Article

Green ideals: How learning the Na'vi language helps protect our planet

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine how a constructed language, the language of Na'vi, can create a commitment to environmentalism. Na'vi, created by linguist Paul Frommer, is the language of the planet Pandora, featured in the movie *Avatar* (2009). I begin by presenting results of a survey I completed with Na'vi speakers in the summer of 2011. This survey sought to determine who Na'vi speakers were and how they were learning the language, but also why they were learning the language. For a minority of participants, their motivation for learning Na'vi, was the connection to a utopian world and an ethic of environmentalism. This paper uses the theory of linguistic relativity, as applied in language creation, to illustrate how language use can contribute to the development of an imagined utopian world. Extending from there, I use the framework of ecolinguistics to examine how individual linguistic choices, such as learning a constructed language embedded in an ethic of environmentalism, might cause change in the real word. In particular, I look at how the Greta Thunberg Effect, the ability of an individual to influence action, might play out in the Na'vi speech community. Finally, I discuss how changes in the Na'vi community overtime, as new films are released, might also contribute to the development of an ethic of environmentalism.

Keywords: Na'vi; *Avatar*; environmentalism; Greta Thunberg Effect; ecotopia; ecolinguistics

1. Introduction

When James Cameron created the film *Avatar* (2009), he set out to create a utopian world — the alien world of Pandora — where tall blue aliens spoke the constructed language of

Na'vi. However, all was not what it seemed on Pandora and "[i]ndeed the idea of paradise lost, destroyed by corporate greed, militarism and imperialism, is at the heart of the film's environmentalist message" (Loshitzky, 2012, p. 154). In June of 2011, the film held the record for the highest-grossing film of all time (Michelle et al., 2012)[1] and the Na'vi people depicted in the film "[had] become icons of resistance with global resonance" (Michelle et al., 2012, p. 115). In particular, the Na'vi have frequently been associated with local, often Indigenous, peoples who are fighting the oil and gas industry, mining, or deforestation to protect their lands — the theme of the film. But how is the language of Na'vi, created by linguist Paul Frommer, part of this imagined "Pandora's Box"?

In the summer of 2011, I conducted an online survey with the Na'vi speech community to learn who Na'vi language learners were and how they were learning Na'vi. Originally, I wondered if the methods fans used to learn these newly created languages might be applied to communities looking to revitalize their endangered languages (Schreyer, 2011). I was also curious as to why these individuals were learning Na'vi. I speculated about whether their motivations might also be something that learners of endangered languages could connect with in their language learning journeys. The results of the survey showed that Na'vi learners were learning the language for a variety of reasons (Schreyer, 2015). However, there were some individuals, a minority, who chose to learn the language because of the *environmental* message of the film and the "green ideals" it presented. For certain learners of Na'vi, using the language has provided them with a window into a utopian world. It is their desire to connect with this utopian world that led them to change their actions here on Earth while connecting to a community of like-minded individuals. In this paper, I discuss how some members of the *Avatar* fandom have embraced the "green ideals" of Pandora specifically through learning the constructed language of Na'vi. In this paper, I ask whether learning a constructed language can enact real social change on these issues. *Avatar* originally came out in 2009, time has passed since my original research in 2011, and much has changed over the last decade in regards to real-world political and environmental issues. However, fifteen years after *Avatar*, climate change and Indigenous rights to land are issues that continue to impact our world. With *Avatar 2*'s release in December 2022, have new Na'vi learners turned to the "green ideals" of Pandora? Can the Na'vi language be an effective tool for putting ideals into action — individually, locally, and globally?

Before I continue, I woud like to acknowledge that I am a settler scholar who is fortunate to live and work in the unceded, traditional, and ancestral lands of the syilx Okanagan peoples in what is known as British Columbia, in so-called Canada.[2] To me, acknowledging syilx peoples as stewards of the lands in which I dwell means recognizing and respecting the community's knowledge of the environment and practices they have

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[1] It retains that ranking in 2024; see https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/top_lifetime_gross/?area=XWW, accessed March 15th, 2024.

