

## “Linguistic Fandom”: Performing Liminal Identities in the Spaces of Transgression

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[F]andom is not simply a “thing” that can be picked over analytically. It is [...] always performative [...] it is an identity which is (dis-)claimed, and which performs cultural work’, declares Matt Hills, as he critically summarises over a decade of media and cultural studies’ attempts at approaching – or ‘picking analytically over’ – the phenomena of fandom and fan culture (2002, p. xi). As he lists the shortcomings of fan culture researchers – from over-emphasising of fans’ emotional attachment to favourite texts to over-rationalising of their critical attitudes – Hills argues for the performative theory of fandom, picturing fan identity as at once performed, in the multitude of discourses and practices, and performing certain cultural representations, values and identifications. In Hills’ analysis this concept of performativity is closely linked to the notion of liminality, to a certain state of ‘between-ness’ negotiating the often ambivalent identifications of fans, and the often contradictory categorisations by academics. It is this liminal, or borderlands position of fandom, and the ways in which it is enacted through discourse and practice, that I wish to explore here.

In this essay I will look at one form of fandom, which – while keeping its affiliation with fan culture and some of its sensibilities – takes on and makes into its own some concepts, values and practices attributed to scholarship and academic community. It is a curious form of fan/scholarship, striving to link the rigorousness of the scholarly with the playfulness of the fannish, and in the process creating a space for the subverting of both. It is also a form of liminal or marginal identity that operates in between those two representations, and as a transgression for their norms. It is what I call a ‘linguistic fandom’, a fandom of ‘fictional’ languages linked to two renowned popular texts: *Star Trek* and *The Lord of the Rings*. These ‘fictional’ idioms, which became an object of fandom for many, are the Klingon language, created by a professional linguist Marc Okrand for one of the multiple alien peoples populating the world of Gene Roddenberry’s space

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opera, and J.R.R. Tolkien's Elvish languages (Quenya and Sindarin in particular) originating in his narratives of Middle-earth.

This essay, and its necessarily partial and subjective accounts of Klingon and Elvish fans' activities, results from my three years involvement with these communities as a part of my PhD project. During this time I looked at personal and institutional websites, followed the discussions on two Internet forums and three mailing lists, exchanged emails with contributors to these forums and lists, and took part in two events attended by Elvish and Klingon fans: in Omentielva Tatya, the Second International Conference on J.R.R. Tolkien's Invented Languages, held in Antwerp, Belgium, in August 2007, and in qepHom VI, the Klingon Classes for the Beginners and Advanced, organised in Saarbrücken, Germany, in November 2007.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing from these experiences, in this essay I will explore how the fans of the 'fictional' Klingon and Elvish languages – or linguistic fans, as I will call them – perform their identities through engagements with these idioms and their textual sources, and how – in course of these performances – they refer to the values and practices of scholarship and fan culture, while simultaneously subverting those values and practices. I will look at these performances in the context to linguistic fans' gatherings, fan/scholarly half conventions / half conferences, which work as embodiments of the liminal status, or 'between-ness' of fan/scholarship or – to use Vivien Burr's (2005) terminology – 'spaces of transgression'.

### Defining 'Linguistic Fandom'

In a welcoming announcement to *Gwaith-i-Phethdain*<sup>2</sup>, one of the better publicised web sites devoted to the invented languages of Tolkien's Middle-earth, a (not-so) accidental visitor is being assured that this is a place where he or she 'can publish [...] poems and short prose in Quenya, Sindarin or other languages found in the books by this author', 'find good examples of Elvish grammar and vocabulary', and finally 'read about the current events in the Tolkienian linguistic fandom'. Here a new term seems to be introduced and defined: a 'linguistic fandom'. Of course, it is not 'a language' that becomes an object of fandom, it is 'the language', or rather 'the languages', of J.R.R. Tolkien. And these languages became an inseparable part of Tolkien's complex narratives of Middle-earth: *The Lord of the*

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<sup>1</sup> This essay, and the research that informed it, is also and in a most intimate way an outgrowth of my earlier and much longer involvement with the texts in which Klingon and Elvish languages originated. My first encounter with *Star Trek: The Next Generation* in early childhood marked my initiation into science fiction genre. The first reading of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* about the same time resulted in life-long fondness for the mythical world of Middle-earth and for fantasy stories in general. This work has its source in these childhood enchantments and enduring interests. And while I have never been an active member of fandom of any of those texts, this identification played its role in my approach to the researched communities bringing to my own position a sense of 'between-ness' typical for fan/scholarship.

<sup>2</sup> *Gwaith-i-Phethdain*, or *The Fellowship of the Word-smiths*, is a web site constructed by Ryszard Derdziński ('Galadhorn'): <http://www.elvish.org/gwaith/>.

