

The Power of “AH, E/B, Very OOC”: Agency in Fanfiction Jargon

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ABSTRACT: Fannish jargon is extensively used in fanfiction writing and its terminology pervades the fans’ discourse and stories so as to obstruct comprehension for non-fans. My essay discusses the functions of fanspeak in community-building and in the fans’ claim to status as experts, focusing on the agency fanauthors thus create and demonstrate to the original authors of the meta-text.

KEYWORDS: Fanfiction; Agency; Jargon; Community-building; Expertise

1. Fanfiction as a Site of Conflict: Fannish Agency Coded in Jargon

“AH, E/B, Very OOC, lemons, Promised HEA.” These words and abbreviations constitute the summary fanfiction writer JandMsMommy provides for her online story “Seven Day Weekend.”¹ Concisely, she informs her implied audience—i.e. fanfiction writers from the *Twilight*-community—about the content of her text without making the same information accessible to any non-fan, non-fanfiction writer, or non-*Twilight* fanfiction community member, all of whom she deliberately excludes by using fannish jargon. With fans employing this so-called ‘fanspeak,’ which is immediately understandable within their community but remains very much incomprehensible to outsiders, I argue that these writers achieve a twofold effect that highlights the significance of fannish jargon within the genre: Firstly, fanauthors construct a strict linguistic barrier between fans and non-fans, which contributes to fandom community-building and provides the vital boundary between membership and non-membership (cf. Cohen 12; McMillan and Chavis 4); secondly, they present themselves as experts in fanfiction writing, fannish conventions, and further areas, which they use as a basis for ascertaining their superiority. Consequently, I maintain, fanspeak functions as a deliberate strategy in fanfiction writing that enables fanauthors to establish themselves as a powerful and active oppositional force to the original authors that provide—and claim ownership to—the texts fanfiction stories are based on.

This conflict about authority, power, agency, and also ownership between the original creators and the fanwriters constitutes a core concern of the whole genre of fanfiction,

¹ Due to the volume of digital texts in my project, quotes from web sources without page numbers will not be specifically listed as non-paginated in my article.

whose very definition already reveals a concept of authorship that is fundamentally incompatible with notions of copyright and intellectual property. Characterized as “any kind of written creativity that is based on an identifiable segment of popular culture, such as a television show, and is not produced as ‘professional’ writing” (Tushnet 655), fanfiction and its amateur authors deny the meta-text, i.e. the previously officially published text such as the *Twilight*-series, the dominance and uniqueness it traditionally demands and receives. Instead of being satisfied with the fixed text of the book, TV show, movie, manga, play, or cartoon, fans of these cultural products use the meta-texts’ familiar elements such as characters, settings, or plots to produce new texts that expand the fictional universe presented to them in archival structures (cf. Derecho). The multiplicity of fannish creativity thus substitutes the prevalence of the original author’s singular “vision”² and dissolves established hierarchies which emphasize a dichotomy between producer and consumer, between author and audience.

In contrast to this traditional division between the producers and recipients of cultural texts, the identities of “readers and writers overlap” (LaChev 88) in fanfiction—a genre which therefore fundamentally redefines these conventional roles: Through their fanworks, fans transform their status from passive consumers to members of a participatory culture (cf., for example, Jenkins, *Poachers; Fans*) who refuse to concede interpretational sovereignty to its traditional keepers, i.e. the producers of the meta-text. “We, the fans,” writes, for example, hazel-3017, “make our own version of our favourite characters, and twist and bend them to our will.” Statements like hers, which emphasize fannish agency, immediately point to the conflicts inherent to the genre that has both the fans and the media industry continuously attempting to (re-)assert and exert their authority.

In this constant renegotiation of positions, fannish jargon plays a significant role in the fanauthors’ strategies to defy being construed as powerless. The very act of writing fanfiction in the first place resists the media industry’s insistence on closing off the meta-text to fannish participation and counters their attempts on keeping “the story the way it is,” as

² Producer and writer Julie Martin (*Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, *Homicide: Life on the Street*, etc.) here exemplifies a prevalent mindset in the media industry: “[A]s a writer, it has to be the story that you want to tell, that is *your* vision” (qtd. in Ross 248; emphasis in original).

Lucasfilm's Jim Ward³ puts it (qtd. in Harmon; also Murray 11). In addition to ensuring through their stories that "the text is never solidified, calcified, or at rest" (Derecho 77), fans also employ strategies *within* their fanworks that undermine the hegemonic demands of the original creators and assert their own fannish power. It is through such an erosion of any gaktekeeping efforts by the originators of the meta-texts that fanwriters demonstrate the genre's reconfiguration of the traditional relation between authors and audience by indicating their "cultural authority" (Cascy et al. 119).