[2] In nsyilxcn, the language of the syilx people, capitalization is not used. For more information on the phrase "so-called Canada", see https://www.waterwatchers.ca/what_s_up_with_so_called_canada.

engaged in to sustain the environment for time immemorial, as well as working to assist community members with the documentation and transmission of that knowledge in the nsyilxcn language. I would also like to acknowledge that over the last few years in syilx and neighbouring Salish territories we have been living in a climate emergency. In 2021, we experienced record-breaking heat domes, intense wildfires, and extreme flooding. All highways between the interior of British Columbia, where syilx territories are located, and the coast were closed for a period of time due to mudslides and flooding. We faced food shortages and uncertainty about the future. More recently, in the summer of 2023, British Columbia faced "a record-breaking wildfire season. An area nearly the size of Vancouver Island was burned, tens of thousands of people were forced to evacuate [myself included], and hundreds of homes and buildings were lost or damaged. The hardest hit areas were the Okanagan and the Shuswap…." (Hoekstra, 2023). Similar wildfires burned across Canada in the Northwest Territories (gov.nt.ca, 2023), as well as in Maui, Hawai'i (usfa.fema.gov, 2023). In recent years, then, the green ideals of Pandora, and the language of Na'vi, seem even more appealing, and even, imperative. In this paper, I argue that constructed languages like Na'vi have the power to turn language ideologies from imagined worlds of films, such as *Avatar*, into language ideologies in action across global communities.

I return now to provide some background on the film *Avatar* and the language of Na'vi and the results of my survey with Na'vi language learners, before reviewing literature about *Avatar* and environmentalism. Next, I examine how linguistic relativity can be enacted in language construction. Following this, I discuss how the transnational communities of conlang speakers can contribute to changes in individual, local, national, and global communities.

2. Background on the Na'vi survey

My interest in the Na'vi language developed when I taught a course at the University of British Columbia's Okanagan campus in the fall of 2010 on "new" languages, including pidgins and creoles, new sign languages, and created languages. At the time, there had been much media attention about the fact that numerous individuals from around the world were learning Na'vi but very little about who the speakers actually were beyond the conviction that they *must* be fans, if not fanatics, of *Avatar* (Schreyer, 2011). Therefore, in order to learn more about Na'vi speakers, I conducted an on-line survey during the summer of 2011. I chose to run an online survey since it seemed obvious that most Na'vi language learning was occurring via the Learn Na'vi website.[3] My survey was designed to discover who Na'vi speakers were (age, gender, education levels, nationalities, etc.), as well as why people learn Na'vi, how they learn it, and how they thought it would develop and change over time. The survey was based on a similar study of advanced Klingon speakers,

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[3] See https://learnnavi.org.

conducted by a Swedish linguistics student, Yens Wahlgren, in 2004 (Wahlgren, 2004). There were twenty questions on the survey, which was originally advertised on the Learn Na'vi website, as well as other *Avatar* fan sites, and in email listservs related to linguistics. The survey was originally in English and individuals were required to be 19 years of age to participate since this is the age of majority in British Columbia, Canada, where my university is based. Due to widespread interest from members of the Learn Na'vi community and concerns that community members who were not fluent in English would not be able to participate, volunteers from the Na'vi community eventually translated the survey into seven other languages (German, Russian, Ukrainian, Hungarian, French, Italian, and Na'vi itself). As well, concern that numerous members of the Na'vi community were under the age of 19 prompted an amendment to the original ethics application in order that anyone who was able to read and write (usually 8 years of age) could participate. In total, 293 individuals participated in the survey from 38 different countries in seven different languages.[4]

