order to allow civil and meaningful discussion to take place among community members.

This attempt to foster meaningful and legitimate communication helps to solidify the idea that communication is a key aspect of this particular discourse community, and so it makes sense that there are many methods of communication available to members of the discourse community. One method of communication available to the community is the previously mentioned forum, on which community members are capable of starting a “topic” about a certain subject, which could be anything from a point of possible discussion, asking a certain question about some aspect of the language, or simply posting interesting or relevant information to provide to other members of the community. After starting a topic, any community member, including the person that started the topic, is capable of responding to the original post, as well as posts made by other members within that topic, thus fostering a form of discussion in which everyone can see each other’s responses and view the logical progression of the discussion from beginning to end, while also being able to reference previous responses made by community members.

The implications of using such a method of communication were identified previously, but there is an additional method of communication provided by the website that is available to community members. Members of the discourse community are also capable of communicating through an instant messaging system similar to an online chat or Facebook private message. Within this system a user is capable of selecting a person to message, and after sending an initial message, the other user is able to either ignore the message or respond. This method of communication is distinct from the forum in that it allows for a more in-depth and personal discussion to take place, as messaging often occurs between only two people, whereas forums allow multitudes of people to respond. In addition, the private message is as described: private. Members of the community are capable of a private form of communication between other community members, allowing people to communicate in an unrestricted setting where fear of judgment by other members of the community is nonexistent.

While the benefits to an open and private form of communication being available to a community are clear, there are also some detriments to such a method of communication, namely the nature of instant messaging itself. Given the rate at which messages are sent, in addition to the general size that the messages are, the actual depth of a conversation that can take place is usually fairly limited. When messages are sent at such a rapid rate, most members will not take the time to think about what they are saying, resulting in messages being largely reactionary and cursory, with little thought being placed on what was said to the other member. The general size of messages tends to be quite short, as the size of the message box is small, making it difficult to see all that one has written on a subject matter. This, in turn, causes people to not bother to take the time to think of something meaningful and complex to contribute to the conversation taking place, as presenting information that would be considered important generally requires a thorough review of the information in order to ensure accuracy and clarity in what was said. As a result of the format of the instant messaging on the website, thoughtless and meaningless messages can sometimes be sent between users, and while such communication is not completely invalidated in terms of successful human interaction, any attempt at communicating complex ideas or having meaningful conversation can be shut down if the conversation ends up devolving into such an alteration of communication via private messaging.

A large amount of focus is placed on communication among members in order to assist others in their pursuit of language acquisition, as well as distribute information to others. The discourse community has multiple participatory mechanisms that allow members of the community to provide information and feedback to one another. One such mechanism is the previously described forum, as it allows members, if they so choose, to post and respond to information within the forum, allowing them to both provide information to a topic of discussion or question from another member, and give feedback on information provided by other members within the topic or forum. In her paper on online communities entitled “Genesis of an Online Discourse Community,” Marcella Kehus writes that forum topics “allowed members to carry on sustained and organized dialog around a certain topic” (Kehus 31). Therefore, the topics on a forum enables users to contribute information and feedback in a guided discussion. The forum allows an open form of information transfer and feedback distribution; however, the forum is not the only method available, as there is an additional method that is much more structured. Something unique to the Council of Elrond discourse community is a language workbook, which is a set of online exercises available to members of the website designed to help members in the furtherance of the community’s goal, namely the learning of Tolkien’s Elvish language. Each exercise ties in to a specific lesson or set of information listed on the website, with questions going over what would have been learned within the lesson in an effort to test how well the member learned the material as well as attempt to assist the member in learning and committing the learned material to memory. Once an exercise is completed, the member submits the finished exercise to the community. In turn, certain members of the community are designated as graders of the exercises, and when finished grading the exercises, the graders submit their reviews and responses back to the member who completed the exercise, remarking upon both the successes of the member’s responses to the exercises and the failures of the member’s responses. The user then has the option to revise their answers to the exercises and resubmit the assignment for further grading.