As a means to empower fans and provide them with "authority," fanspeak serves as just such a fannish strategy by enabling the writers to establish themselves as a community of experts that remains largely inaccessible to non-fans, i.e. also to original authors or the media industry. After exploring the considerable complexity of fannish jargon, my article then focuses on its functions in the fans' power struggle with the meta-texts' producers: First, I show how fans engage in community-building by coding their stories with sequences of words and letters that remain cryptic to the uninitiated outsider. In a second step, I discuss how fanspeak constitutes a decisive tool in allowing fanwriters to generate a discourse of their own that plays a significant role in their self-fashioning as experts—both in the context of interpreting the meta-text and within the fannish community itself. The aim of my article is thus to demonstrate how fans strategically and deliberately employ jargon to create a "New World" (*amazinginvisiblegirl*) that excludes and undermines the power of the original author as the sole creator of meaning.

2. Abundant Creativity and Complexity: Fannish Usage of Jargon

Fanspeak plays a prominent role in fanfiction writing: Apart from its presence in nearly all summaries of stories, fans moreover draw on their own expressions, abbreviations, and shorthands in their Author's Notes, reviews, or any other kind of fannish text or paratext.⁴ Upon accessing an online archive such as *FanFiction.Net* or blogging spaces such as

³ Jim Ward served as president of LucasArts 2004-2008; moreover he held several positions at Lucasfilm, such as vice president of marketing or senior vice president. Lucasfilm in itself is infamous in fandom for its continuous—and sometimes aggressive—attempts to "strike a balance between encouraging fan creativity and controlling what it perceived to be its copyrights" ("Lucasfilm").

⁴ According to Gérard Genette's influential study *Paratexts*, paratext is the text that is situated "between text and off-text" (2), i.e. that constitutes a threshold "between the inside and the outside [of a fictional text], a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse about the text)" (2).

LiveJournal, a reader inadvertently encounters jargon that discloses to the fan—and him/her alone—numerous features and details of the fanfiction. Since fan-texts habitually display a rich abundance of fanspeak terminology, they present themselves as particularly puzzling and opaque to anyone unfamiliar with the fannish way of encoding featured characters, the story's fictional universe, its level of detail in terms of sexual content, etc. Ending with a string of fanspeak, NightSwordSW's summary for her *Star Wars* story "The Face of a Warrior" can be read as a rather typical example and indicates the significance and prevalence jargon has assumed in fandom:

Betrayal. Loyalty. Sacrifice. Love. And one promise from years ago whose legacy has yet to be unleashed. This may be the war against Cadeus, but nobody knows who lurks in the shadows. Jaina, Jag, Zekk, Kyp, J/TK, H/L, Luke, OC's, LOTF AU post-Fury.

Via fanspeak, fannish readers can immediately access crucial information about the content, approach, and setting of a text: Interpreting *J/TK*, for example, they learn that the characters of Jaina Solo and Tiraku Kiftu are engaged in a romantic relationship with each other; the abbreviation of *OC's* alerts them to the presence of several non-canon characters (i.e. characters that do not appear in the meta-text); moreover, the writer informs her readers about the fictional universe this particular story inhabits by detailing it as an Alternate Universe (*AU*) version of the meta-text's plotline taking place after the events of the novel *Fury* in the *Legacy of the Force*-series (*LOTF*). This very same knowledge, however, remains obscured to non-fans or new fans whose exposure to *Star Wars*, fanfiction, and this specific community has not yet been extensive enough so as to enable them to cross this linguistic barrier. Fandom, after all, tends to be closely guarded as "some kind of exclusive club that you can't really be in unless you know all the words" (Anthony J. "Doppelgänger" Shepherd; cf. amenaza).

While the notion of a somewhat separated "club" of members suggests a certain degree of homogeneity among the readers and writers of fanfiction, the genre has always been characterized by its immense diversity and heterogeneity (cf. Sandvoss 62-63, 123-52; Zubernis and Larsen, *Fandom* 9, 16-35). In reference to fanspeak, this means that fanauthors employ an immense creativity and versatility in constructing various forms of jargon that impede quick and easy access to the communities for non-fans. In addition to having

changed immensely over nearly five decades of fanfiction writing (cf. Merrick; Coppa 43),⁵ much of fanspeak terminology is decidedly localized instead of global: In a redefinition of Claudia M. Rebaza's usage in "The Modern Coterie," which introduced *localized/global* to studying the language of fan groups,⁶ the large disparity that exists between global general fanspeak and localized fanspeak not used/understood in all fandoms/communities testifies to the prevalent heterogeneity of jargon. Although immersion into fanfiction writing as a genre provides any fan with the ability to use and comprehend general jargon, fans also innovatively adjust these global expressions to their particular fandom's needs or even coin specific localized fanspeak that only their own community understands. Deeply rooted in the conventions of her own fandom, NightSwordSW's summary, for instance, remains to some degree opaque to any fanwriter who only recently entered this particular subcorner of fanfiction: Such a *Star Wars* newcomer would probably correctly interpret *OC* to stand for non-meta-textual, 'other characters' but would not be able to decipher the setting coded by *LOTF AU post-Fury*, which adapts global fanspeak to *Star Wars*. Inhabiting different "neck[s] of fandom" therefore often leads to "those fannish language disconnects" (thefourthvine) that testify to the heterogeneity and complexity of jargon.