2.1. Who are Na'vi learners?

In this paper, I do not have space to provide much detail on who the speakers are but will summarize the overall trends of Na'vi speakers (all from Schreyer, 2015). The average survey respondent, in 2011, was: male (72% of participants), American, and between the ages of 15 to 24 (62% of participants). They were attending high school or university (which is not surprising considering their ages) but had no previous knowledge of linguistics. They were fans of the movie *Avatar* and, in summer of 2011, had been studying Na'vi for 13 to 18 months and were beginner speakers of the language (45% of participants). However, while this was the average Na'vi speaker, the community was also highly diverse. Participants ranged from 10 to 81 years in age. While male participants were a clear majority, the responses also included female individuals (26% of participants) and a range of non-binary participants, including gender queer, transgender, and non-binary individuals (2% of speakers). In regards to proficiency levels, beyond the very low or beginner level speakers, 11% of participants were self-identified advanced speakers, 19% were intermediate speakers, 22% were low or basic speakers, and 3% of participants indicated that they did not know any Na'vi at all. This was a particularly surprising result since the survey was recruiting Na'vi *speakers* specifically, but it seems that individuals who were members of the Learn Na'vi forum considered themselves to be part of the community and, therefore, speakers, despite not knowing any of the language at the time they completed the survey.

They are what might be considered "lurkers", which is a unique participant category in online speech communities. Lurking might have a negative connotation in some contexts (Dennen, 2008), but, within digital communities, lurkers are the "silent majority"

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[4] While the survey was translated into Ukrainian, no one completed it in this language.

(Nonnecke & Preece, 1999, p. 123). They are people who observe without posting publicly, and yet they still participate through their presence online and are a part of the community although not visibly so. As Nonnecke and Preece write, "[i]n the online context, lurker evokes the image of a benevolent yet responsible net citizen, while the traditional definition implies something much more sinister" (1999, p. 124). In fact, in my Na'vi study, I learned more about the prominence of lurkers. In my past article on this topic, I wrote:

> [3.3] … In fact, when asked about whether or not there is a Na'vi culture, one respondent stated, "I tend to lurk, so [I'm] not visibly part of it". The moderators of the Learn Na'vi forum are sensitive to lurking, however, and the main landing page greets new visitors and encourages them to join the Na'vi community, stating "Kaltxì, Guest! Why don't you join our community?" (Schreyer, 2015, s. 5.11)

Relatedly, when I asked Na'vi learners how they were learning the language, the majority of participants listed online learning tools. These included websites such as the Learn Na'vi website (n = 196), YouTube (n = 40), Na'viteri (Paul Frommer, the creator's, blog) (n = 23), and WikiMedia (n = 19).[5] Participants also referenced fan-made learning tools such as dictionaries, grammars, and workbooks, which are also solely available online (Schreyer, 2015). Therefore, it should be clear that the Na'vi learners are digital citizens in a participatory culture (Jenkins, 1992).

2.2. Why do you study Na'vi?

Participants indicated that they were learning the language because it was fascinating or cool (n = 118), they were fans of the film (n = 93), they were interested in languages and linguistics (n = 77), for fun or as a hobby (n = 65), the language sounded beautiful (n = 40), the community of Na'vi learners was welcoming (n = 34), and it was a learning challenge (n = 30) (Schreyer, 2015). However, there were some individuals, a minority, who chose to learn the language because of the environmental message of the film and the "green ideals" it presented. As one participant shared, "I feel that after watching Avatar, I have become more aware of the environment and the consequences of our choices as human beings on the environment. I have definitely taken precautions to assure that I am doing the least harm to the world as possible." Another participant replied that "the movie did remind me to pay closer attention to my own ideals". Interest in the ideologies of environmentalism promoted in the film was a focus for a few participants. As one participant stated, their reason for learning Na'vi was: "Because (a) *I love the world of the Na'vi people and believe in their ideologies* and (b) I love languages — how they work, why they work, etc. To have both? Perfect" (emphasis added). Another replied that they were learning Na'vi, "as a way of furthering my knowledge of the Avatar universe as a fan, a way of

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[5] For additional details, see Schreyer, 2015.

showing my support *for the ideologies presented in the film by the Na'vi"* (emphasis added).

