

'What is toast?'

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'What is toast?' Language and society in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

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ABSTRACT


With its depiction of a 'word man' as the sole survivor of the human race, *Oryx and Crake* offers a unique perspective on the correlation between the death of a people and the death of their language: Jimmy/Snowman's narrative perspective centres the role of language at the tipping point of society. This paper undertakes a close reading of extinction (of humankind and of human language) in the novel, using this to inform a broader conceptual study of meaning-making in social systems and the role of language in memory. The oscillation throughout the novel between memories of a peopled world and the post-apocalyptic present day facilitates discussion of how language functions in both individual and social settings, such as fashioning memory through acts of naming and renaming, and the experience of shared language as a form of intimacy.

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Introduction

Oryx and Crake follows the journey of a man—known as Snowman in the present, and as Jimmy in narrative flashbacks to his life pre-apocalypse—who lives among genetically-engineered humanoid creatures ('Crakers'). Snowman is, for the majority of the novel, presumed to be the sole human survivor of an extinction-level pandemic event. As a character deeply interested in language, its purpose and its meaning, Jimmy/Snowman's narrative perspective centres the role of language at the tipping point of human extinction.¹ Believing himself to be the last surviving human, Snowman witnesses the death throes of civilisation in general alongside those of his native language.²

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I refer to language death throughout this paper in sociolinguistic terms, to signify the extinction of a native-speaking community.³ Echoing the fate of many languages throughout history, language death in *Oryx and Crake* is the direct result of genocide.⁴ The apocalyptic events of *Oryx and Crake* have implications for every human language in existence at the time of the pandemic, but it is the death of English which Atwood explores through Snowman's narrative perspective and his interactions with the Crakers. The extent to which English 'survives' in these conditions is extremely limited: the language is reduced to a sole native speaker and given the new sociocultural context of the Crakers' small community, with many of its referents transformed or else destroyed by the post-apocalyptic landscape. In their article on 'Endangered Languages', Low et al. describe the inseparability of language from its native culture, stating that 'language death entails two significant [and, they argue, intertwined] losses: the loss of cultural heritage and a unique system of thought expression'.⁵ Snowman has experienced these losses acutely. Although the Crakers are fluent speakers of the English required by their limited experience of the world within the Paradise compound, their initial inability to understand colloquialisms, abstraction, and references to anything of the pre-catastrophic world nevertheless places Snowman—at least for the majority of the novel—as the witness of the death of language.

It is eventually revealed that Snowman is not, in fact, alone in surviving the pandemic. I nevertheless refer throughout this paper to Snowman as the last surviving human, in order to highlight how the conceit of the lone survivor is used in the early chapters of *Oryx and Crake*. In this part of the novel, language death appears to be beyond doubt and its extinction imminent. It is only once the Crakers' understanding of language and storytelling begins to develop under Snowman's mentorship, and Snowman finds evidence of other human survivors—in other words, when language becomes a shared system once again—that this threat is eventually replaced with the hope of preserving both language and civilisation.

This paper explores Atwood's presentation of language death as a result of a culture's extinction in *Oryx and Crake*. To do so, I first examine the role of language in the novel in terms of both its inherently social nature (in light of the reduction of language to a single native speaker) and as a form of representation and cultural preservation.

Language as a social system

Even the briefest consideration of language quickly points to the vast array of underlying—and primarily social—factors which affect how language comes to have meaning, from the interplay of multiple words within language systems, to the context in which that language exists. The very existence of

the field of sociolinguistics is a testament to this, along with the long history of academic literature dedicated to the social nature of language, which I draw upon in the analysis which follows below. The meaning of language therefore involves fluctuations according to the evolving sociocultural landscape in which it operates, such as the addition of words (e.g. the addition of 'smartphone' to incorporate the existence of a new technology into language), the evolution of the meaning of existing words (e.g. a general morphing of the meaning of 'smart' as a result of this), and the fading of other words as they become obsolete or pass out of fashion (e.g. the subsumption of the verb 'tape' in favour of 'record' as prominent technologies change). Natural language systems consist of words that adapt over time according to their use.⁶ In her essay on 'Variation, meaning and social change', Penelope Eckert takes this further, arguing that language 'is not just a system that *happens* to change, but a system whose change is central to its semiotic function': that language is adaptable to its social context suggests it is a social system.⁷