In addition to the challenge resulting from its various levels of dissemination that range from global jargon to its fandom- and community-specific variations to localized—and which are freely combined in fan-texts—,⁷ fanspeak proves to be immensely creative and

⁵ Studying fanspeak terms such as *fiawol* or *bheer*—of which "some are still used, others are not"—, Helen Merrick convincingly explains how the usage of specific expressions "can help date the 'era' of fandom being examined."

⁶ Referring to the disparity of fannish jargon with the terms *localized* and *global*, I am building on Claudia M. Rebaza, who studied a group of *Buffey: The Vampire Slayer* fanfiction writers on *LiveJournal*. In "The Modern Coterie," she briefly mentions jargon as a means to create a "boundary between insiders and outsiders" (66) and distinguishes between fanspeak as "global action" (66) and "localized action" (69). These terms are then used to signify expressions that were imported to fanfiction from other spaces, such as gaming or netspeak, and expressions that are used in her community in regard to any *LiveJournal* or fan/fanfiction practices (66-71).

⁷ An example of the complex blending of jargon in fanspeak is provided by mandycullen's summary of her *Twilight*-story "Perfect Stranger," which ends with a series of fannish terms: "AH, AU, extremely OOC. ExB. BPOV. M for language." Here, she combines general jargon (*AU*, *OOC*), its variations of *ExB* and *M*, and *AH* and *BPOV* of her own fandom and community to code the contents and approaches of her story in an intricate way: It features the *Twilight* vampires and werewolves as All Human characters acting fairly Out Of Character if compared to the meta-text; moreover, Edward and Bella engage in a romantic relationship (*ExB*), which is shown from Bella's perspective (*BPOV*) and whose sexual aspects—as the marker *M* signals—are described in a level of detail "not suitable for children and teens below the age of 16" ("FictionRatings").

multidimensional: Fans employ widely different schemata and sources in generating expressions, which further impedes immediate comprehension by non-fans. Throughout all fandoms, writers make abundant use of abbreviations, acronyms, and initialisms; they form blends and portmanteaus⁸; they re-define words to give them a wholly new meaning in the fannish context and create neologisms which are completely unique to fanfiction writing; moreover, fans have proved adept at transferring words from other languages than English to fanspeak, either adopting their original meaning or redefining them; and last but not least they frequently employ what I term *graphic writing*,⁹ which creates jargon by means of characters and symbols not ordinarily found in the written representation of English-language words and allows the fans to express themselves in a highly visual way that is among the most difficult to understand for non-fans. What makes the reading of these fan-texts even more difficult for those unfamiliar with fanspeak is the fact that these various modes of jargon formation are commonly combined so as to create a highly heterogeneous text. In addition to featuring both localized and globalized fanspeak, Romanticized Missile Fire's summary "OMCxOMTRaider. AU, blood, lime later, [...] FLUFFY-ISH!" for her *Star Wars* story "Farthest From the Core," for instance, is multi-dimensionally coded by graphic writing (OMCxOMTRaider), a number of initialisms (OMC, OMT, AU), and re-defined words (FLUFFY, lime). Only the knowledgeable fan will be able to decipher the complex fanspeak to refer to a story that is set in an Alternate Universe, conceptualized as FLUFFY-ISH, i.e. as a light-hearted romance, and focused on a relationship between an other male (non-canon) character (OMC) and another non-canon male alien—more particular a Raider—from the planet Tatooine (OMTRaider). Furthermore, as a lime-story compared to a lemon, it does not feature any explicit descriptions of sexual acts.

3. Community-Building by Fanspeak: The Barrier between Fan and Non-Fan

When a sequence of fanspeak terminology like "A collection of Dean!hurts. Ch 11: A little bit of Dean!whump with a side of Frustrated!Sam" (Enkidu07) constitutes the whole summary

⁸ Here, I refer to the common usage of *portmanteau*, which indicates a "word blending the sounds and combining the meanings of two others" ("Portmanteau Word"). This meaning stands in contrast to the linguistic definition, which restricts the term to "a type of fusion of two morphemes into one" ("Portmanteau").

⁹ I termed this practice *graphic writing* as this links it first to the visuality of the literary genre of graphic novels and secondly to the linguistic term *ideograph*, i.e. a symbol that represents a specific concept independently of its written or spoken shape.

of a story—i.e. the sole textual stimulus to potential readers—, it becomes immediately obvious how ingrained the use of jargon is within fandom and to which extent it has replaced standard language. Apart from allowing fanauthors to express themselves in a fast, effortless, and easily comprehensible way,¹⁰ fanspeak has assumed the crucial function of enabling both writers and readers to feel included in the fanfiction community simply by being able to use and understand its terminology. Each encounter with a story or term therefore signifies a renewal and reinforcement of membership, which makes jargon the source of an enormously empowering experience for fans.