*Rings* (1954-1956) and the *Silmarillion* (1977). The contribution of the ‘cult’ status of these texts to the popularity of Tolkien’s languages is an interesting and complex issue in its own right, and the one that deserves a separate discussion.<sup>3</sup> Here I would like to concentrate on the meanings that the term ‘linguistic fandom’ evokes.

The welcoming message mentioned above seems to interpret ‘linguistic fandom’ as an ensemble of enthusiasts who find interest (and presumably pleasure) in morphologic, syntactic and semantic qualities of language, as well as in its artistic application. But the term itself is quite telling. It combines two concepts: that of ‘fandom’ and that of its ‘linguistic’ object. The question of defining fandom has been addressed in a significant body of literature, commonly attributing to this term a notion of a deep affective attachment to the cultural text (Jensen 1992; Grossberg 1992) or that of its active reception and creative reproduction (Jenkins 1992, 2006, 2008). But, as the opening quote from Hills’ states, it is perhaps better characterised by its performative quality, as a certain ‘(dis-)claimed’ identity. It seems therefore worthwhile to look at what identity (or identities) is asserted, or disowned in the expression ‘linguistic fandom’.

It appears that the term ‘fandom’ has been used self-consciously. Through its common sense meaning, it evokes an affiliation with a broader phenomenon of fan culture with its practices of gathering and discussing fan knowledge and expertise, creating and consuming fan fiction and artwork, collecting and trading memorabilia and ephemera. It also evokes the many-sided relationship to the object of fandom: at once passionate and analytical, admiring and critical, creative and consumerist. By calling forth the term of ‘linguistic fandom’ then, the author of the message appears to be claiming the many-faced identity of fan. But at the same time he asserts affiliation with yet another idea and identity. The playful connotations of fandom have been combined with a rather technical concept of its object as ‘linguistic’. Interestingly, this term can refer to both language and its scholarly study, linguistics.

What would then a notion of ‘linguistic fandom’ signify: a fandom of a language or that of linguistics, or maybe quite simply a fandom of language, or even a language of a fandom? In the case of the *Gwaith-i-Phethdain* web site the choice falls, naturally, on the specific languages: it is ‘Tolkienian linguistic fandom’ that is called forth after all. But I would like to argue that the alternate meanings evoked by the combination of these two concepts are all present. Surely, it is a passion for studying Tolkien’s languages that underlines the idea of ‘linguistic fandom’. And yet, putting it in other words, it is the passion for studying languages expressed through Tolkienian examples. This simple rephrasing opens the possibility of deriving a notion of ‘linguistic fandom’ from its original application and lifting its meaning from the close association to Tolkien’s work.<sup>4</sup> It would be possible to imagine various incarnations of linguistic fandom:

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<sup>3</sup> I examine these issues elsewhere (Cf. Kazimierczak, 2010b).

<sup>4</sup> This possibility is even more visible in the French version of the web site, where the term ‘Tolkienian linguistic fandom’ has been translated into ‘la communauté linguistique des fans de Tolkien’.

Tolkienian linguistic fandom of course, but also Okrandian linguistic fandom<sup>5</sup>, Esperantist linguistic fandom, Lojban linguistic fandom, linguistic fandom of constructed languages.<sup>6</sup>

### **Liminality, Imagined Subjectivity, Transgression**

This understanding of linguistic fandom as a form of fan/scholarship, claiming affiliation with both fan culture and scholarship, is reminiscent of Hills' analyses of liminal identities of scholar-fan (an academic who considers him/herself as a fan, openly declaring affect for a media text) and fan-scholar (a fan who uses academic procedures to analyse his/her favourite text). Using as a point of reference norms of practice of two communities – or imagined subjectivities, as he describes them – fandom and academia, Hills pictures these two identities as operating on the margins of both communities and transgressing their values (2002, pp. 19-20).

Three concepts seem to be crucial here: liminality, imagined subjectivity and transgression. Describing the identities of fan-scholar and scholar-fan as liminal, Hills seems to recall Turner's figure of a 'liminar', a ritual subject standing aside from any social position, 'neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification' (1974, p. 232). In Turner's view a liminar is never a static figure. He or she is a 'passenger', a traveller, always on the move, in passing from one location and set of values to another. In this fluid state of – to use Hills' term – 'between-ness' a liminar remains a teleological subject: his/her liminality is only temporary, inevitably leading to the affiliation with one identity and its values. As Hills' discussion indicates, such is not the case of scholar-fan and fan-scholar whose transitory mode seems never to be concluded. Their position appears to be not as much liminal as marginal, for – as Turner could have described it – 'they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity' (ibid., p. 233). These two identities could perhaps be characterised more productively by the notion of the border, which in postmodern critique supplanted Turner's 'liminality'. This perspective has been mobilised in the discussion of academic practice and its transgressive potential, especially in relation to 'borderlands anthropology' considered as a space for narrative freedom to claim multiple identities and for 'a celebration of ambiguity as the condition of the postmodern self' (Cf. Weber 1995, p. 532).