I have personal experience with the exercises, as I have completed the first set of exercises regarding the first lesson, a lesson centered on the pronunciation and syllabic rules within the Sindarin language of Elvish. In response to my progress with the exercise, I was sent this on the workbook page sometime after submission: “Your language instructor had the following comments for you: Welcome to the workbook! This is excellent, just please have another look at these two, for perfection's sake: 5, 13 (missing) / Malinornë (workbook mentor)” (Council of Elrond). This response indicates that the grader took the time to look through my submission for correctness, indicating areas in which I had failed, or rather accidentally omitted, as well as complimenting me on what I had done well throughout the exercise. This system allows members to distribute information and feedback to each other in a structured manner, as the person who made the lesson submits the information to the learning member, who in turn submits their responses to the exercises to a grader, who finally returns information and feedback to the learning member of the discourse community, creating a cycle of information and feedback distribution reciprocated by many members of the community throughout the entire course load of the lesson plan and exercises on the website. While normally having such a structured method of distributing information and feedback would be a detriment due to its inherently limiting nature in terms of what may be distributed and how it may be responded to, the fact that the website also offers the forum, a much more open and less structured option of information distribution, means that any conflict created by the structured exercises is counteracted by the openness of the forum.

Multiple methods of information distribution have been mentioned, from the forum posts, to the instant messages, to the language exercises; however, there is an additional method of information distribution, namely the articles on the website, which while they are not necessarily directly tied to the language portion of the community, they offer another means to distribute information. These methods of information distribution all have the added benefit of being genres allowing for communication of its goals and furtherance of its mission. Forum posts are a unique genre, being similar to a group meeting for open discussion, but existing in print form with previous responses able to be seen by all. As previously mentioned, they allow an open and less limited atmosphere for the distribution of information. Instant messages are also their own genre, consisting of short pieces of information passed back and forth between members of the community. While the information distributed is most likely not complex, the option to gain immediate contact with an individual within the community in a private manner is a benefit to the community as a whole, as it facilitates communication and therefore connection between members, strengthening the bonds of membership as a whole.

The language exercises are a very unique form of genre, as few communities tend to utilize a question and answer system as a main basis for the distribution of information. The lessons and exercises available to the members of the community allow members an easy and structured way to be enculturated into the Council of Elrond discourse community, helping them to gain insight into the terminology used by the community revolving around the Elvish language, as well as instructing them on the various ways in which Elvish is used and understood. In addition, the exercises provide a solid and common foundation for community members to utilize within their discussion of the language and their discussion with other members of the community. While the structure might normally be limiting to the community, the added benefit of the forum posts for group communication nullifies this detriment. The last genre made available to the community, the articles on the Council of Elrond website, is one that only a select few members of the community have access to, as the information distributed tends to be known by few people at the time of the creation of the article, yet the information distributed could potentially be interesting or pertain to everyone within the Council of Elrond community, not just the language portion specifically. For instance, one of the current articles on the website lists the following info:

Symphony Silicon Valley and Chorale and Howard Shore, composer of the Oscar-winning Lord of the Rings (LOTR) soundtrack, present the first American screening of the complete LOTR trilogy with a live American orchestra. Along with soloists to be named later, the Academy Award-winning films will be shown in High Definition on a giant 48’ by 20’ screen with 250 musicians on stage. April 16-19, 2015. (Council of Elrond)

In this situation, the information listed does not necessarily pertain to the language forum, nor towards the parts of the community that tend to work more with the printed works rather than cinematic adaptations, but most of the community on the Council of Elrond website has a common interest and fascination with all aspects of the *Lord of the Rings* to some degree. As a result, the article section works well in distributing such information to the various groups of the entire website, information not only pertinent to one group, but to all. In essence, this genre allows a method of information communication that is universal among all groups on the website, enabling other groups to connect with each other via the universal articles.