Non-fans, however, face a diametrically opposed experience since fanspeak immediately confronts them with their lack of knowledge and exclusion: “To the uninitiated outsider, media fandom as it’s currently practiced online [...] makes little sense: strange jargon with unclear acronyms and lots of punctuation” (Hellekson 113; Marx 10). By its pervasiveness, diversity, and versatility, non-fans are therefore hindered by an obstacle of considerable complexity from accessing fandom, from understanding its stories, or following its conversations. Fanspeak enables the fanfiction community to draw a firm boundary around its members and texts, which underlines its essential function in community-building: Membership as one of the four key elements that define a community according to David W. McMillan and David M. Chavis¹¹ after all “has *boundaries*; this means that there are people who belong and people who do not” (9; emphasis in original). In a fierce emphasis of exactly those very boundaries, Victoria P. voices a prominent fannish sentiment when she considers fandom to be “*la cosa nostra*,” i.e. “this thing of ours.” Comparing fandom explicitly, though tongue in cheek, to the “mafia family,” stresses the significance of community and membership in fandom and—despite the statement being exaggerated in its militancy—calls additional attention to its agency and power.

As a barrier fans have created via language, fanspeak therefore fulfills an important role in community-building by serving as the dividing line between fans and non-fans, between

¹⁰ Which is important as many fanfiction sites limit the number of characters allowed for story headers. *FanFiction.Net*, for example, permits only 384 characters in a summary but does not restrict Author’s Notes or other categories of paratext.

¹¹ Defining community in their highly influential article “Sense of Community: A Definition of Theory” of 1986, McMillan and Chavis propose four different elements as essential: membership, influence, reinforcement, and shared emotional connection.

insiders and outsiders, and—in extension—also between the fannish readers and writers on the one hand and the original producers on the other. Just like any non-initiate, the creators of the meta-text—no matter how familiar they are with their fictional universe, no matter how much they insist on their abilities as “professional storytellers” (*Farscape* producer David Kemper qtd. in Ross 248)—cannot penetrate the language barrier and consequently cannot gain membership: “[T]he off-putting jargon and the unspoken rules mea[n] that only *this* group of *that* people can negotiate the terrain” (113; emphasis in original), writes Karen Hellekson. As such, she explicitly recognizes fanspeak’s significance as a tool that provides the barriers integral to community-building and reinforces fandom’s exclusive nature as a fiercely guarded group that sharply differentiates between who is inside and who is outside. The complexity of jargon is essential in creating a community of fans who strategically use their own language in processes of inclusion and exclusion. In this way, “language acquisition,” as Rebaza writes, functions here “not only as a rite of passage, but as a clear boundary separating insiders from outsiders” (72).

Mastering fanspeak, as numerous fans testify, has thus acquired the status of being a proof of membership and fandom uses it to sharply differentiate between long-time fanauthors, outsiders, and those who have just started to tentatively enter its complex web. None too gently do some community members point to the ignorance of new fanwriters and vocally assert the existing boundary between the groups. Speaking for her fellow fans, *zvi_likes_tv*, for instance, powerfully emphasizes that “we expect newbies who come to fandom to learn our fannish jargon and mores.” The fannish insistence upon being able to use and comprehend fanspeak as one of the defining features of fandom membership therefore demonstrates very adamantly the status of language as a boundary fans strategically employ to distance themselves from non-fans. First-time fanwriters cannot simply post a story to automatically become members; providing a fan-text is just a first step toward getting accepted, with knowledge of fanspeak as one of the key elements to full membership: New fans simply “must learn the terms [...] in order to participate and become members of the group” (Rebaza 72). As such, authors unfamiliar with jargon and insecure in its usage are immediately marked as *newbies*, i.e. novices in fandom, and are thus granted mere probationary access until they have mastered the communal conventions and expressions. In itself, language becomes a means of empowerment: Disqualifying outsiders, fans deny

them any agency by pointing out their inability to use jargon. “You can always tell a newbie,” declares a fan, “because they do not speak properly, they have not figured out how to speak whatever the fandom is” (qtd. in Rebaza 73).

Various voices therefore attest to the exclusionary potential of fanspeak, focusing on its complexity that requires time and effort in getting accustomed to. Mastery of fannish jargon or any fannish conventions within any community easily “takes between three and six months” and fandom’s complexity makes “trying to work on fan fiction without inside experiences [...] hardly advisable” (LaChev 90). Through its diversity and varied levels of distribution, fanspeak has proven an effective means to limiting access to the fan communities and represents a powerful barrier that cannot be surpassed easily. Fandom thus displays its agency by banning outsiders, and fans have a tool at their disposal that enables them to single out non-initiates and deny them both access and authority. Power, after all, can only be gained by membership and inside knowledge acquired through long-time immersion into fandom and its practices.

The required time and effort to achieve membership, however, also signals the double function of fanspeak in community-building: Apart from its significance in closing off fandom, it also provides a much needed linguistic ‘glue’ after a new fan has crossed the “fannish jargon barrier” (thefourthvine). Understanding and being able to use fanspeak fosters an immense sense of cohesion among the fans as, in the end, membership “is a feeling that one has invested part of oneself to become a member and therefore has a right to belong” (McMillan and Chavis 9). This intense “feeling” of “a right to belong” highlights the empowerment to be gained from understanding the communal language. What then makes fannish jargon additionally special is the fact that this experience of membership is not restricted to a single threshold moment but can be repeated over and over again: Whenever a fan encounters an intellegible term or deciphers a formerly unknown expression, their sense of belonging is augmented and intensified. “If you even have some knowledge [...] then you’re not really an outsider,” writes metamiri and thus affirms the importance of understanding jargon in creating cohesion.