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<sup>5</sup> By 'Okrandian linguistic fandom' I understand, of course, users of Klingon language created by a professional linguist Dr Marc Okrand. I've chosen to use this term, instead of perhaps the more directly comprehensible 'Klingon linguistic fandom', following the example of the original application of the term in 'Tolkienian linguistic fandom', and to mark the importance of the author's persona in perception of the language. For the more detailed discussion of the perceived authorship of Klingon and Elvish languages see: Kazimierczak, 2010b).

<sup>6</sup> An interesting question arises in relation to the object of such a 'linguistic fandom'. Is it only a fictional or constructed language that can induce fan attitudes and practices? In other words, is it imaginable to describe as fandom an interest in studying any languages judged as 'natural'? This issue again deserves a separate discussion.

But in view of Hills' argument this celebratory perspective of freedom and openness in the construction of the self appears to be deceptive. What Hills strives to underline while discussing the 'between-ness' of fan-scholar and scholar-fan is that the ambiguity of identity is always restricted and policed by the normative constructs of ideal collective identifications built in close dialogue with and in opposition to one another: 'imagined subjectivities' (2002, p. 20). This condition is not an exclusive feature of the identities claimed by fandom and academia, it is an inherent quality of the processes of identity performance. '[C]ultural identity is inseparable from limits, it is always a boundary phenomenon and its order is always constructed around the figures of its territorial edge', observe Stallybrass and White while examining Foucault's notion of transgression as 'interrogation of boundaries' (1986, p. 200). To identify means to demarcate, to draw a border and to discriminate between the norms and practices which exemplify the singularity of the self and of one's community, and those norms and practices which represent 'the other'. This 'forcing of the threshold and interrogating of the liminal position' (ibid., p. 200), inevitably bound with identity play, brings on both the possibility and the necessity of transgression. Defined by Stallybrass and White, after Barbara Babcock, as an 'expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms be they linguistic, literary, artistic, religious, social and political' (p. 17), the transgression appears as a dialectical force. On one hand, it calls into question the legitimation of normative orders. On the other hand, by reminding that there is something to be transgressed, it serves as a means of the reinstatement of those orders. As such the transgression remains entwined both with the concept of imagined subjectivities and the notion of the threshold or border between them.

### **Performing identity in the space of transgression**

The notion of transgression as the interrogation of boundaries, and of liminal positions, is central to Burr's analyses of spaces of transgression: materials sites where otherwise marginal identities may be acted upon as 'normal' or legitimate (2005). Burr employs Hills' concept of the liminality of the scholar-fan position to discuss her own experiences and those of other academics while taking part in the *Slayage Conference on 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer'*, a scholarly event devoted to the popular media text. She refers to the sense of uneasiness experienced by some participants who in the course of the conference felt drawn to two different identities: that of fan and that of scholar. Against Hills' argument, Burr diagnoses these feelings not as a sign of the impossibility of resolving the tension between those two identities, but as a marker of a new identity in the making.<sup>7</sup> Her way of

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<sup>7</sup> As she writes: 'When it comes to challenging some of the most deep-seated categories in western thinking, categories in which power relations are implicit, it is inevitable that we will encounter resistance, even from ourselves. Getting what (you think) you want often means giving up something you did not realize you had [...] It seems to me that the tensions that I and others experienced at SCBtVS [*Slayage Conference on 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer'*] are inevitable as we struggle towards an identity that is something other than

approaching the problematic position of scholar-fan (and presumably that of fan-scholar) is to look at it from the perspective of queer theory, although she suggests shifting the focus of this approach from the issue of sexual identities to more general questions of the impact of certain categories on knowledge, morality and politics. Referring to Derrida's argument that meaning is always defined by the difference, Burr observes that terms such as 'fan' and 'academic', similarly though not identically to those of 'heterosexual' or 'homosexual', appear to be meaningful only in relation to each other.<sup>8</sup> In Hills' words, an imagined subjectivity cannot exist without its counterpart. According to Burr, the way to overrule this duality of thinking and to 'queer' the opposition between the identities of fan and academic is to find or create spaces of transgression, spaces where another of Derrida's notions – the logic of 'both/and' – could be performed; spaces where otherwise marginal identities would be perceived as 'normal' and legitimate. And in her view, the *Slayage Conference on Buffy the Vampire Slayer* offers the site for such 'experiments in transgression'.

Understood in this way, Burr's space of transgression appears closer to the concept of border, characterised by Rosaldo and other borderland anthropologists as celebratory and liberating in its political potential (Cf. Weber, 1995), than to Turner's notion of liminality. Still, its promise of the final resolution of the duality of fan/scholarly identities seems more of a postulate than the actuality. With meaning always defined by difference, and cultural identity necessarily linked to 'the figures of its territorial edge', the space of transgression may work towards legitimating liminal identities, but cannot remove the tensions inherent to their double allegiance. As such it remains the embodiment of the 'between-ness' of their position with all its unresolved and disquieting pressures.