Questions in the survey also asked participants if they felt they were a part of Na'vi culture[6] and, if so, why? Some members of the community again turned to the focus on the environment as part of cultural knowledge for Na'vi speakers. One participant said:

> For me, the Na'vi culture is being a part of Eywa for Na'vis, The People, or a part Gaia for us, earthlings: *feeling ourselves a part of Nature on our planet, and taking care of it, and of ourselves at the same time.* (emphasis added)

Another Na'vi community member explained their connection to the film in the following way:

> … Many of us were emotionally moved by Avatar's themes, cheesy as they are; *we fear a dystopian future and almost buy into a beautiful fantasy about being closer to nature and living in trees and not generating waste or using fossil fuels for every aspect of our daily lives. Many of us are environmentally aware. We support the idea of an inclusive ethos and would rather welcome than exclude.* Also, it's really, really nerdy. We exult in our nerdiness. The community is incredibly smart — all kinds of smart! We've got engineers, scientists, writers, linguists, maths nerds… and everyone shares their knowledge and we are all richer for it. (emphasis added)

It is clear from this quote that learners of Na'vi are aware of climate emergencies and the importance of climate justice[7] and their entry into language learning was tied to these ideals.

Similarly, this climate justice and environmentalism approach appeared when I asked participants how they thought the Na'vi language would develop in the future. In particular, one participant wrote, "I hope, it may be a language of communication among people around the Earth sharing the *'green' ideas*, the idea of Gaia" (emphasis added), emphasizing the connection here between language, worldview, and inclusion. Similarly, another participant wrote that they believed Na'vi "…will develop as a unique language for international communication. I want Na'vi to be a sacred, spiritual language, language of nature and people." The emphasis here on Na'vi as a language of international communication was also echoed in another participant's comment. They wrote, "[a]ccording to me, Na'vi can become the new Esperanto… A Human language. A bond between all the peoples… Imagine this… Close your eyes… A non-Human language

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[6] For a discussion on culture versus community in the Na'vi context, see Schreyer, 2015.

[7] According to the United Nations Development Programme, "climate justice means putting equity and human rights at the core of decision-making and action on climate change".
See https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/climate-change-matter-justice-heres-why#:~:text=Climate%20justice%20means%20putting%20equity,and%20action%20on%20climate%20change.

becomes THE Human's language…" (ellipses in the original).[8] Another participant stated that they were interested in a language that was spoken "by people — creatures, real or fake — who are true peace keepers". In his definition of ecolinguistics, Stibbe (2015) writes that ecolinguistics aims to "[aid] in the search for new forms of language that inspire people to protect the natural world" (p. 1). These comments from Na'vi speakers led me to question whether learning a constructed language, an entirely new form of language, could enact real social change on issues of environmental and climate justice.

3. *Avatar* and environmentalism

The connections between the movie *Avatar*, the Na'vi people, and environmentalism were immediately apparent following the release of the film.[9] In fact, news articles about the film shortly after its release indicated that director James Cameron "has hailed the message of his film as a lesson for humankind to stop damaging the environment" (*The Telegraph*, 2009).[10] Many early critiques of the film focused on the trope of the Na'vi as the "ecological Indian" (Fritz, 2012). According to one of these pieces:

> Avatar uses the image of the Na'vi and their relationship with nature (constructed as either savage and violent or harmonious and interconnected) to put forward a message of environmentalism. The Na'vi have been constructed to dress, speak, and move like a homogenized Indigenous people (Lutkehaus, 2009), and their struggles against settler colonialism/neo-colonialism are made to seem strikingly similar to those of Indigenous peoples worldwide. (Fritz, 2012, p. 87)

A 2013 edited volume, *Avatar and Nature Spirituality* (Taylor, 2013), covers a range of topics connecting the film to environmentalism, including chapters such as "Avatar: Ecorealism and the Blockbuster Melodrama" (Rust), "Avatar Fandom, Environmentalism, and Nature Religion" (Istoft), and "I See You: Interspecies Empathy and Avatar" (Sideris). To my knowledge, no other paper has looked at the relationship between Na'vi language learning and the draw of environmentalism in the film, which makes the findings of my survey of Na'vi speakers a unique take on this phenomenon. However, discourse about the film did make it into popular culture, particularly the phrase "the Pandora Effect".