As a means to connect people, jargon therefore represents more than a barrier; it also functions as a threshold for new fans. When these prove sufficient interest in fandom and

engage in its activities, fellow fans will gladly offer help and open the door to the communities. Forums like *FanFiction.Net*'s "Fanfiction Terminology, Labels, and Reviewer Etiqu" allow newcomers to ask questions and receive answers by experienced fanauthors; glossaries to fanspeak like *Fanlore*'s with its impressive 1,043 entries provide another option to look up unfamiliar terms and learn about them with the help of long-time members. By facilitating interaction between different groups, be these new/experienced writers in general or new/experienced writers within a certain fandom, jargon consequently has the potential to unify the communities and give meaning to a rather vague sense of belonging in virtual "imagined communities" (cf. Anderson).

Moreover, fanspeak has the additional advantage of providing a linguistic basis that connects fans from different countries and languages of origin and thus can create cohesion beyond its function of generally signaling fandom membership. After all, jargon terminology remains the same "regardless of an individual's native language" (Wood 405). By transcending linguistic differences, its expressions create a bridge of understanding between writers of different backgrounds and origins. It is fanspeak that grants any fan some degree of access to stories like L0kiicita Cullen's Spanish "Último Vuelo," Chewbacca77's French "Ça m'a fait quelque chose," or NeverMineToHold's German "In Favor of the Morning Star". They all feature jargon in their story headers that is easily comprehensible for any fan even though they may not be able to speak the respective language. Even a Russian story like LenaKaitoKuroiRico's "Кошмары или Три Пробуждения и одна колыбельная" becomes somewhat understandable despite its Cyrillic letters as she includes the familiar words "dark, angst, fluff, OOC" in her summary that overcome the linguistic boundary between speakers of Russian and other fans. In an extension of Andrea Wood's claim about fans establishing a "shared terminology among all language groups" (405) in anime/manga fanwriting, fannish jargon has created this "shared terminology"—this lingua franca—in all genres of fanfiction. Even though English may be the basis for many of the terms, fanspeak nevertheless needs to be learned or acquired by everyone since its complexity and the increasing integration of non-English terms reduce a possible advantage of native speakers of English in mastering jargon to a minimum. By providing a collective linguistic basis, fanspeak therefore facilitates communication between fans of various backgrounds, giving everyone a chance to participate once they have learned how to use it.

In terms of cohesive community-building, this transnational character of jargon becomes especially obvious when fans choose to include words from a variety of languages in their terminology. Despite the continuous prevalence of English in most fandoms, terms such as the Japanese *yaoi*¹² or the German *fest* complement the idea that fanspeak represents a powerful means of uniting people of heterogeneous backgrounds who come together in an affinity space¹³ through their “shared passion or a common endeavor” (Black, *Adolescents* 38; cf. Jenkins, *Convergence*). No matter which cultural background a fan might have, jargon consequently helps to obtain this all-important “*sense of belonging and identification* [which] involves the feeling, belief, and expectation that one fits in the group and has a place there” (McMillan and Chavis 10; emphasis in original).

Fulfilling “important functions in creating and maintaining sense of community,” the “*common symbol system*” (McMillan and Chavis 10; emphasis in original) of fannish jargon thus becomes one of the fundamental aspects of how the increasingly global fandom constitutes itself: On the one hand, it represents an internally cohesive group, whose members experience full “cultural transparency” via the powerful identity marker of language; on the other, it dissociates itself through this very same “barrier of meaninglessness” from non-fans and non-fanfiction writers.¹⁴ Both the feeling of membership and the boundaries to the outside are tantamount in fanspeak’s function in creating, establishing, and demonstrating the community’s agency. Not only does jargon have impact on fandom-internal power relations as it signifies control over processes of inclusion and exclusion; it also has tremendous effects on fandom-external power relations in establishing the fanfiction community as a capable and influential agent in the tension-laden conflict between fans and producers illustrated earlier.

¹² A Japanese fan coinage of 1979, *yaoi* is an “acronym of *yamanashi*, *ochinashi*, *iminashi*, meaning ‘no point, no climax, no meaning’” (McHarry); other terms such as *shonen ai* (‘boy’s love,’ i.e. homosexual relationships between men), however, are adopted from Japanese literally.

¹³ The notion of defining fandom as an affinity space has become popular in fan studies, since the shared denominator of the members/frequenters of an affinity space is a “common passion” (Black, “Digital Design” 117) or, as Michael Williams calls it, a “powerful affinity [...] formed around a narrative object” (546). This “passion,” for instance, can be the passion for writing fanfiction about a favorite meta-text.