Oryx and Crake disrupts the normative structures of society—and, consequently, of language—by considering how the function of language changes when the context of that language is reduced from a vast community to an individual. Although the Crakers can communicate with Snowman, in the immediate aftermath of Crake's genocide Snowman is the only surviving native speaker—the only person fluent not only in the functional use of English, but in its abstractions. Studies of language in *Oryx and Crake* hinge on the apocalyptic collapse of society to demonstrate a *before* and *after* effect of language spoken in community and out of it; language is suddenly reduced from a shared social system to an intimate means of preserving something perceived as lost.

The sudden reduction of language from a social system to something so isolated suggests that, to some extent, Snowman's language has become briefly private. 'Private language' is a concept Ludwig Wittgenstein presents as an impossibility in *Philosophical Investigations*.⁸ According to his thought experiment, the privacy of language would require that another person cannot reasonably understand the language; that the very structure defining its vocabulary is by nature inaccessible to others because it refers only to the immediate sensations of the individual. Wittgenstein suggests that such privacy is inherently impossible, that language is social by nature. To some extent, however, the character of Snowman in *Oryx and Crake* offers some possibility of private language. Although the language Snowman speaks is historically rooted in a shared social system, the destruction of human civilisation has left him with a sense that language is now his alone. Snowman finds it impossible to communicate with the Crakers, despite their proficiency in the English language, as they do not understand any concepts and experiences with which they are unfamiliar and lack the

social context required to understand his words. One such concept is ‘toast’, which Snowman recognises they will not be able to access due to the complexity and obsolescence of ‘electricity,’ ‘bread,’ ‘flour,’ and ‘cooking,’ an understanding of each of which must precede an understanding of ‘toast’.⁹

This leaves Snowman with something like a private language: a language rooted in the context of a pre-apocalyptic humanity that he perceives as inherently inaccessible to the Crakers, despite their ability to communicate. Rather than a private language generated from scratch by an individual, then, as Wittgenstein imagines, this depicts Snowman’s language as having been suddenly reduced from a social context to a private one by the apparent extinction of his race. This is, ultimately, only a brief glimpse at private language: language might persist somewhat privately, but its meaning still originates from a social context; likewise, that *Oryx and Crake* is a textual object points toward its reader as a repository for all the language that Snowman is trying to preserve. Broadly speaking, the social nature of language is interrupted by genocide, briefly hinges on Snowman as a lone native speaker, and then sees a slow revival as the Crakers and other human survivors offer a return to the social function of language. By recognising that Snowman perceives language as private during this middle interlude, the reader begins to see its reduction through genocide as a form of language death.

This can be read through the persistent nostalgia for societies past in *Oryx and Crake*, which is always shown through Jimmy/Snowman’s view of language. While the division of *Oryx and Crake* into pre- and post-apocalyptic narratives seems naturally to lend itself to readings of nostalgia for the society of a pre-apocalyptic world, a close reading of language in the novel reveals instead the permeation of this sentiment even in Jimmy’s younger years, originating long before the apocalypse—rather than caused by it. Jimmy devotes himself to the study of language despite his society’s disdain for this pursuit, obsessing over the preservation of old words and old literature: before the pandemic, he hoards obsolete words from previous decades with a reflective nostalgia; after the pandemic, this habit takes on a greater sense of urgency, as he begins to feel a postapocalyptic duty to preserve something of humanity. Just as Atwood presents civilisation as already under threat of collapse prior to the pandemic, she foreshadows in parallel the death of language.