This notion of the space of transgression as a site for enacting and legitimating the 'between-ness' of fan/scholarly identities intersects with the understanding of fandom as performative. In Turner's classical theory social action is viewed as constituted in performances where – through ritual repetition – social meanings are both re-enacted and re-experienced (Cf. 1974). But Hills' understanding of the performative character of fandom – referred to in the opening of this essay – owes more to Butler's theories of the performativity as 'a forced re-iteration of norms', 'neither free play nor theatrical self-representation', 'a ritualized production [...] compelling the shape of production, but not [...] determining it fully in advance' (1993, pp. 94-95). However, his reading of the concept reframes the question of the agency in performed action which in Butler's theory marks the differentiation between 'performance' as a self-reflexive

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academic or fan, and that sites such as this are important places for experiments in transgression' (2005, p. 382).

<sup>8</sup> Brian Taylor makes a similar observation in his paper examining how a historical development of academic disciplines has been shaped through discursive categories of 'professionalism' and 'amateurism':

'[W]hen faced with a retrospective "success story" of professionals taking up the torch lit by amateurs, sociologists might profitably consider the suggestion that "amateurism" is a definition afforded by professionals to deride a phase of their organizational history. Expressed crudely, in historical terms, there can be no self-defined amateurs until they can be condescended to by self-defined professionals.' (1995, p. 502)

and volitional act and ‘the performative’ as an un-volitional compulsion. In Hills’ view fandom escapes these categorisations posing an ultimate challenge to performative theory. As he writes: “The “problem” [...] is that fans display a type of “non-volitional volition”, which disrupts Butler’s poststructuralist separation of voluntarist “agency” and “power/knowledge”. Fans are “self-absent” to the extent that that they are unable to account, finally, for the emergence of their fandom, but they are also highly self-reflexive and wilfully/volitionally committed to their objects of fandom’ (2002, p. 160).

This bracketing (or leaving open) of the question of agency puts emphasis on the cultural work performed by fan identity. The performative character of fandom is played out in the fact that – to put it simply – its discourses and practices matter; they enact (and re-enact) certain realities: of fan culture, of academic work, and – as Burr proposes – of certain transgressive spaces in-between.<sup>9</sup> In the following parts of this essay I will look at two cases of linguistic fans’ gatherings – qepHom for Klingon users and Ometielva for Tolkien fans – as such transgressive spaces where linguistic fandom’s ambivalent affiliation with fan culture and scholarship is performed.

## A Fan/Scholarly Convention

qepHom is a meeting devoted to learning and speaking the Klingon language, organised in Germany by Lieven L. Litaer (Quvar), a member of the Klingon Language Institute.<sup>10</sup> As an official web site suggests, this event attempts to escape an exclusive affiliation either with scholarly values or with fan attitudes. While the project is described as affiliated with and supported by the Klingon Language Institute (KLI), the organisation which claims as its goal scholarly study and propagation of the Klingon language, the organisers strive to underline that membership in this organisation is not obligatory for participation. At the same time *The Frequently Asked Questions* section of the *qepHom* web site pictures the meeting as an educational rather than a *Star Trek* fandom oriented event:

The word qepHom means “minor meeting.” It serves to gather for practice and teaching of the Klingon language and gives Klingon speakers the opportunity to meet Klingonists from their area. It also gives the newbies the chance to get the right start to learn the language, or to find out what Klingon really is. Briefly, it’s a *Klingon language course*. [...] Not all participants are specifically Star Trek Fans. The qepHom is a Klingon class where everyone can participate who is interested in the language.

The purpose of qepHom appears to be both practical and speculative. On one hand, it clearly aims to provide guidelines for the use of the Klingon language

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<sup>9</sup> I borrow this interpretation of the performative from John Law, who employs it in several of his writings. For examples see: Law (2002), Law and Urry (2004).

<sup>10</sup> The Klingon Language Institute is an organisation involved in the study and propagation of the Klingon language. For further information on the KLI see the website: <http://www.kli.org/>.

employing such resources as *Conversational Klingon* and *Power Klingon*<sup>11</sup> or incorporating practical sessions in Klingon pronunciation. On the other hand, it seems to encourage more theoretical discussions about the Klingon language and its previous developments and future evolution. The above quoted description of the nature and goals of qepHom suggests that, being a scholarly or educational event, it is also – and perhaps more importantly – a gathering of individuals sharing the same interests and passions. Those interests encompass the Klingon language, its study and development, as well as the fictional culture of the Klingons and the *Star Trek* textual universe in general, as the web site of the course assures its potential participants: ‘of course you can ask any questions concerning Klingon culture, language, grammar, or vocabulary’. The linking of those two contexts: linguistic and cultural seems to characterise the majority of activities of Okrandian linguistic fandom, including scholarly study of the language, its practical use and creative writing. What sets qepHom apart from other practices supported by the Klingon Language Institute is the fact that – despite its official description recalling the self-attributed identification of the community as ‘Klingonists’ – this gathering seems to emphasise the fandom aspect of the engagement with the Klingon language. The sixth meeting held in Saarbrücken in November 2007 encouraged such a reading of the event’s affiliation.