¹⁴ The terms *cultural transparency* and *barriers of meaninglessness* are taken from Rebaza (52, 71); she in turn refers to Etienne Wenger’s and Jean Lave’s pioneering work on communities of practice.

Mastering fanspeak is inherently empowering for fans, and hence indispensable to their ability to challenge producers, subvert traditional hierarchies, and emerge as agents in their own right. Due to fanspeak's strategic use as a tool of community-building, it significantly aids fans in claiming power and authority in regard to interpreting, re-writing, and even owning the meta-text since it enhances their communal strength. As individuals, fanwriters and their stories would have slight impact on the traditional power distribution that concedes little to the fans and relegates them to consumers of texts and merchandise. While fans on their own are powerless in the face of TV-networks, Hollywood studios, or book editors, the multiplicity of the fanfiction community has created a "sense of right to appropriate" (Postigo 69; Jenkins, *Fans* 54-57) among the fanauthors who become increasingly visible and speak with multiple voices that clamor for attention. The Internet-age in particular has fostered "a fannish history of organized protest" (Clerc 5),¹⁵ which testifies to the power of the community by its emphasis on contesting the producers, or—in fanspeak—*The Powers That Be*. Fan campaigns and fan-sponsored projects like the Organization for Transformative Works, which not only provides an online fanfiction archive and legal defense for challenged fanworks but also launched a well-respected academic journal, resist a one-dimensional attribution of power to the producers by establishing fans as a force to be reckoned with. Identified as the community's symbolic "external enemy" (Zubernis and Larsen, *Fandom* 121), the original author fails to uphold his/her status as the instance of authority: The agency created and demonstrated by the tightly-knit fan groups dissolves traditional hierarchies, with jargon facilitating the process of community-building necessary for the upheaval of these power structures. As a strategic means to erecting boundaries to the outside and signaling membership to the inside, fanspeak therefore constitutes a fannish move of gatekeeping and has assumed a majorly significant function in

¹⁵ Ever since the birth of fanfiction in the late 1960s, fandom has actively protested against the media industry, with the outcome of these campaigns always depending on the communal effort: As only small communities of fanwriters existed before fanfiction went online in the late 1980s/early 1990s (Coppa 53), the impact they had on the original authors and producers was minimal, not to say non-existent. As rather infrequent events, fan campaigns before the millennium thus enjoyed only limited success except for the famous "Save *Star Trek*" letter-writing campaign, in which at least 114,667 letters reached the network NBC (Jenkins and Tulloch 10; "Fan Campaign"). Today, campaigns are much more common and, organized via the Internet, often involve millions of fans (Murray 15-19; "Fan Campaign"). On fan activism also see the special issue *Transformative Works and Fan Activism* of the journal *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2012), guest edited by Henry Jenkins and Sangita Shresthova.

enabling fans to speak out and act for their “sense of ownership” over the meta-text and their “right to be heard” (Ross 36) by the media industry.

4. The Fan Expert: Claiming Status via Fanspeak

Apart from its significance in community-building, the complexity of fanspeak—the very time and effort required in mastering its terminology—constitutes the basis for the second major function of jargon: Knowing fanspeak has become a powerful signal of a fanauthor’s expertise to both fellow fans and the original producers alike, which substantiates their claims to agency and authority. In fandom, there has always been a significant link between knowledge and power and, as Helen Merrick attests, the very fact of employing and comprehending fanspeak indicates “a fan’s familiarity with, and status in fandom.” Proper usage of jargon therefore reveals “cultural competency and in-depth knowledge of the fan community” (Merrick) as a consequence of long-time membership and as such becomes a prerequisite for claiming authority that only dedicated fans can fulfill.

Fannish expertise, i.e. a high degree of competency in all areas of fandom, is therefore embodied by understanding jargon and can be achieved by immersion and effort only. Interpreting a warning like *silentreaper06*’s “PWP, Wincest” correctly, i.e. understanding that the story’s only focus lies on describing sex between brothers, testifies a fan’s expert status, which reaches far beyond linguistic knowledge: Demonstrating a reader’s belonging to the community, it highlights their proficiency in fanfiction writing, the fannish community, the fan-text, fannish conventions, and certainly also the meta-text—which, as the object of fandom, is intensely studied, read, and re-read, watched and re-watched (Jenkins, *Poachers* 67-75). Mastery of fanspeak thus includes areas of competency that exceed the producers’, who may have a “vision” (Martin qtd. in Ross 248) of their meta-text but know little of fandom.¹⁶ Valuing knowledge—as indicated by fanspeak—puts the fannish gift economy that freely provides stories, information, help, reviews, or encouragement in a marked contrast to the media industry, which offers the fans a chance to attest their superiority over the

¹⁶ Conversely, fans often respond very positively to any fandom knowledge revealed by the producers: When *Supernatural* actor Jensen Ackles, for instance, played with a popular fanspeak term in an interview, “fans [were] impressed with his knowledge of fannish parlance” (Zubernis and Larsen, “Jensen Ackles”). For a discussion of producers’ views and insights on fandom, see for example: Ross; Zubernis and Larsen, *Fandom*; Scott.

creators of the meta-text.¹⁷ Instead of attaching any importance to holding copyright or making money off the texts, they indicate their care for the fictional universe with its characters and stories by fanspeak. Using jargon becomes a strategy to establish power in the immensely relevant areas of text, values, and language.

