

Ectostory Interaction: The Confluence of Reception, Fandom, and Cognitive Flexibility

In speaking Klingon, playing Quidditch, purchasing Wonka Bars, and attending Spinal Tap concerts, we foreground how often we interact with originally fictional entities as though they were real. I call such activities ectostory interactions – as they occur outside the story wherein the fictional entities originate – and argue that they reside at the intersection of two ontological levels: the texts’ level of fiction, and the level of actuality – what we often refer to as the “real world” – wherein we receive the text. Readers/audiences must have the cognitive flexibility to access both ontologies simultaneously in order to fully appreciate a synontological entity such as an actual, non-Hogwarts school’s Quidditch team.

Ectostory interactions are partially but not fully explained by reception and audience theories. Reception and audience theories are concerned with the meaning received and influence experienced by readers/audiences. I, on the other hand, am interested in how and why readers/audiences come to *interact* with fictional entities ectostory. In these cases, it is not so much a question of how readers/audiences are influenced, but rather what kind of machinations are involved in their interactions with entities that originate in fiction.

Indeed, an ectostory interaction requires an active component – one we see in fan activities – and thereby involves a confluence of text reception and fan behavior. Consider, for instance, the originally fictional elvish language Sindarin. Readers/audiences are deeply influenced by Tolkien’s narratives, and fans of his work interact with elements thereof – such as Sindarin – ectostory, as though they were real, producing and consuming further texts to that end: there are now grammar books and dictionaries of Sindarin, university courses in Sindarin, translations of Sindarin, and a growing number of Sindarin speakers. The reception of and fan participation in Sindarin conflate in ectostory interaction.

The interaction between the text and the reader/audience in this case and many like it prompts us to explore synontological phenomena by considering reception and fandom studies in tandem.