Nostalgia is intrinsically linked to the dystopian setting of the novel and Jimmy’s mythologising through language of the past: a nostalgia which, as Boym defines it, seeks to ‘obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time and space’.¹⁰ Jimmy’s habit of ‘ferreting out arcane lore’ is impelled by ‘stubbornness; resentment, even’ because ‘the system had filed him among the rejects, and what he was studying was considered—at the decision-making levels, the levels of real power—an archaic

waste of time.’¹¹ The origin of Jimmy’s collection of old words, then, is always tied to an acute awareness of its futility according to others—a futility only magnified by the disintegration of the world around him. Before humanity is driven to extinction in the novel, language and literature are considered worthless pursuits in a science-centric capitalist society: an exaggeration of the gradual devaluation of the humanities in the real world. ‘The arts’ as such are long dead in Atwood’s novel, and although Jimmy’s humanities degree is still taught, its only value is located in his qualification in ‘spin’: the study of language for its potential use in marketing campaigns. Despite—and indeed because of—it being an ‘archaic waste of time,’ Jimmy seeks out obsolete words and phrases from a time before his own ‘of a precision and suggestiveness that no longer had a meaningful application in today’s world’.¹² Atwood centres the potential of language as a means of cultural preservation because of its representation of the social structures of anglophone societies. Jimmy’s collection of old language is always tinged with an acknowledgement that it is ultimately a futile act, as he cannot maintain or preserve a language alone.

Jimmy initially takes pleasure in being the only person in a conversation to understand his own linguistic and literary references, peppering outdated words into conversation, making up books, and delighting in the fact that nobody around him notices—emulating in adulthood the joy he found in introducing the invented word ‘cork-nut’ to his schoolmates.¹³ Later, when writing advertisements for AnooYoo, the privacy of his inventions depresses him because it only proves that ‘no one at AnooYoo was capable of appreciating how clever he had been’.¹⁴ The disinterest of his colleagues removes the joy of social intimacy from Jimmy’s inventive use of language and transforms it into a mark of his isolation.

When Jimmy is further removed from an understanding audience by the destruction of human society, all language quickly comes to take on a similar quality of isolation that his obsolete and invented words once had. With Snowman as the only present member of Anglophonic society, the pandemic is the great equaliser of supposedly useful terms such as ‘toast’ and ‘regroup’, and Jimmy’s stores of words that were already obsolete, such as ‘norn’ and ‘pibroch’.¹⁵ Early in the text, Snowman recognises that ‘When they’re gone out of his head, these words, they’ll be gone, everywhere, forever. As if they had never been.’¹⁶ As a young man, Jimmy felt a desire to hold onto cultures of the past by internalising words and phrases that had been forgotten by others; after the apocalypse, this intensifies into the weight of responsibility for preserving humanity itself through the recollection of a language that is dying with its people. Andrew Tate, writing of Snowman’s role as a post-apocalyptic storyteller, describes Snowman’s ‘desire to “hang on [to] the words” [as] a kind of godless prayer’ and an act of ‘linguistic

consecration': phrases which emphasise Snowman's sense of the significance of language in this period of its apparent privacy.¹⁷

The success of language as a means for preservation in this novel—and across the *MaddAddam* trilogy—is less the focus of the narrative than the importance of making it such a means. Jimmy/Snowman's conscious engagement with the language of the past holds the sole hope of society's preservation, and provides a foundation from which he is able to consider its loss. For the majority of the novel, this is represented through the privacy of Jimmy's language as a tool for personal reflection and internalised preservation—'like having his own baby teeth in a box'.¹⁸ Like any private memory, Snowman believes that the language of humanity, including his stores of rare words, will die with him.