As a first testament of their superiority, fans, for instance, are proud of claiming a more intimate knowledge of the meta-text and its fanfiction archive. As Liesbet van Zoonen points out, they

prove to be a highly competent audience expressing critical assessments of the show that often surpass the knowledge of the producers. Some long-time fans feel they know the characters and their fictional community better than the writers and are struggling—as it were—with the writers about the ownership of the [text]. (61; cf. Baym)

Based on their emotional connection to the meta-text, their intense study of it, and the time they invest in creating fanworks about it, fanwriters dispute the authority the original authors might have and insist on their own interpretive agency. It is they who show in their stories “how the plot and stuff should have been written” (fssquiggles), renouncing their supposed passivity and emphasizing their own contribution to the textual archive. Stressing this dissolution of conventional hierarchies, a fan on the popular web page *TV Tropes* sums up the genre of fanfiction in the words: “If you want something done right, do it yourself. [...] There are Fan Fics out there that are INCREDIBLY good. Often being just as good, if not better, than the original work” (“Fanfic”). Fans, according to JessicaLynn, simply know “more about all the little details than the author,” which powerfully underlines fannish expertise. Fanfiction writing is thus characterized by the inherent belief in the deficiencies and incompleteness of the meta-text and the fans’ ability to improve and complete them,¹⁸ which is routinely described in the paratextual Author’s Notes that tend to precede stories. Disparaging the meta-text by complaining about its “loose ends, unanswered questions, and

¹⁷ The fannish gift economy is based on the “free exchanges of information and goods from individuals to a group, or from one individual to another” (Rebaza 85). Without monetary remuneration, “individuals share as needed, and can expect that, from somewhere in the group, they will receive knowledge or [texts or support] in exchange at a future point” (Rebaza 85-86). For further discussion of the concept of the fannish gift economy, cf. Rebaza 84-124; Hellekson; Fiesler 745-53.

¹⁸ Being fans, these fanauthors feel an emotional connection to the meta-texts, or in other words, “LOVE” (LovesAlways) them, but that does not keep them from wanting to make it “better” (Samantha V) with their fanfiction.

unhappy endings,” fanwriters display their superiority in “fixing all that” (ShadowPast620) by their own texts.

Besides this, fans also affirm their power by demonstrating the higher regard they have for their own conventions and knowledge as compared to the value system of the media industry. The fannish gift economy is based on participation, on exchange of texts, feedback, and support without remuneration, and fandom has always been fierce in guarding that principle by shunning anyone’s attempt at using the community to make money off its creativity.¹⁹ As members of this specific social culture, fanwriters reject commercialism from both within and without fandom, distancing themselves from the accompanying belief that a text can be owned by an individual, be that an original author, a network, or a corporation. Whenever fans write, they offer their story to the community and it enters the fannish archive: “The individuality of that piece is lost,” writes Hellekson, “it becomes part of something greater” (115). Being part of fandom is synonymous with disdaining notions of copyright and individual ownership of texts, which members of the community adhere to as one of the most fundamental principles of the genre. Consequently, fans express their superiority not only by their expert knowledge of the meta-text but also by dissociating themselves from the original authors and commercialism: “[F]an[s],” as DarkVoid claims, “know better than money-hungry producers.” Disparaging the media industry, fandom asserts sovereignty by determining its own value system, in which only participation and fannish expertise count. “Entering into fandom means abandoning preexisting social status and seeking acceptance and recognition less in terms of who you are than in terms of what you contribute to this community” (Jenkins, ““Strangers”” 213). Fannish conventions thus supercede conventional hierarchies in the field of literary production and fans prove both their knowledge and adherence to their own principles by using fanspeak.

Apart from indicating their textual competency and belief in fannish values fandom by fanspeak, fanauthors substantiate their expert status in a third way, i.e. by instrumentalizing language itself. They “create a discourse of their own” (Wright 21), which enables them to

¹⁹ An example of that can be seen in the infamous FanLib incident, in which non-fans established a profit-oriented online archive for fanfiction that stipulated that stories posted could be used for commercial purposes (“Fanlib”; Rebaza 157-60).

fundamentally distance themselves from the producers. No longer is it the meta-text and its original author whose language is the only one available—and therefore the one to be used; instead it is the fans who display their agency by generating and conversing in their very own specialized jargon. Far from providing a mere alternative to non-fannish language, it represents the “accepted and expected way of discussing texts” (Wright 21). Abandoning the producers’ language in favor of their own jargon, fans continuously disqualify the traditionally dominant discourse present in other writings about the meta-text and establish their own expertise, which is symbolized by fan-texts like “My 30 Day OTP challenge for Destiel. Most of these I plan to keep gen/moderately NSFW” (The Road Goes On) that indicate the fanauthors adherence to the community’s linguistic principles and their mastery of the fans’ lingua franca. Coding fanfiction in fanspeak immediately sets these texts apart by their non-normative terminology, signaling to any reader the fans’ expertise in appropriating, interpreting, rewriting—in short, transforming—the meta-text. A simple summary like “AU/Slash/Darkward” (MyTwiDreams) ultimately turns into a statement of fannish sovereignty: The meta-text is transformed into a different fictional universe (*AU*), its protagonists are no longer heterosexual but homosexual (*Slash*) and its ‘hero’ Edward becomes *Darkward*, a “dark, twisted [...] bad-ass character” (Cullen818).