Subtitled ‘Klingon Classes for the Beginners and Advanced’, qepHom VI gathered together 16 people with ranging knowledge and experience. Some of them – such as the organiser of the meeting, Lieven L. Litaer – had a significant expertise in the Klingon language, others were very beginners or, the ‘newbies’ to the Klingonist community. Despite the claims of the official description that ‘[n]ot all participants are specifically Star Trek Fans’, the majority of them declared an affiliation with *Star Trek* or, specifically, Klingon fandom. In fact, with three exceptions, the participants were all members of Khemorex Klinzhai, a club gathering Klingon fans from Germany and the Netherlands. This identification with – to use the Klingonists’ own term – Klindom was immediately visible in the appearance of the space occupied by the qepHom participants. The room where all the classes were held was decorated with banners representing different ‘ships’ or sub-groups of the organisation. But the Klingon related ornaments spread out of the confined context and space of the class-room taking on a playful form in the food decoration: the Imperial Trefoil, a symbol of the Klingon Empire, which marked a pizza and a chocolate cake shared by the participants.

Described as a ‘language class’ by the web site and the materials distributed during the sixth meeting, qepHom seems to be concerned with its educational goals. During the three days of the 2007 meeting the participants were presented with several talks explaining the basics of the grammar and vocabulary of the Klingon language and offered a booklet with language exercises. They could take part in the session devoted to the pronunciation of Klingon sounds. Finally, they were encouraged to test their knowledge in a Klingon Quiz, compiling both

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<sup>11</sup> *Conversational Klingon* and *Power Klingon* are two audio resources created by Marc Okrand, the inventor of the language, in co-operation with Paramount Pictures, the producer of the *Star Trek* franchise and the holder of copyright for all materials related to it.



serious and more tongue-in-cheek questions on Klingon language and *Star Trek* canon, crosswords, cartoons, connect-the-dots exercises and translation challenges. The successful completion of the quiz was awarded with various Klingon related prizes: decorative plates with Klingon inscriptions, issues of the Klingon Language Institute's journal of poetry *jatmey*, CD's with Klingon language lessons, copies of the dictionary compiled by the classes' organiser, and finally a 'snowball' with a Klingon warship inside and a clock with Klingon numerals and the qepHom logo. Additionally, all the participants received certificates of participation.

Despite all of these 'instructive' aspects qepHom VI appeared as a social rather than an educational gathering. The talks, presentations and exercises seemed to serve merely as a background for the often playful interaction between the Klingon fans, and the use of the Klingon language was most prominent not in the scholarly discussion, but in the attempts at creating Klingon poetry and in the collective performing of Klingon songs. In this perspective qepHom was not as much a language class as a celebration of the community, a form of fan/scholarly convention. This celebratory character was epitomised in the Klingon Party concluding the whole event. The party took place in a rented private room in a local bar, decorated to imitate the appearance of the Klingon starship with dark red lights, red candles and the symbols of Imperial Trefoil and bat'leh – the Klingon preferred weapon – on the walls, completed with a replica of a computer panel in a corner of the room.<sup>12</sup> The Klingon Party offered the opportunity for more chatting and song singing, as well as – uniquely in course of the whole event – for costuming, a practice firmly associated with the activities and attitudes of fandom. And so the majority of the participants wore for this occasion homemade *Star Trek* costumes and elaborate make-up. Most of the costumes reconstructed a Klingon appearance: the outfits and weaponry, the wigs and face masks bearing marks of head ridges characteristic for the later representations of the Klingons in the *Star Trek* films and television series. However, one of the participants chose to dress up as a Vulcan, incorporating in her costume a feature distinctive for the imaginary of this alien species: pointed ears.<sup>13</sup> The practice of costuming spread out to include an infant child of another participant: too young to wear her own head ridges, the girl was dressed in a little jumper with the

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<sup>12</sup> In this instance the recreation of the Klingon environment was not entirely accurate. As one of the participants observed, the design of the computer panel was consistent with that of a Federation starship rather than a Klingon vessel.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the combination of this feature with a Celtic-like pattern on the robe and a distinctive hairstyle reminiscent of the representation of another 'non-human' people, the Elves, in Peter Jackson's adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003), evoked a striking similarity with the imaginary associated to Tolkien's narratives and his textual world. This unexpected resemblance may serve as an interesting example of the – often unconscious – intertextual exchanges furnishing the cultural world of linguistic fandom. I examine these issues in more details in an essay exploring linguistic fans' attempts at translating / adapting the works of world literature. See: Kazimierczak (2010a).