 Each of the genres offer a unique method of communication of its aims, and the combination of all four genres allows a wide range of possibilities for said communication; however, one conflict with this is the idea that all the previously mentioned genres rely on written words as a basis in their communication, meaning that there may be some loss of communication without a method that allows verbal communication. Written genres often remove some of the primary elements of normal human communication, namely body language and verbal tone. While tone within a text does exist, it does not have as much of an effect as when verbally delivered. Text has an added benefit of allowing a large amount of information to be conveyed to multiple people, as well as allowing information to be returned to at a later point in order to be referenced; however, relying on text as a sole method of communication between members prevents people from making connections with each other within the community, connections that are necessary for the community to continue to function, grow, and thrive. One example of this is Rehus’ study of an online community, her findings for which showed that “the lack of personal relationships, or relationships with ‘sufficient human feeling,’ showed this group to be working as a set of individuals but with little interconnectedness” (Rehus 60). Thus, without an interpersonal connection, a member will act as a single entity working for their own goals rather than the goals of the group. Non-text communication helps to facilitate the growth of such connections, building relationships with other people that would not normally be possible via text. This reiterates one of Mirabelli’s key points of discourse communities not being solely reliant upon text, but rather upon multiple types of literacies within the community. While the benefits to text-based genres of communication are clear in terms of their ability to distribute information to other members of the community, in order for the community to survive and grow as a whole, some members of the community must extend their communication to non-text genres. To help this occur, discourse communities, including the language section of the Council of Elrond website, must attempt to facilitate these non-text genres as means of communication, thus allowing said communities to thrive.

 As revealed by the incredibly large amount of focus on communication within discourse communities, the Council of Elrond language forum also has with it a specific lexis unique to members of the community, namely the entirety of the Elvish language created by Tolkien. Indeed, the list of terms within the language is incredibly extensive, to the point that the Council of Elrond website has multiple dictionaries of terms for the multiple types of languages available. In fact, the term Elvish is actually too broad when describing the language, as there are two branches of Elvish, Quenya and Sindarin, both of which are quite extensive in their development and vocabulary, considering they are fictional languages. For initial terms that community members must learn, “Quenya” and “Sindarin” are both a necessity, as all community members require a recognition of their difference. This is because the main point of the forum is the advancement of the learning of the Elvish language, and so to join the community, a person must first choose which branch of Elvish to learn, either Sindarin or Quenya, or perhaps both for those more daring and with more time on their hands. Beyond the initial terms of the branches of Elvish, each language has within it a wide vocabulary and set of language rules necessary for the production of written and verbal word. For the sake of this point, I will refer primarily to the Sindarin branch of Elvish. One example of the vocabulary of Sindarin includes a term known as “abonnen,” which, according to the dictionary on the website, means either “a man born later than the Elves (Sindarin, noun)” or “born later, born after (Sindarin, adjective)” (Council of Elrond). Another example is the term “vanya,” which means “beautiful, fair (adjective)” (Council of Elrond). Terms such as these indicate a complex lexis unique to the Elvish language community specifically, fulfilling another one of the discourse community criteria.

 One potential conflict of having such a complex and unique lexis is the difficulty community members might have in acquiring such a lexis in order to interact with the community. While normally this concept would actually be a problem for some discourse communities, the Council of Elrond language section has taken steps to avoid such a problem, first by guiding the learning of their members via the various language exercises and language lessons available to the members of the community, and second by providing an extensive library of terms through the dictionaries made available on the website. Not only that, but the website also provides links to other web sources meant to assist their users in learning the Elvish language, thereby providing information to the members of the community as well as furthering the overall mission of the community as a whole.

 The steps that the Council of Elrond language forum takes to help guide its new members in their knowledge of the Elvish language shows that the community takes an active stance towards the enculturation of its members, but this guidance would not be easy without some levels of members separate from new members of the group. The stratification of members based off of members is partially based off of knowledge, as members of the community who have a stronger grasp of the Elvish language tend to have more say in the discussion of the language or in the instruction of the language with others; however, there are also members that fulfill specific roles within the community. For instance, located on the forum are members known as forum moderators. The role of moderators is to assist in the discussion of the topic at hand and keep discourse between members of the community responsible and civil, acting as sort of rule enforcers to the community. If a member of the community disobeys the guidelines for the forum set by the Council of Elrond group, the moderator takes action against that member of the community by either suspending certain privileges, such as being able to post on the forums or message other users, or by banning them from the forum altogether, meaning that as long as they are logged in to the banned account, that community member will not be able to interact with any members of the community at all. What’s more, banning can also be permanent, meaning that a user loses such privileges indefinitely. While a community member can simply make a new account for free, their previous account will be forever abandoned, and if they have been identified as having been the same person that made the banned account, they could also be liable for their new account being banned as well.