Due to its prominent role in these domains where fans insist on their superiority over the producers’ knowledge, value system, and discourse, fanspeak has assumed a viable function in the fanwriters’ self-empowerment by demonstrating their competency. In addition to its role in processes of community-building, jargon exemplarily illustrates how fans construct their agency via expertise as a fanauthor’s “power and authority rests upon her engagement with the discourse [and] her specialized knowledge of the discourse” (Wright 35). The complex terminology therefore discloses how tightly linked knowledge and power are on every level of fandom: Beyond its significance in fandom-internal empowerment by enabling fellow fans to recognize how deeply a writer has immersed him-/herself in the meta-text, the community, and its conventions,²⁰ fanspeak allows fans to signal their competence to fandom-external agents, such as the original authors. It emphasizes a fan’s expert status and thus their “power and authority,” as they know more than the original producers, converse

²⁰ Recognizing a writer’s engagement in fandom, for instance, plays a significant role in giving feedback as can be seen by statements in a *FanFiction.Net* forum with the topic “Critique: Best and Worst Reviews You Have Given or Received.”

in their own language, and generate a multi-layered and complex discourse with its own value system. To say it in the fans' own words, "Fandom knows best" (introductory), or, as John Fiske argues, "fan cultural knowledge [...] is used to enhance the fan's power over, and participation in, the official, cultural text" (43). The fan experts, as these statements testify, have reconstituted themselves as powerful co-owners of the meta-text, leaving their traditionally ascribed status of consumers to become both active producers and guardians of the meta-text and its fannish archive.

Fanspeak thus functions as one of the fans' strategies to prove their expert status to both their community and outsiders. Knowledge is no longer restricted to the original producers, but it is the fans who can translate "Pairings of OCXOC, hints of anidala and OCXOC" (subaquakat) into a statement about story content and it takes a fannish expert to figure out the difference between "a lime or lemon" (Storyteller's Dream) plotline. Disqualifying producers' language, fans substitute it with their own expertise and code their fanfiction in a way that discloses the significance of knowledge as a basis for their agency: Competence as such has become synonymous with mastering fanspeak.

5. Jargon as Cultural Capital: Agency and Power in Fanspeak

Fanspeak's association with knowledge—with effort invested in learning to use and understand it—has therefore led to its tremendous significance in the fanauthors' self-empowerment. Fan experts, who have formed a tightly-knit community by creating their own discourse, establish themselves as a powerful opposition force to the media industry by insisting on new hierarchies that disrupt encrusted notions of originality, authorship, or intellectual property. Based on "shared ownership" (Ross 246) of the text, the fans' textual archive, together with fannish knowledge, values, and conventions, provide a counter model of participation, communality, and alternative areas of expertise. Fanspeak, as I have discussed, constitutes an effective tool and strategy to achieve, demonstrate, and emphasize this very fannish agency.

As a discourse of their own, in which fans—and only they—feel comfortable, jargon underscores the dichotomy between fans and non-fans, thus providing a strategy for considerable self-empowerment. On the one hand, fans stress their expert knowledge by

employing terminology appropriately; on the other hand, they construe a language barrier to keep the uninitiated from entering their communities while this very same barrier creates a fierce sense of belonging among fellow writers and readers. By this double function fanspeak presents itself as one of the fans' main gatekeeping strategies they use to resist, undermine, and reconstruct the often uncontested power of original producers, authors, networks, or publishers over a text. Invoking the power of the word—even if it is the abbreviated, blended, or graphically altered word—aids fans in opposing these traditional entities and becoming powerful themselves: In jargon, fanwriters have found a means to use and instrumentalize “linguistic capital as a form of cultural capital” (Ross 144).

Employing fanspeak extensively in addition to forming and disseminating it in vastly divergent ways has thus given fans a strategy to confirm their hegemonic claims over the meta-text and their fan-texts. As a community of experts, fanauthors actively work against being relegated to consumers and insist not only on their status as producers but also on dismantling the authority of the original authors. Fandom simply ‘knows best and writes best,’ and does not hesitate to emphatically assert this claim. Acknowledging the agency of fanauthors, even *Supernatural* executive producer Eric Kripke admits to listening to and acting upon the voices of the fanbase: “[W]hen we make missteps,” he confesses in a 2007 interview, “we pay attention to the fans and we course-correct” (emphasis in original). This fannish agency, I conclude,—the “cultural capital” fans have amassed and continuously demonstrate—could not even be thinkable without the power of their “linguistic capital.”

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