symbol of the organisation, or ‘the Fleet’, and the emblem of the ‘ship’ of which her mother is a ‘captain’.<sup>14</sup>

In this open celebration of a typically fan practice qepHom appears to defy the less playful position of the KLI, expressed in the words of its founder, Lawrence M. Schoen: ‘We have nothing against people who like to dress up, focusing on the language is just more intellectually rigorous’ (Smith 2003). By allowing the elements of a broader cultural context of the *Star Trek* universe to take precedence over more analytic linguistic approaches, this ‘minor meeting’ seems to transgress the scholarly values of the Okrandian linguistic fandom, self-attributed through the imagined subjectivity of ‘Klingonists’. As such it approaches a subversive potential that Vivien Burr (2005) links to the concept of the space of transgression: a site where the dualities of fan/academic identity can be expressed, negotiated and legitimised. At the same time, precisely by acting as a subversion or transgression of the ‘Klingonist’ identity, it reveals the tensions inherent in linguistic fandom as fan/scholarship. This process is even more visible in another of linguistic fans’ gatherings: Omentielva, a conference of Tolkienian fans and linguists.

### A Fan/Scholarly Conference

‘We use *Omentielva*, followed by the appropriate Quenya ordinal, as the short name for each International Conference on J.R.R. Tolkien’s Invented Languages, part of a series of biennial conferences at changing locations’ introduces the project of Tolkienian linguistic meetings its official web site. Until now three such conferences have taken place: Omentielva Minya hosted by the Department of English at Stockholm University in July 2005, Omentielva Tatya held in the Department of the Applied Language Studies in Lessius Hogeschool in Antwerp in August 2007, and Omentielva Nelya held in Whitehaven, UK, in August 2009. While the description of the qepHom put an emphasis on its social character, the introduction to the Omentielva project makes it clear that the purpose of this gathering is first and foremost scholarly study:

Everyone with a serious interest in Tolkien’s invented languages is invited to participate, and encouraged to prepare, bring, and deliver a paper on any aspect of Tolkien’s languages.

This call for scholarly papers to be presented during the conferences, as well as the venues of two first events, suggests the affiliation of their organisers and participants with the academic community. Pursuing a format of scholarly conferences Omentielvar Minya and Tatya have been followed by the publications of their proceedings in the appropriately titled volumes of *Arda Philology 1* (2007) and 2 (2009), designed as the series of publications with the purpose of becoming a significant source of references for Tolkienian linguistics.

And yet the social aspect of the gathering is not entirely marginalised. As the official web site states, ‘[t]he programme [of Omentielva] consists of listening to

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<sup>14</sup> In another surprising reference to the work of J.R.R. Tolkien the ship has been called ‘The Lord of the Rings’.

and discussing the papers; as well as meeting each other, breaking bread together, and generally enjoying each other's company'. The agendas of all three conferences seem to follow this format. The daily proceedings include presentations of scholarly talks and seminars offering the opportunity for theoretical discussions. The evening programme, however, introduces less formal sessions from practical communication in Quenya, through poetry readings, to playful attempts at a Quenya version of the '20 questions' game. Similarly to the Klingon qepHom, the International Conference on Tolkien's Invented Languages appears to create a space for the social gathering and interaction of like-minded individuals, sharing common interest in the languages and their mythology. It offers also a space where these languages can be plainly spoken and not only spoken of. A letter from a participant in the first conference, Pernilla Leijonhufvud, gives an interesting and in-depth testimony to the community-centred character of the Omentielva project:

We were all there together because we love those languages, and want to talk and think about them with other people who also love them. It didn't matter that we were all on very different levels of learning, that we had different opinions, or that we had different mother tongues. We were there for a reason, and that reason overshadowed everything else. Referring to Bill Welden's words in his opening address, we all brought a piece of the puzzle, however small. We all contributed to the experience, whether we knew it or not. It was a mix of academic endeavour and silly jokes and everything in between, and above all it was a face to face encounter, a mind to mind meeting, our first. Omentielva Minya.

I have met you now, I have broken bread with you, I have laughed with you. Now, where could the second meeting take us? Think about it. Omentielva Tatya, in 2007.