As *Oryx and Crake* nears its conclusion and the presence of other humans is made known, however, Snowman begins to consider language as a tool for continuation. Before he leaves to find the other survivors, Snowman wonders about the possibility of doing 'some social interaction' with the Crakers, to 'Help them invent the wheel' or 'Pass on all my words'—a notion he returns to immediately before his departure with an added weight of responsibility: 'He should say something to them ... Leave them with a few words to remember.'¹⁹ In both of these instances, Jimmy is, for the first time in the novel, no longer sure of the futility of language, but rather struck by its potential. At the point of Snowman's departure, language is at the centre of his offering, showing the transformation of his focus on language from a meaningless habit to duty to his lost community. Alone, Snowman cannot sustain a language beyond the moment of his own death. With the promise of community, however, there is renewed purpose in the acts of preservation offered by language.

Species extinction and language death

The consequences of Crake's bioterrorism are most immediately made apparent via Snowman's physical surroundings. Devoid of other humans and littered with the rubble of the pre-pandemic world, this is a landscape familiar to dystopian—and particularly post-apocalyptic—fiction. What is striking about *Oryx and Crake* is that Atwood constructs this image of a dying species (where Snowman is the last *surviving* human) with a focus on language (where Snowman is the last *speaking* human). Atwood emphasises throughout the text the concurrent extinctions of humankind and of the languages of humankind: with the narrative perspective of a 'word man' living in a post-apocalyptic world, we witness the end of humanity through the death of language.

Words and phrases from the past are markers of the end-of-the-world dystopia of this novel, scattered through the narrative in the same way

that abandoned buildings and human corpses are. Madison Gretzky describes this as words and phrases in the novel being ‘ripped from their proper context and set adrift. Like Snowman, too, they are out of place in this new post-apocalyptic world’.²⁰ The centrality of language to Atwood’s construction of a post-apocalyptic landscape is made apparent in the opening chapter of *Oryx and Crake*. The first chapter of the novel creates a dystopian atmosphere with vague descriptions of Snowman’s physical environment (‘reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble’), gestures towards his isolation (‘Nobody nowhere knows what time it is’), and ends with a troubling illustration of the death of language.²¹ After Snowman’s parenthesised wondering, ‘jute plantations. (What was jute?)’ sets out the use of obscure language as something of the past, Atwood succinctly illustrates the fall of human society with a moment of forgetfulness: “‘In view of the mitigating,” [Snowman] says. He finds himself standing with his mouth open, trying to remember the rest of the sentence.”²² Here, Atwood sets out the slow death of language that we see play out in the novel. Both ‘jute’ and ‘In view of the mitigating’ are notable for their rarity in day-to-day use. Snowman’s inability to remember what jute ‘was’ or once referred to, and the unspoken significance of the complete phrase, ‘In view of the mitigating *circumstances*’ demonstrates his social isolation. As the last person who understands pre-apocalyptic human concepts such as jute plantations and rhetorical configurations, the failure of Snowman’s memory signals the last time these terms will ever be used. His attempts at recall are therefore a way of marking the incremental diminishment of the human vocabulary, because this vocabulary has been reduced to his own private store of words.

This is a concept made explicit as the novel goes on. Remembering the word ‘*Mesozoic*’ (emphasis in original) but unable to recall its meaning, Snowman observes that ‘This is happening too much lately, this dissolution of meaning, the entries on his cherished wordlists drifting off into space.’²³ Snowman later ‘has a vision of the top of his neck, opening up into his head like a bathroom drain. Fragments of words are swirling down it, in a liquid he realizes is his dissolving brain.’²⁴ Each of these instances offers an image of the disappearance of language; language lost to the individual symbolic of pieces of a society lost forever. Snowman’s frequent oscillations between remembering words and phrases and forgetting their meanings is a repeating pattern throughout the text which brings language to the fore as a signifier of extinction: the reader is made to witness the end of a species through the end of its languages.