A 2010 Urban Dictionary entry defines the Pandora Effect as:

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[8] L. L. Zamenhof created Esperanto in 1887 as an international auxiliary language, "which has spread worldwide with its utopian ideals of shared communication and understanding (Li, 2003; Blanke, 2009; Smith, 2011)" (Schreyer, 2021, p. 331).
[9] A cursory Google Scholar search with the terms *Avatar*, Na'vi, and environment shows 1,890 results. https://scholar.google.ca/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=avatar+na%27vi+and+environment&oq=, accessed July 11th, 2024.
[10] This is but one example of a quote from a news article about the film's message. Many more appeared across the globe.

> A condition causing one to feel a strange mix of emotions (which may include awe, disappointment, giddiness, emptiness, warmth, and most of all depression) after watching James Cameron's Avatar movie. For many it has changed the way they see the world and life in general.
>
> There are several treatments for someone who has the Pandora Effect; go see the movie again and again, watch YouTube videos about Neytiri (or anything Avatar-related), and going to Avatar-Forums.com to find further help… by Eytukan, January 3rd, 2010.[11]

This definition clearly illustrates how the film could impact individuals, particularly in regards to worldview and, interestingly, directs them to Avatar-Forums. Although Learn Na'vi is not specifically listed as one of these forums, the author of this post is using a Na'vi name, Eytukan[12], and we can speculate that they are a potential Na'vi learner, such as those who participated in my survey. The Pandora Effect, and particularly cultural and virtual trauma, were the focus of an article of the same title (Martínez-Falaquina, 2014), which summarizes the success of the film, as well as the environmental issues and issues of Indigenous rights embedded within the narrative. Martínez-Falaquina writes:

> *Avatar* is successful as a spectacular entertainment object, and one that has sold very well. It is precisely by voicing — and selling — contemporary preoccupations that it helps make visible an unfair reality which needs to be considered and, if possible, stopped; namely, the ill-treatment of indigenous peoples and the environment. In this respect, it is undeniable that *Avatar* has made many people think, especially some that would probably not be considering these issues otherwise. But, the movie also — and problematically — succeeds, by means of a simplistic stereotypical and formulaic representation of traumatic events, which allows for a somewhat gratifying feeling for the victims of genocide and ecocide, a self-distancing from the perpetrators of those very real crimes and a related wished-for expiation of colonial guilt. (2014, p. 128)

In sum, *Avatar* as a film clearly has had the potential to influence worldview and ideologies. Individuals pursuing utopia or "an ecotopia" (Martínez-Falaquina, 2014, p. 120) are drawn to this film and the language of the "ecological Indian" (Fritz, 2012) — Na'vi.

4. Utopias and languages

Linguistic relativity[13] or the generalized idea that "language determines or influences

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[11] https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Pandora%20Effect, accessed July 11th, 2024.
[12] Eytukan is a Na'vi Proper Noun, a male leader of the Omatikaya (Blue Flute Clan) (see https://learnnavi.org/navi-vocabulary, accessed July 11th, 2024).
[13] Linguistic relativity is also known as linguistic determinism.

thought" (Leavitt, 2010, p. 2) is a theory that sometimes underlies the belief that you can create a language in order to change the way someone sees the world. As climate justice activist Osprey Orielle Lake writes, "[b]y joining consonants and vowels, we can conjure concepts, actions, realms of existence, mystical imaginings, and a surfeit of emotions into existence" (2024, p. 277). Language creator, L. L. Zamenhof aimed to do just this when he developed the international auxiliary language of Esperanto in 1887 (Li, 2003). For example, Karlander describes Zamenhof's views of Esperanto as "a neutrally human language" that could serve as "a remedy for human discord and strife" (2020, p. 97). Esperanto, then, was imagined as the language of a utopia. As Karlander writes, "[o]n this utopian view of Esperanto, the universal adoption and use of the new language was given the potential to create an equal and peaceful coexistence for all nations of the world" (2020, p. 97). Similarly, the Na'vi language, for those who are learning it for ideals tied to environmentalism, is a language that can bring together all humans in a joint goal to protect the planet.