In all these instances the conference of Tolkienian linguists does not appear to differ from any other academic gathering. Yet certain features seem to mark the specificity of this gathering. Despite the association of the first two Omentielvar with Stockholm University and Lessius Hogeschool respectively, it is worth noting that, in fact, they were not organised or co-ordinated by these institutions. Both conferences had been planned and implemented by the informal group called the Arda Society. Additionally, Omentielva Minya had been hosted by the members of Forodrim, the Tolkien Society in Sweden, while Omentielvar Tatya and Nelya were similarly supported by Tolkien fans from Belgium and UK. It could seem then that the affiliation of the conferences' organisers lies not as much within academia as within the fan community. And the same observation could be made about their participants. The majority of Tolkienian linguists taking part in the second conference were engaged with the traditional fan groups, while very few claimed any professional association with scholarship. Still more strikingly, some participants declared having no previous knowledge of and – in one case – no deeper interest in Tolkien's invented languages. Their association was first and foremost with Tolkien fandom. What finally sets Omentielva apart from the traditional academic meetings is the grass-root, informal character of its organisation. One of the purposes of the organisers was to render this event as accessible for the Tolkienian community as possible. And so in such practical

issues as the accommodation or meals the conference seemed much closer to the format of a summer camp. For four days of the proceedings of Omentielva Tatya the majority of the participants occupied a vacant building of a local school for adults, sleeping on the floors in the classrooms and taking turns to help the organisers with cooking, washing or tidying up. This informal, community-centred character of the gathering was also visible during the final session discussing the plans for future Omentielvar. It seemed that all the participants were recognised as the deciding body for that and for the next events. The secretary of the conference, Anders Stenström (Beregond), presented the economic report for the previous conference and economic sketch for the current one. Other important decisions, such as the form of the publication of the future conferences' proceedings, had been brought to the participants' attention and openly discussed.

Despite its strong emphasis on the scholarly character of the proceedings – much stronger than in the case of the Klingon Language Institute event – the International Conference on J.R.R. Tolkien's Invented Languages bears some marks of a more informal, fan community-oriented gathering. What is striking, however, is the strict temporal and spatial separation of those different approaches and practices. The academic sessions of Omentielva Tatya were held in the conference room in Lessius Hogeschool in the mornings and early afternoons, while the practical sessions of Quenya chats, games and poetry readings all took place after evening meals in the dining hall of the adult school. This distinction between the scholarly and playful or artistic engagements with Tolkien's languages was a conscious device on the part of the organisers, reflecting the seemingly conflicting values and views of Tolkienian linguists. Those views found their direct expression in the moderated discussion of 'what is a proper Quenya and how should we use it' (Harm Schelhaas).<sup>15</sup>

The starting point of this discussion was an observation that this very question seems to be a rather sensitive one, leading to the 'acrimonious' debates regularly affecting the web forums and mailing groups concerned with Tolkienian linguistics. As Harm Schelhaas indicated:

[...] we tend sometimes to get these acrimonious discussions, where people tend to distinguish two categories: those who want to study Quenya as it is found in Tolkien's writings, as academically rigorous and accurate as possible [...] And on the other hand there are people who are interested in expressing their own 'lámatyávë', trying to experiment how close they can get to Tolkien's 'lámatyávë', and write texts.<sup>16</sup>

The participants of Omentielva readily agreed that the premise of such debates was false, as those two approaches were not mutually exclusive and the most of Tolkienian linguists engaged in the different activities at different times. They also judged that such a differentiation was characteristic of the thinking of the

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<sup>15</sup> All the following quotations come from the discussion recorded during the Second International Conference on J.R.R. Tolkien's Invented Languages on August 10, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> The term 'lámatyávë' has been used by Tolkien to describe his concept of a 'linguistic taste', 'individual pleasure in the sounds and forms of words' (1993, p. 214-215). It has been adapted by Tolkienian linguists to describe their preferences in reconstructing or using Elvish languages.

beginners, coming in contact with Elvish languages for the first time without full and proper understanding of their specificity:

I think the problem is that the fans when they first come to Elvish, they are very much in a hurry to learn how to speak. (Valeria Barouch)

[...] what does general 'Tolkienistic' public want? That is, I think, something else that the experts are prepared to give them, or are feeling themselves able to give them. As Bill Welden put it, there is no such thing as Tolkien's grammar, not even Tolkien himself had Tolkien's grammar. Yet that is what general public wants. They want to be taught how to speak and how to write Quenya. (Harm Schelhaas)

Misjudging the non-standardised, fluid character of Tolkien's languages, the beginners cannot understand the necessity of grounding the practical or artistic applications of these idioms in scholarly analyses. Consequently, they tend to emphasise just one of these approaches, contributing to the polarisation of the field. Such misunderstandings are, in the words of Omentielva participants, not a part of the views of Tolkienian 'experts'. Interestingly, their ability to overcome such an opposition seems to reside in the capacity to observe another distinction:

I think that people need to remember what they are doing. Am I analysing what Tolkien wrote or am I creating something else? When we forget about this distinction, when we start doing different things at the same time, that is the problem. As long as you are clear about what you're doing, I don't see any problem. (Benct Philip Jonsson)

I think we all here know the difference when we are sitting here and someone talks about analysing certain text by Tolkien or, as we had it yesterday, analysing mode of Tengwar from *Etymologies*, that is a scholarly work. And when we're sitting down evening time trying to play cards in Quenya that is [something different] [...] So we here don't make this mistake. We are able to distinguish. (Harm Schelhaas)