Katherine Snyder notes that the pandemic which seems to eradicate humankind in *Oryx and Crake* is simply the final catalyst for an already-oncoming extinction, foreshadowed by—among other things—the popularity of a computer game, *Extinctathon*, which catalogues those species of

animal already extinct.²⁵ It is fitting, then, that the use of the death of language as a symbol for the death of humankind also precedes the pandemic. In perhaps the most sharply ironic passage in *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy encounters a household of conceptual artists whom he derisively recalls had claimed that ‘the human experiment was doomed’ from the moment agriculture was invented (‘first to gigantism due to a maxed-out food supply, and then to extinction’) and had also named the ‘main by-products’ of human society as ‘corpses and rubble’.²⁶ Jimmy’s mocking of the artists is read through the lens of Snowman’s present existence in a world which is, indeed, defined by human corpses and rubble, in which humankind is all but extinct. This preoccupation with extinction suffuses Snowman’s memory of Amanda’s ‘Vulture Sculptures’ art project:

The idea was to take a truckload of large dead-animal parts to vacant fields or the parking lots of abandoned factories and arrange them in the shapes of words, wait until the vultures had descended and were tearing them apart, then photograph the whole scene from a helicopter ... Vulturizing brought [the words] to life, was her concept, and then it killed them.²⁷

This description of the vulturization of words and bodies together in ‘abandoned’ and ‘vacant’ spaces foreshadows—retrospectively, as it is told in analepsis—the un-peopled post-pandemic landscape in which Snowman lives. The bringing together of the figurative death of language with the actual death and decay of animal bodies points to the broader symbolic correlation between the breakdown of signification and the dying-out of human society in the text.

Language and meaning-making

The relationship between a representation and the object it represents—and particularly between a *linguistic* representation and the object it represents—has long been a subject of debate among scholars. Alfred Korzybski, in developing the field of general semantics, highlighted the abstract nature of language with his assertion that ‘the word is not the thing’.²⁸ This is a sentiment also expressed by René Magritte’s painting, *The Treachery of Images*, which famously accompanies a visual representation of a pipe with the words, ‘*Ceci n’est pas une pipe*’ (‘This is not a pipe’).²⁹ In a similar vein, the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and of structuralism more broadly has sought to explain the capacity of language for meaning-making.³⁰ The act of linguistic representation always involves some element of translation to adapt the vagaries of reality into the specific delimitations of language. Language therefore introduces an acute consciousness of an externalising process in which experience must be coded and decoded to be rendered comprehensible. Walter J. Ong echoes this notion when he states that language is ‘inadequate to capture much about the detailed richness of inner mental

experience'; Ong suggests that the formulaic process of translating experience into language is always, at least to some extent, one of transformation.³¹

Ong is gesturing here toward the potential of language to express experience in a recognisable, intelligible way: the function of language as a shared code by which a message might be conveyed and understood. To be represented in language, then, means to be transformed into something which must adhere to particular formulae to be communicated, and so we can recognise both the necessary adaptation of experience into something that it is not (language) and the potential of this function to convey a denatured, transformed version of that experience.

I apply this notion of structural abstraction to a reading of *Oryx and Crake* here to demonstrate the consequences of Snowman's language choice as a storyteller and as a witness to the end of civilisation. In this context, the pressure of defining a legacy by which humanity will be remembered intensifies the importance of meaning-making and its methods.

Names and re-naming

Because of the transformative aspect of representation, linguistic mediation requires a series of (sub/conscious) selections of words to describe the object at hand. This is the foundation of meaning-making for the language user, as language provides a structural framework within which meaning must be fashioned by the subject. The influence of this on perceptions of the past and memory is highlighted by acts of naming and re-naming in *Oryx and Crake*. The language that Snowman uses to frame retellings of the past is under the added pressure of his being the only person able to relate to an audience how humankind came to become extinct. Biases which influence his choice of language therefore shape not only his own memory, but also the legacy of humankind as it is passed on to the Crakers and relayed to the reader of *Oryx and Crake*.