 As part of my research, I interviewed a moderator on the language forum. Known on the forum as gwendeth, she has been on the forum for quite some time. “I believe I’ve been modding the Sindarin forum since 2005. I joined the Language forum in 2003 when I joined COE – which I joined because I wanted to learn Sindarin” (Council of Elrond Interview). Gwendeth has spent many years on the forum as a forum member, moderator, and language learner. When questioned about how someone would go about joining the community, gwendeth replied, “There are no ‘requirements’ to join the Language or any of the Forums on COE. Anyone can read any of the posts or contribute or ask questions in any of the threads” (Council of Elrond Interview). Gwendeth is correct in that the action of becoming a forum member is quite straightforward. All that is required is a valid email address and anyone can register on the forum; however, simply registering does not mean that one truly becomes a member of a discourse community. An in-depth process of enculturation is necessary in order to become a true member of the community, a process which moderators assist with, but this is not the only type of member to do so.

 An additional type of community member is a workbook grader. Once members have achieved an adequate level of knowledge on the language of Elvish, they may opt to become workbook graders. Once passing the requirements of being a grader, that member will then be sent the filled exercises of other members of the community. At this stage, it is now the grader’s job to review the exercises for errors, comment on the other member’s performance, and return the assignment to the member. This role creates a clear distinction between regular members of the community and graders, each having their own responsibilities within the community. This variance in the roles and duties of members satisfies the final criterion for a discourse community, but it also helps to enculturate members into the community in a much more active way than other communities. The Council of Elrond language forum has been shown as having taken steps to actively assist its members in joining the forum and with interacting with other members. With the wide variety of exercises aimed at teaching members the foundations of the Elvish language, dictionaries filled with terms to assist members in their studies and acquiring of the group lexis, and methods of communication available to the members of the community that enable them to interact with other members and guide in their learning as well, the discourse community shows an active role in the enculturation of its members. The stratification of membership roles is no different, as each role helps to fulfill a duty that inevitably will guide other members of the community in their enculturation process. The moderators of a forum help to enable members to communicate and discuss Elvish with other members in a productive and informative manner, without having to deal with members that are a detriment to the group in their interactions with others. By watching over the interactions between members on the forum, the moderator facilitates discussion, preventing anything that might inhibit discussion from doing so. In this way, the moderator assists members in being enculturated into the community, allowing them to build connections with others and learn the ways of the discourse community.

 Workbook graders offer a more direct approach towards helping the enculturation of community members. As they grade the exercises of community members, they are directly involved in the learning of new members, helping to point out the mistakes made by new members. As mistakes are discovered, members are able to learn from them and correct what they have answered, thereby preventing themselves from making that mistake in the future and solidifying their knowledge in the Elvish language. In addition to the grading of the exercises, the workbook grader has the opportunity to give positive, reassuring feedback to the learning member of the community. This positive feedback helps to motivate the learning member to continue with their learning and push themselves to greater levels of complexity and knowledge in the Elvish language. The motivation to continue learning will push the members to increase their knowledge of Elvish, which in turn will help to satisfy the main goal of the community, to foster the growth in knowledge of the Elvish language in others, thereby tying their actions with the main goal of the discourse community that they are attempting to join. Not only that, but the motivation will also help to drive them to build connections with other members in the community, as they attempt to supplement their learning by learning with other members of the community. The connections that the learning members build will help to enculturate them into the overall community, as well as facilitate the growth of the community as a whole, from the growth of membership, to the growth of connections, to the growth of knowledge. Through the gradation of membership, including the specific roles of members such as the moderator or workbook grader, the community is able to grow as a whole.

 Through my research and experience with the community, I have determined that the Council of Elrond language group sufficiently satisfies the six criteria necessary to be a discourse community. Not only that, but many of the methods used by the community separate it from other discourse communities, and methods used by any discourse community affect its functionality and overall performance as a community. The six criteria define discourse communities as a whole, but the way they are implemented affects the quality of the discourse community itself.

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