Paradoxically, in the views of Tolkienian linguists taking part in Omentielva Tatya the only way to combine the scholarly and playful or artistic in their engagements with Elvish languages is to separate them entirely, clearly and appropriately labelling the nature of any linguistic endeavour. It is striking how in this discussion of the possible reconciliation of the academic and fan practices inspired by Tolkien's languages, his linguistic fans appear to be re-creating the boundaries of 'imagined subjectivities' of fandom and academia. This ordering operates on different levels and introduces several dualities. The first opposition, between those who study Quenya and those who use it, enters the discussion only to be refuted as based on a misunderstanding of the true nature of Tolkien's linguistic creation. It is replaced by the second duality, grounded in the 'expert' knowledge of Elvish idioms, which distinguishes not between people engaged with the languages, but between their practices. In the course of this argument the third opposition is introduced, once again marking the difference between Tolkienian linguistic fans: the 'experts' on one side and Tolkien's 'general public' on the other.

In the discussion, which so firmly restates the duality of the fan/scholar identity, one comment seems to give evidence of the underlying possibility of

transgressing such categories. Interestingly, as in case of many other assertions of Tolkienian linguists, it refers to the authority of Tolkien and his work:

[...] we were talking about distinguishing scholarship, the academic work from artistic, whereas we shouldn't forget that Tolkien was a man of letters, both scholar and artist. And [he] did not always distinguish these two methods himself. When he wrote a Quenya sentence, he used his philological knowledge and his artistic taste at the same time. (Harm Schelhaas)

It seems that in this one instance, in the ability to defy the supremacy of one system of values and practices over the other, Tolkien fans cannot follow his example. Still, linking the features of the traditional academic conference and the more informal fan gathering, and inviting the discussion of two supposedly opposed modes of relating to Tolkien's languages, Omentielva appears to question the foundations of Tolkienian linguistic fandom.

## **Conclusion**

Introducing the concept of a queer conference Burr (2005) claims that venues such as the *Slayage* conference provide a space to negotiate and maybe even to overcome the dualities attached to the question of fan/academic identity. It remains problematic to what extent such a project could ever be achieved. Bearing in mind an inherently dialectic nature of transgression as 'interrogation of boundaries', both questioning and recalling the concept of territorial edge between cultural norms, practices and identities, the notion of a space of transgression remains ever ambivalent. It is not Turner's temporary and theological liminality, nor Rosaldo's (and other 'borderlands' anthropologists') celebratory and political border. It is rather Hills' unresolved and disquieting 'between-ness', sometimes transgressing the regulative norms of imagined subjectivities, sometimes embracing them. And such seems to be linguistic fandom's position in relation to fan culture and to academia.

Omentielva and qepHom seem to serve as a space where through face-to-face interaction, scholarly discussion and playful use of the common language (a language of a fandom perhaps) the identity of linguistic fan is expressed and unravelled in multiple performances of fan and academic identifications and practices. From fannish enjoyment of *Star Trek* and Tolkien's narrative to the scholarly ambitions of Omentielva and educational goals of qepHom, from rigorous linguistic study to '20 questions' in Quenya and Klingon filking, the ambivalent affiliation of linguistic fandom is explored and reaffirmed. While these gatherings do not resolve the binary positioning of 'imagined subjectivities' of fandom and academia, they accommodate different readings of Klingon and Tolkien's languages: as linguistic codes in their own right, as a part of the broader textual and cultural realities, as the works of two professional linguists. In doing so they seem to both reveal and to a certain point legitimise the tensions inherent to Klingon and Elvish fans mixed allegiance. At the same time they seem to account for the performative quality of linguistic fandom (and fandom in general). This performativity is played out not only in the interchange of 'self-absence' and 'self-reflexiveness', or 'non-volitional volition' as Hills defines it, but more simply

(and perhaps more importantly) in the fact that these gatherings and their spaces matter. They are productive of certain realities: of fandom convention with its fan talk, filking and costuming; of academic conference with paper sessions and plenary discussions; and of fan/scholarly gathering, a transgressive space in-between, accommodating (and discriminating between) various elements of both.

Hills argues that fandom with its 'non-volitional volition' poses a challenge to the performative theory and its distinction between the wilfulness of performance and the compulsion of the performative. Leaving open the question of agency, it draws attention to the complexities of cultural work inherent to fan identity: at once performed, in the multitude of discourses and practices, and performing certain cultural representations, values and identifications. Linguistic fandom, as a curious form of fan/scholarship and a certain space of transgression, illuminates further this notion of fan identity as performative. At the same time, it pushes forward the understanding and enquiry of the broader processes of policing and subverting inherent to any identity work, bringing into sharp focus its inseparable links with territorial edges and transgression as their interrogation.

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