The most prominent act of renaming in *Oryx and Crake* is introduced early in the novel with an overt nod to the separation of identities marked out by having two separate names: 'Once upon a time, Snowman wasn't Snowman. Instead he was Jimmy.'³² By making a clean break between the pre-pandemic existence of Jimmy and the post-pandemic existence of Snowman, the narrator implies that there is a further distinction—of life experience, of humanity, of relatability—to be made between these identities. At the end of the novel, we are made privy to the moment of transition from one identity to the other, as Snowman introduces himself as 'Snowman' for the first time:

[Snowman had] thought this over. He no longer wanted to be Jimmy, or even Jim ... He needed to forget the past – the distant past, the immediate past, the

past in any form. He needed to exist only in the present, without guilt, without expectation. As the Crakers did. Perhaps a different name would do that for him.³³

Despite the irony of this hope, which is proven futile by the chapters of obsession with the past which precede this quotation in the novel, this perception of language as a tool by which to self-consciously refashion the past reveals its use in memory and preservation. Snowman does not forget the past, but the division of his character into two parts—Jimmy and Snowman—does influence the reader's understanding of his experience, anticipating throughout the novel the definitive before/after moment which divides him. Assuming a new name 'to forget the past' demonstrates Jimmy/Snowman's desire not only to be someone else in the present, but *to have been* someone else before the pandemic, to now be untethered to the guilt he feels over his part in the manufactured extinction of his species.³⁴

This division of identity contrasts starkly with Snowman's treatment of Crake, who once was Glenn:

Snowman has trouble thinking of Crake as Glenn, so thoroughly has Crake's later persona blotted out his earlier one ... there was never any real Glenn, *Glenn* was only a disguise. So in Snowman's reruns of the story, Crake is never Glenn, and never *Glenn-alias-Crake* or *Crake/Glenn*, or *Glenn, later Crake*. He is always just Crake, pure and simple.³⁵

This explanation of Glenn/Crake's renaming in the text is in direct contrast to that of Jimmy/Snowman's, quoted above. When Snowman renames himself, it is with the explicit acknowledgement that he had lived a previous identity, with the duality of his name throughout the novel marking out his past (Jimmy) and present (Snowman). Snowman retrospectively applies Crake's new name, on the other hand, to his entire life, suggesting that 'Glenn' was a fabrication that must be corrected. Snowman takes on a new name to absolve himself of guilt; he assigns Crake the name associated with genocide in order to ascribe that responsibility to him even in hindsight. This is particularly significant because the name 'Crake' was initially chosen for the *Maddaddam* game which becomes the digital gateway for Crake's later crimes. Remembering Glenn-the-child only and always through the later filter of Crake-the-genocidist removes the sense of dual identity afforded to Jimmy/Snowman and implies that even in his youth, Crake already embodied the essence of the man he would become. Snowman's own memory is reconstructed by renaming Glenn as 'Crake', a consistent choice of language which prevents Snowman from thinking of Crake without a conscious reminder of the adult bioterrorist he became.

The reader's perception is wholly formed by this choice of names. The narrative retelling of Jimmy/Snowman's past demonstrates a conscious fashioning of memory via language. The effect of meaning-making through

devices such as naming, then, is exaggerated to the reader and illuminates the very real process of intentional alteration that Jimmy/Snowman incorporates into memory acts. Renaming is therefore an overt, deliberate manifestation of an act which can also occur sub- or unconsciously by the language used in memory acts, either in internal narrativized memory or in the production of external linguistic media.

Recontextualising language

Radical catalysts to the construction of the meaning of terms already embedded in the traditional structures of a language system are possible, but rare—one may think, for instance, of the recontextualization of words such as ‘lockdown,’ and ‘pandemic’ in light of recent events. More commonly, the changing meaning of words according to their context is exacerbated in instances of private or new language, where each iteration carries a proportionately higher significance to the creation of a word’s meaning in comparison to reiterations of already established uses of language.