However, as Leavitt explains, for Sapir, one of the individuals credited with developing the ideas of linguistic determinism (often called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis), language does not necessarily determine thought, but rather "language is part of social reality" (Leavitt, 2010, p. 139). Scholars of the global Esperanto movement have also commented on the social nature of the language and how "Esperanto was only part of a larger philosophical project, which aimed at renewing humankind" (Gobbo, 2017, p. 40), how Esperanto is "a supreme means for achieving social improvement" (Karlander, 2020, p. 97). Li aptly sums up the utopian and social perspectives when he writes:

> To its supporters, Esperanto is an egalitarian alternative to English. It is looked upon as a tool with which to counter 'linguicism' or 'linguistic imperialism'; a means toward the end of what may be termed 'linguistic utopianism'; an envisioned state of human co-existence in a world free from linguistic injustice and inequality, in which linguistic diversity — coupled with biodiversity — characterized by the equal and peaceful co-existence of discrete varieties of languages and their speakers is the natural order of the day. (Li, 2003, p. 39)

This perspective is similar to the perspective of the Na'vi learners who are learning the language due to environmental concerns or "green ideals". In Na'vi learners' own words, they see the language as one that can be shared across the world and become the "language of nature and people" and address both the Earth's environmental degradation and concerns for Indigenous land rights.

Participants in the Na'vi study also wrote about their desire to have a shared community, where they could speak the Na'vi language. This is illustrated in a variety of quotes from participants including the following:

> There is also a much smaller group that would like to change their lives to reflect

the ideals of the Na'vi culture as it was expressed in the film, through creating small, tribal-like villages and communities that live more in touch with nature and break away from most of the modern conveniences we use in the Western world.

I would actually love to see a community created that relied more on the companionship and assistance and hard work of its members in a more eco-friendly fashion, as opposed to the materialistic, corporate-controlled system that the United States has now.

Because of all the love and dedication our community has, [Na'vi] will one day become a fully developed language, ready for being used for day-to-day conversations by virtually everybody on our beautiful planet!

[There] will (eventually) [be] more members in the forum, and possibly official printed learning books, training DVDs, recognition as a language, more websites devoted to learning Na'vi and Avatar, and also possibly an eco-village created by a group of our members.

I hope that there will be enough dedicated people to keep learnnavi.org running. It's not just about the language, but also about the movies, environmental projects, and of course, the friends around the world.[14]

As noted earlier, fans of *Avatar* and particularly those learning the Na'vi language are drawn to the idea of "an ecotopia" (Martínez-Falaquina, 2014, p. 120); a place to gather in a community of like-minded individuals, who work together to protect their environment, perhaps in pursuit of climate justice locally and globally.

5. Climate justice and constructed languages

Turning to the idea of climate justice, Fine and Love-Nichols examine how "climate injustice intersects meaningfully with linguistic oppression" (2021, p. 461). In their paper, they describe how sociolinguistics can play a role in climate justice and climate activism and they put forth these ideas in a research and teaching agenda, which includes:

(a) a focus on interactional context, medium, and genre; (b) contextually grounded analyses of identity, style, affect, and stancetaking; (c) ethnographic and long-range studies to complement short-term experimental studies; and (d) a critical consciousness of climate communication as embedded in relations of sociopolitical power. (2021, p. 457)

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[14] Quotes adjusted for grammatical accuracy.

In his hopeful response to the dialogue, Maliseet scholar Bernard Perley comments that a reclamation of Indigenous languages, free of colonial ideologies about the land and climate-related terms would allow for new ontologies about the state of the world (Perley, 2021). But could there be an additional way? Could individuals who participate in climate-aware language use, such as the use of the Na'vi language, spread their environmental ideologies to others in their networks as language, and ideological, brokers? As Eckert and Wenger (2005, p. 587) write:

> Brokers are people who span structural holes, mediating loose ties… They provide reasonably strong links between otherwise separate networks and thus are in a position to spread information or goods between these networks… In order for a person to be a broker, there must be a demand for resources across the structural hole that they span, and they must actually deal in those resources.

Discourse from environmental movements often focuses on the ways that one person can make a difference to climate change and to the current global climate crisis. For example, an article from a website on Crowdsourcing Sustainability titled "Climate change: Can one person really make a difference?" argues that "our everyday actions **really do** make a difference in the fight against climate change for a few reasons: 1) The size of an individual's footprint is **mindboggling**; 2) The micro dictates the macro; and 3) The ripple effect: we are a **highly** social species."[15] In sum, humans have a large impact on climate through their environmental footprint, so small changes can have a large impact, including impact on other people.

