

UBC prof helped develop Krypton language for blockbuster Man of Steel

Christine Schreyer used the Cree syllabic system to develop the look of Kryptonian symbols

BY ZOE MCKNIGHT, VANCOUVER SUN JULY 5, 2013



UBC linguistics prof Christine Schreyer developed Kryptonian language symbols for the movie Man of Steel.

Much of Christine Schreyer's work as a linguistic anthropologist centres on revitalizing indigenous languages, not making them up.

But for the last few years, when not busy teaching at the Okanagan campus of the University of B.C. as an assistant professor, Schreyer has taken on a side job creating fictional languages for blockbuster movies.

She was scouted by producers of Man of Steel, the Superman flick that has grossed more than half a billion dollars worldwide following its June release, and which was partly filmed in Vancouver.

Since some of the action takes place on Superman's home planet Krypton, and the iconic "S" logo was replaced by a Kryptonian symbol meaning hope, it was decided a whole new original language was required.

So over several months in late 2011 and early 2012, Schreyer made the trip from Kelowna to Burnaby's Mammoth Studios set on her days off from teaching and marking to develop a realistic and thorough language.

"Because Superman is such a big industry — there are comic books and movies and TV shows — there are a lot of character names and planet names and city names that are common throughout," she said.

The language was based on existing vowel and consonant sounds. Next, they thought about sentence structure. In English a simple sentence is constructed with a subject-verb-object sequence, but Schreyer inverted that for Kryptonian.

"Because in the movie, the people of Krypton are being very selfish and have taken all of the planet's resources and it's about to explode, we left the subject at the front of the sentence because it's all 'me me me,'" she said.

The Krypton people are motivated by acquisition and consumption, so the sentence object is also more dominant than in English. But while the casual viewer would be oblivious to this intellectual "background information," it satisfied Schreyer as an academic.

"If you're interested in creative languages, or are a really big fan of Superman — and there are a lot of very big fans — we thought you wouldn't want to see something that had no meaning in the writing."

As an anthropologist, "I look at how language and culture go together, and what that tells us about how we see the world," said Schreyer, who approached Kryptonian with the same spirit.

At UBC, her first-year students are asked to create their own languages including sounds, words and sentence structure. In 2009, during the media hype surrounding James Cameron's much-anticipated film *Avatar*, Schreyer became interested in the Na'vi language created for that film's indigenous people, and why and how fans around the world were learning to speak it.

After a newspaper article on her Na'vi linguistics research caught the attention of Alex McDowell, production designer for *Man of Steel*, he asked Schreyer to develop an authentic-looking Kryptonian language. (An oral language was also created but left on the cutting room floor. The actors speak English.)

A graphic designer drew the 20 Arabic-like symbols forming 300 words, which appear on characters' clothing and sets throughout the movie. Schreyer used her knowledge of the Cree syllabic system to

guide how the symbols looked, and audiences can find their own personal Kryptonian glyph by logging onto glyphcreator.manofsteel.com.

"It was a lot of work, but I found it really fun because it was creative and outside my daily teaching and research routine," she said.

"I do like teaching and research but it was always fun to escape to Krypton."

And though she doesn't have an onscreen cameo in this Man of Steel instalment, there's already talk of a sequel because the movie has done so well.

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