An example from Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* illustrates this, as Atwood explores the changing nature of the word ‘cork-nut’ according to its context within Jimmy’s life. ‘Cork-nut’ is the creation of Alex, a parrot from a *Classics in Animal Behaviour Studies* instructional video with a propensity for inventing words.³⁶ Although Jimmy understands ‘cork-nut’ as Alex the parrot uses the term to mean almond, he begins to say ‘cork-nut’ to ‘anyone who pissed him off ... who wasn’t a girl,’ identifying the origin of its power: ‘No one but him [Jimmy] and Alex the parrot knew exactly what cork-nut meant, so it was pretty demolishing.’³⁷ Thus, a word intended to refer only to almonds becomes an inside joke, taking on a new meaning as a private insult. Jimmy clearly perceives this as the beginning of a social bond between himself and Alex, despite the fact that Alex is a parrot from an old video. The confrontational power of ‘cork-nut’ among Jimmy’s schoolmates is not derived from the intended meaning of the word (almond), but instead from Jimmy’s sense that his audience don’t understand him—a theme that recurs in his later years. He nevertheless focalises himself ‘and Alex’ as the only two who understand his private joke, framing the joy and power of language as something rooted in social connection—however tenuous.

The eventual popularisation of the word ‘cork-nut’ at Jimmy’s school becomes a source of great nostalgia for Jimmy later in life, due to its indication of social intimacy. Jimmy’s first reunion with Crake after they leave the compound in which they grew up together is a passage steeped in uncomfortable anticipation, having transitioned from a comparatively easy relationship spending their free time in each other’s homes to a year of awkward question-and-answer communication via email. This anticipation climaxes with Jimmy’s observation that Crake looks ‘older and thinner

and also smarter than ever,' emphasising how much he has changed in their time apart in the light of his own insecurities.³⁸ An immediate reprieve to this tension is granted by Crake's greeting: "Hi there, cork-nut," ... and nostalgia swept through Jimmy like sudden hunger.³⁹ The use of 'cork-nut' here, a shared and intimate language from Jimmy and Crake's childhood, is used to quickly reassert their familiarity with one another. Just as Jimmy previously found solace in 'No one but him and Alex the parrot' knowing what this word meant, he is now soothed by the use of a term that no one but he and Crake understand.

The significance of 'cork-nut' for Jimmy therefore undergoes a gradual transformation from an indicator of social bonding in childhood, to a sign of remembered intimacy in young adulthood, and finally becomes a symbol of isolation after he witnesses the videoed execution of his mother:

On the worst nights he'd call up Alex the parrot, long dead by then but still walking and talking on the Net, and watch him go through his paces. Handler: *What colour is the round ball, Alex? The round ball?* Alex, head on side, thinking: *Blue*. Handler: *Good boy!* Then Alex would be given a cob of baby corn, which wasn't what he'd asked for, he'd asked for an almond. Seeing this would bring tears to Jimmy's eyes.⁴⁰

Here, Jimmy perceives 'cork-nut' as an isolating act of language because it is misconstrued by the parrot's handler. Jimmy had previously found enjoyment and comfort in using the word 'cork-nut' only because he perceived in it the makings of a social bond between himself and Alex the parrot, and later between himself and Crake, and the invented term was rendered a socially intimate act of language. Where this understanding—and, consequently, this intimacy—is lacking, Jimmy perceives 'cork-nut' as something of a linguistic mis-fire: an obstacle to communication between the parrot and his handler. This isolation by language foreshadows the loneliness of Snowman after the apocalypse, as the last surviving being with a concept of human language. Over the course of the novel, Jimmy's identification with Alex the parrot is summative of the broad narrative of his life, moving from experiences of shared and intimate language to a demonstration of private language, reduced to isolation.

