

JOUR479L/The Art of Interviewing
Final Project: Andrew Miller Profile
Fourth Draft
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Deep in the heart of Virginia, a slim, bookish man sits in front of a computer in his apartment. By day, he is a support worker in the Palisades Restaurant in Eggleston, Virginia, holding down a steady job at the edges of Appalachia. In the evening and in his spare time, Andrew Miller has another job: he translates familiar works of literature into the Klingon language from the “Star Trek” universe.

So far, he has translated two of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories, “A Scandal in Bohemia” and “The Red-Headed League,” into Klingon and made these works available for sale. And while he’s keeping the details close to the vest, he’s begun working on his own work, complete with original characters.

All this begets a question: Why? Miller, the son of government employees, grew up in the greater Washington, D.C./Northern Virginia area, spending his formative years in Italy, India, Egypt, and Japan. In the process, he became what he calls a “third-culture kid,” taking on new traits of the cultures he explored while adapting to change as needed. Throughout these years, he became fascinated with linguistics, which he saw as bridges between communities.

“It unifies people, because there's no human language that any other human being can't learn,” said Miller.

Miller would take this idea with him to the College of William and Mary in Virginia. There, he dove into linguistics and literature classes while absorbing what he dubbed some of the best science fiction TV shows and movies of a generation.

“I grew up as a young person in the 90s, primarily, and science fiction was everywhere on TV. You couldn't escape from it. It was good. It was way more mainstream than it is now, with shows like ‘Earth: Final Conflict’ and ‘Babylon 5’ and ‘The X-Files...’”

In his twenties, Miller would meet his hero, Marc Okrand, who created the Klingon language for the “Star Trek” franchise and helped to change his life. Miller had dropped out of William and Mary and was experiencing depression. He was “working in a bookstore and floating along” when he noticed a book titled “In the Land of Invented Languages,” by a linguist named Arika Okrent.

Miller reached out to Okrent, expressing his fondness for the Klingon language. She wrote back and encouraged Miller to go to Philadelphia the following summer to meet with Klingon speakers at the qep’a, or grand meeting of the Klingon Language Institute.

“And so I went, and I met everybody, and Marc was there too. And it turns out he lives in DC, and I lived in

Northern Virginia at the time. So we started hanging out.”

Okrand, who earned his doctorate in linguistics from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1977, went on to create the Klingon language. His work began with the sounds and syllables used in “Star Trek: The Motion Picture,” working with actors such as James Doohan (who played Scotty) to develop the language’s guttural tones. He later created functional dialogue for “Star Trek III: The Search for Spock,” and published “The Klingon Dictionary.”

By the time Miller met him, Okrand was also the President of the Board of Directors of the Washington Shakespeare Company and provided Miller with complimentary tickets to its productions.

The group would go out to dinner after the shows. Okrand’s and Miller’s friendship deepened, with Okrand later involving Miller in theatrical events. In one instance, Miller was invited to perform scenes from “Hamlet” as the character of Laertes for two fundraisers. Miller was later offered opportunities to share the stage with theatrical legends such as George Takei and Stephen Fry. Okrand eventually made Miller’s geeky dreams come true by having him participate in a Klingon opera.

At first intimidated by the idea of meeting his hero for the first time, things soon settled down.

“I was like, ‘Oh, that's him. That's the guy.’ And so I went up, and I called him, ‘Dr. Okrand,’ and he said, ‘You shouldn't call me that.’ And I said, ‘What should I call you?’ He said, ‘You should call me Marc.’”

"Our conversations ranged from Klingon and language shop talk to virtually any topic," said Miller. "He's a very worldly, educated professional person, and is probably the most easy-going, unassuming, and most genuine human being I've ever known."

Miller also described Okrand as having a Zen aspect, despite his fame within the science fiction and geek community.

“He's a chill bodhisattva.... He grew up in LA so he knows what fame can do to people, and he's never let his own fame go to his head,” Miller said.

“One of the reasons I chose Sherlock Holmes to translate in the first place is that everybody already knows what that is.” said Miller. Miller explained that he initially started the process of writing the first Sherlock Holmes story, “A Scandal in Bohemia,” in 2009, with Okrand’s encouragement, after receiving feedback from other Klingon speakers. Miller, who had already created a basic draft, began continually adding to it.

“The Klingon community kept adding words,” said Miller. The Klingon-speaking community, as well as the larger conlang (constructed language community), constantly debates which words should be included in the Klingon

dictionary before adding to it. (The dictionary does exist - you can find it online at www.klingon.wiki.)

Miller, then involved with writing the book, would hold friendly debates with Klingon speakers and translators online.

“We just had a little discussion about how do you say ‘sandstone.’ Can you combine the word for ‘sand’ and the word for ‘stone,’ and you get sandstone?,” said Miller while laughing. “It’s like a little yeshiva where you’re always arguing about what constitutes what.”

When Miller found himself stumped (such as translating “to be comfortable” (“baw”) with “to be stuck,” (“Dly”) where there are subtle differences between the two verbs), he would consult Okrand.