Recently, scholars in climate science and psychology have come to call this one-on-one impact, particularly in regards to climate activism, the Greta Thunberg Effect (Jung et al., 2020; Sabherwal et al., 2021; Haugseth & Smeplass, 2023; and Salerno, 2023). For instance, in their article, Sabherwal et al. indicate that "…findings suggest that young public figures like Greta Thunberg may motivate collective action across the U.S. public, but their effect may be stronger among those with a shared political ideology" (2021, p. 321). Research such as this makes me wonder about the local, often individual, impact of Na'vi speaking and the green ideals embedded within the language, but also what would happen if a public figure, such as Greta Thunberg, also expressed interest in the Na'vi language alongside her climate activism.

Beyond my interest in language and climate justice brokers, who might bring the Na'vi language to wider networks, other climate justice activists and scholars have been thinking about the role of language and environmental worldview. In her book, *The Story Is in Our Bones: How Worldviews and Climate Justice Can Remake a World in Crisis,* climate activist Orielle Lake writes about the role of Indigenous languages and the embedded knowledge within them, but also her interest in a new language, perhaps a constructed one, which would lead

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[15] See https://crowdsourcingsustainability.org/climate-change-can-one-person-really-make-a-difference.

to an ecotopian worldview. In the words of Orielle Lake:

> Language is foundational in influencing and informing our worldview and the way we imagine, experience, and actualize the world around us. I am particularly interested in how we can redevelop an Earth-loving language that respects nature and the staggering and awe-inspiring reality of existence itself — a language that can hold the multivalent auspicious nature of our living Earth; a decolonized, anti-racist language of equity and care; a language whose very syntax and timbre convey the remarkable and ancient kin relationship within the web of life; a sumptuous multidimensional language that those of us speaking modern languages can employ to share our histories, cosmologies, and traditions; a language of animacy and enchantment that can knit us to the land, grounding us to a specific place and opening our hearts and minds to the aliveness of the world and our love for nature. (2024, pp. 277–278)

Here again we see the ideas of linguistic relativity, constructed language ideologies and social realities as the goal of new languages at a transnational level, across borders, and shared amongst humanity.

6. The future of Na'vi

Earlier in this paper, I posed the following questions: With *Avatar 2*'s release in December 2022, have new Na'vi learners turned to the "green ideals" of Pandora? Can the Na'vi language be an effective tool for putting ideals into action — individually, locally, and globally? *Avatar 2* was titled *The Way of Water* (2022) and it was also a multilingual movie (Lambert, 2023), including English, some Na'vi dialogue, and a Na'vi sign language. However, Lambert's analysis of the film, in comparison to the original *Avatar*, illustrates how times have changed, both in the world of the film and in the real world. Citing Potter (2019, p. 9), Lambert explains that "the avatar[16] as used in the first film is a technological means to reconnect the Human with Nature" (Lambert, 2023, p. 80). However, in *The Way of Water*, as humans plan to take over Pandora as a replacement homeland, technology becomes a threat to nature, rather than a way for humans to connect with it.[17] This shift in environmental ideology in the film also has the potential to shift how Na'vi learners view the Na'vi language. Without a further study of Na'vi speakers, however, it would be difficult

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[16] Avatars in the film are the created Na'vi bodies that are driven by humans through a technological connection. These are used to allow humans to learn about the Na'vi with the intention that humans will eventually capture the resources of Pandora.

[17] However, the films were also made using solar power and other forms of sustainable power — building on the green ideals seen in the Na'vi community. See https://www.ecopreneurist.com/solar-panels/avatar-2-going-to-be-powered-by-solar-film-studios-that-is/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CLEI%20was%20determined%20to%20harness,as%20energy%20efficient%20as%20possible.

to tell how this change in ethos in the film has impacted the language ideologies of those Na'vi learners who were originally driven by the "green ideals" of the language, as presented in the first film.