This shows how the meaning of a word may retain some relation to its referent (in this case, almond) while still accumulating other associations (childhood, intimacy, etc.) over time. Even though 'cork-nut' does not radically alter over the course of Jimmy's life, its appearances in the novel nevertheless shape and are shaped by acts of memory. With Alex the parrot, Atwood demonstrates the power of small recontextualizations to alter the meaning of language, and—crucially—how this relates to its social use. This illustration concerns just one phrase, 'cork-nut', and a handful of changing social factors: Jimmy's social status at school, intimate reassurance from

an old friend, and an expression of isolation. These modulations, though small, are shown to be significant markers of the progression of Jimmy's narrative. This example offers a small-scale illustration of how the meaning of language is transformed by the pandemic in the text, as such modulations are accelerated by Snowman's later isolation.

Conclusion

This essay has considered two broad claims about the function of language: first, that it is inherently a social system, and therefore subject to adaptation; second, that as a means of representation, language choices shape meaning and memory. *Oryx and Crake* raises the stakes for both aspects of language, by depicting a narrator who is both the last native speaker of English and also the narrator of the apocalypse. Throughout this essay, I have sought to demonstrate the parallel drawn between the death of a species and the death of its language. By examining Atwood's treatment of language in this way, the weight of Snowman's responsibility becomes apparent: as the last surviving human, he believes he is solely responsible for the preservation of language and the memory of human civilisation.

Notes

1. See Andrew Tate, "In the Beginning, there was Chaos": Atwood, Apocalypse, Art', in *Apocalyptic Fiction* (Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 61–82.
2. See J. Brooks Bouson, "It's Game Over Forever": Atwood's Satiric Vision of a Bioengineered Posthuman Future in *Oryx and Crake*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 39 (2004), pp. 139–56.
3. David Crystal, *Language Death* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 89–119.
5. Dylan Scott Low, Isaac Mcneill, and Michael James Day, 'Endangered Languages: A Sociocognitive Approach to Language Death, Identity Loss, and Preservation in the Age of Artificial Intelligence', *Sustainable Multilingualism* 21 (2022), pp. 1–25, p. 2.
6. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983).
7. Penelope Eckert, 'Variation, Meaning and Social Change', in Nikolas Coupland (ed.), *Sociolinguistics: Theoretical Debates* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 69.
8. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), §243.
9. Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (London: Virago, 2004), pp. 112–3.
10. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 18.
11. Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 229.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 292.

15. Ibid., p. 112, p. 317, p. 78.
16. Ibid., p. 78.
17. Tate, 'In the beginning, there was Chaos', p. 64.
18. Ibid., p. 307.
19. Ibid., p. 396, p. 426.
20. Madison Gretzky, 'After the Fall: Humanity Narrated in Margaret Atwood's Maddaddam Trilogy', *Margaret Atwood Studies* 11 (2017), p. 52.
21. Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 3.
22. Ibid., p. 5.
23. Ibid., p. 43.
24. Katherine V. Snyder, "'Time to Go": The Post-Apocalyptic and the Post-Traumatic in Margaret Atwood's "Oryx and Crake"', *Studies in the Novel* 43 (2011); Bouson, "'It's Game Over Forever'", p. 140.
25. Ibid., p. 92.
26. Ibid., p. 285.
27. Ibid., p. 287.
28. Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, 5th edn (Institute of General Semantics, 1994), p. 58; Edward Temple Bell, *Numerology* (Baltimore: The Williams & Wilkins Co., 1933; repr. Westport: Hyperion Press, 1979), p. 38.
29. René Magritte, *The Treachery of Images*, 1929, oil on canvas, 60 cm x 81 cm, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
30. See Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*; William Downes, 'Communication: words and world' in *Language and Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 323–67.
31. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1982; repr. New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 36.
32. Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 17.
33. Ibid., p. 407.
34. Snyder, "'Time to go'", p. 472.
35. Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 81.
36. Ibid., p. 61.
37. Ibid., p. 67.
38. Ibid., p. 233.
39. Ibid., p. 233.
40. Ibid., p. 306.

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