“I would ask him questions about the grammar,” he said. “And, he would tell me, ‘Oh, this particular grammatical structure originated from this particular problem that I had to solve on set with Leonard Nimoy or William Shatner.’”

Once the translation of the Sherlock Holmes stories got underway, Miller would politely argue with an editor friend in Germany as to how the text should be written and what parts were open for interpretation.

For Douglas Miller, Andrew Miller’s father, his son’s progression to this place-through linguistics and writing-made sense, even if it was unconventional. “He

was a savant with languages from the time he was a tiny kid. When we lived in Rome from when he was two to five, he picked up what I'd call 'playground Italian' just from playing with other children," said Miller.

"When he was four, I'd find him in the mornings—not watching cartoons, but memorizing foreign alphabets. He taught himself the Arabic alphabet from a book. It was unbelievable."

Miller also noted his son's progression with languages as he grew up. He reminisced about how, when Andrew was in high school, and he himself was stationed in Bahrain, Andrew sent along a thousand-word vocabulary sheet and 20 pages of grammar for a new language for the two to communicate in. The level of detail surprised the elder Miller. He expected his son to create a few dozen nouns and verbs. Instead, Andrew had created the beginnings of an entirely new language.

Miller, his voice ringing with pride over the Zoom call, described how his son Andrew is in the right place at the right time. Andrew now knows the right people where language, creation, and linguistics are concerned. "For him to have a close friend in Marc Okrand—the man who created Klingon—and to be part of the process of adding new words to the language is thrilling for him," he said.

Douglas Miller doesn't look at Andrew's interests and accomplishments—including the fact that he translated two classic Sherlock Holmes stories into Klingon—as a

distraction or an impediment. He sees them as evidence of what his son is capable of.

“My fantasy is that he gets hired by the movie industry to help create languages for new films. He’d be amazing at it,” said Douglas Miller. “He’s more than capable of sitting at a writer’s table for the next ‘Game of Thrones.’ He has the historical knowledge and the painstaking research skills to create an entire world.”

One of Andrew Miller’s readers was Stuart D. Washington, a neuroscientist living in Washington, D.C. He sees Miller’s work as important.

“The sky’s the limit. I mean, what he can learn from a language or from correcting or speaking a language like Klingon and apply it to original ideas, sounds incredible,” Washington said.

Miller, in turn, has been helping Washington create a constructed language for a race of lizard-like people within a science fiction story of his own that he’s been writing for more than 20 years.

Washington also believes that Miller, if properly motivated, could do something incredible with both his translated and original work.

“It doesn’t need to be a Sherlock Holmes story. It could be an Andrew Miller story...I think there is such potential for him to do something that’s just out of this world,” Washington said.

Another Miller reader is Rick Terpstra. For Terpstra, a high school English teacher from Pennsylvania, Miller's work came as a wonderful surprise. Terpstra, whose custom Pennsylvania license plate reads "KHAAAAN" after the "Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan," has long seen himself as a science fiction fan as well as a fan of English literature and translation, and appreciates the effort Miller has put into his work.

"I remember when I took Old English literature, my professor handed me a book, a dictionary, and a grammar guide, and said, 'Have fun with it,'" recalled Terpstra. "And it's a lot of painstaking work; there are a lot of choices that go into translation."

Terpstra also pointed out that translation-based works like Miller's can add to the volume of what's available to a series' fans.

"I think it makes the fandom richer...an exercise like this is really interesting because it forces the translator, and by extension, the reader, to engage with familiar works in a new way," Terpstra said.

For Miller, the work continues. Although somewhat shy by nature, he occasionally hits the road to give talks and panels at various colleges and universities, though he's hesitant to attend conventions to promote his work. The money is nominal outside of the occasional speaking fee at a college or university. He admits that this hobby has cost him more than he's made so far, but that he may

break even someday.

Still, the feedback he's received for his work has been overwhelmingly positive. "For every 100 people, there are three that are going to rake you over the coals for having a weird hobby. That leaves 97 people who know about language, or know about the history of literature, or just are fans of the show, and they think that what you're doing is awesome."

What about the time he's put into research, translation and writing? Where does he see his own contribution to Star Trek and its fandom? When asked this, Miller replied, "To me, it's sort of the crown jewel of science fiction. It started out not being real, and then decades of love poured in by passionate people made it real. And that's very hopeful and inspiring to me, and it's why I've given so much of my time to it."

Miller is now working on his own original fiction. He declined to offer specifics, but allowed that they're "substantially finished," and emphasized that a translation can take at least six to nine months.

"For all the people out there who want to do something cool and also niche... be prepared to work for it. Be prepared to do your research and be patient, and know that you will have to make sacrifices for it," said Miller when asked what he'd tell anyone who wanted to follow in his footsteps, translating or creating something new from a constructed language.

“Know that even if the work you're doing is not understood by anybody right now, as long as you have the capacity to be understood, someone, somewhere, someday, will understand you.”