Lambert's analysis of the multilingualism in the film illustrates an additional divide — beyond the change in the use of technology. In *The Way of Water*, the original Na'vi constructed language is used sparingly (Lambert, 2023) and the use of the newly constructed Na'vi sign language illustrates "a reinstatement of a linguistic divide" (p. 76). The sign language is the language of the water Na'vi (the Metkayina clan as opposed to the original Omatikaya clan from the first film), who use a dialect of the original Na'vi language[18], but who also sign to communicate with the *tulkun*, whale-like creatures. Lambert explains that this use of Na'vi sign language to speak to the tulkun illustrates a closer connection to nature for the water Na'vi (2023). How then might this sign language impact those among the Na'vi learners who were drawn to the environmental ethic of the original spoken language?

The Na'vi sign constructed language was developed by deaf actor CJ Jones[19], who created over 350 signs for *Avatar 2* and the upcoming *Avatar 3*.[20] However, it is unclear how many fans of the film, or speakers of the original Na'vi language, are learning the new sign language because there are fewer resources available for learning the sign language. For instance, while there is a playlist of CJ Jones showing some of the signs on YouTube[21], a news article from January 18th, 2023, on the Learn Na'vi website says:

> Since this sign language is an entity unto its own and not a spin-off or altered version of the spoken Na'vi language, a separate companion website for it is under construction. When completed, we will post a notice here in the LearnNavi.org News tab. Stay tuned for that![22]

As of summer 2024, no news about this companion website has appeared in the News tab. Does this mean the "green ideals" of the sign language, which Lambert (2023) argues is a language more closely connected to nature than the spoken language, have not translated over to fans? Might this be because the sign language is a little too alien to a probable majority hearing set of learners, who perhaps prefer the spoken language as a default? It is likely that both the spoken Na'vi and the signed Na'vi will appear in the upcoming *Avatar 3* (set for release on December 19th, 2025)[23], so perhaps only time will tell how this new language will impact Na'vi learners' ideals.

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[18] https://learnnavi.org/news, accessed July 15, 2024

[19] https://screenrant.com/avatar-2-navi-sign-language-set-photo, accessed July 15th, 2024.

[20] https://james-camerons-avatar.fandom.com/wiki/Na%27vi_Sign_Language, accessed July 15th, 2024.

[21] https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9R-Yt3TTkd5J582DdQwVzIDAneQvzCzY, accessed July 15th, 2024.

[22] https://learnnavi.org/news, accessed July 15th, 2024.

[23] https://people.com/movies/avatar-3-everything-to-know, accessed July 15th, 2024.

7. Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have been attempting to answer the question of whether or not the Na'vi language can be an effective tool for putting "green ideals" or ideologies of environmentalism into action — individually, locally, and globally. In 2011, for certain learners of Na'vi, using the language provided them with a window into a utopian world where individuals live in harmony with nature. As one Na'vi learner said, after watching *Avatar*, and subsequently learning Na'vi, they became "more aware of the environment and the consequences of our choices as human beings on the environment". For these Na'vi learners, learning the language provided them the ability to change their actions here on Earth and connect to a community of like-minded individuals. Through analysis of Na'vi language learners, therefore, in this paper, I have argued that we can see a form of ecolinguistics in practice, where "new forms of language … [can] inspire people to protect the natural world" (Stibbe, 2015, p. 1). In this paper, I also argue for the possibility that these Na'vi learners became brokers of the language, and the ethic of environmentalism, to others in their networks. Perhaps there was a Neytiri Effect[24], similar to the Greta Thunberg Effect, where one Na'vi speaker impacted how other people see the world through their use of a new language.

Finally, as I write this conclusion, in the summer of 2024, another wildfire has broken out in the Okanagan valley; it was "held" quickly, but climate change, and the need for climate justice, continues to be imperative across the globe. While it is difficult to know for certain, in my own ecotopia, I like to imagine that Na'vi learners, set in green ideals, have been helping to change the world, and might continue to change the world, with one word, one action, at a time.

Acknowledgments

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[24] Neytiry is the Na'vi character who teaches the human avatar of Jake how to speak the Na'vi language.

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