Exploring Plurilingualism in Fan Fiction

Exploring Plurilingualism in Fan Fiction:

ELF Users as Creative Writers

By

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INTRODUCTION

The pervasive role of English as a global language and as a shared language of communication has attracted academic interest that has developed into a prolific field of research, spanning multiple domains and areas of language use. Tourism, academia, diplomacy, business, and the media are only a few among the areas that have, officially or unofficially, adopted English as the working language for international, cross-cultural interactions (e.g. Crystal 2003, 2008).

English use in these contexts is associated with a progressive reduction of traditional spatial boundaries, represented by increased mobility and migration fluxes, and the annihilation of the spatial dimension in digital environments (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Pennycook 2012; Cogo 2012b; Blommaert and Backus 2013), thus creating communicative settings where identity and meaning are often constructed and mutually negotiated in a lingua franca. These types of contexts show a flexible and fluid usage of the language, which can no longer be conceived as a monolithic, self-contained entity but is adopted and adapted by its users—often in conjunction with other languages—in order to achieve specific pragmatic and social goals in contingent communicative events.

Research in phonology, lexicogrammar, pragmatics, idiomaticity, and plurilingual practices has shed light on how speakers of English as a lingua franca (ELF) manage cross-cultural interactions and maintain intelligibility as they negotiate the interaction on their own terms, employing marked linguistic forms and communicative strategies that do not necessarily conform to native speaker language use. ELF studies have attempted to dismantle the long-standing native speaker/non-native speaker dichotomy, showing that native-like competence is not paramount to effective communication in the international context. The erosion of the myth of the native speaker as the ultimate authority on English use (e.g. Kalocsai 2009) goes hand in hand with a shift in the conception of the ELF user, who is seen as a fully-fledged user of English rather than a perpetual learner always falling short of an impossible target. Deviations from native forms and norms are not seen as errors or symptoms of a lack of communicative competence (Widdowson 2012, 8). Non-conformity to native norms takes a backseat in ELF discourse, as the functional motivation underlying the use of marked forms is at the core of many ELF

studies. ELF users appear to be listener-oriented, engaging in cooperative linguistic behaviour, adapting the language to the perceived needs to the contingency of each communicative event (Seidlhofer 2011, 50). ELF speakers have been shown to exploit all the skills and resources at their disposal in order to achieve their communicative goals, ensuring conversational fluency and preventing communication breakdowns. These strategies involve the exploitation of the speaker's plurilingual repertoire; that is, the L1(s) and LN(s) the speaker is familiar with but not necessarily fluent in. Indeed, cross-linguistic influence and plurilingual phenomena are not uncommon and may play a significant role in ELF conversation (Seidlhofer 2011, 104; Cogo 2012a, 103) as other languages are used deliberately by ELF speakers for communicative and social purposes.

The global status of English and the changes that this status has brought to the way the language is used in multilingual environments has inevitable implications for English Language Teaching, too. Since the early days of ELF research, the pedagogical repercussions of ELF studies have been a matter of interest; however, studies on this aspect of ELF have surged in more recent years (Bayyurt and Ackan 2015; Vettorel 2015; Kohn 2014), including empirical research in the classroom as well as teacher education in order to foster ELF awareness in pre-service and in-service teachers. The adaptability, fragmentation, hybridity, and contingency of ELF in cross-cultural contexts define such language use as a postmodern phenomenon (Seidlhofer 2011), irreducible to the status of a self-contained, codified variety of English inscribable within a traditional ELT framework.

Research has so far been focused on spoken ELF, with the main corpora, VOICE[1] (The Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English), ELFA[2] (English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings), and the more recent ACE[3] (The Asian Corpus of English) including data from spoken interactions; however, more recently the scope of ELF research has widened to encompass written texts, too. Specifically, interest has emerged in the use of ELF in digital environments, as testified by Poppi's (2012) and Vettorel's (2014) studies, focusing on e-mail interactions and corporate websites and blogging practices, respectively. The corpus of written

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[1] www.univie.ac.at/voice. Accessed July 20, 2016.
[2] www.helsinki.fi/elfa/elfacorpus. Accessed July 20, 2016.
[3] ACE. The Asian Corpus of English. Director: Andy Kirkpatrick; Researchers: Wang Lixun, John Patkin, Sophiann Subhan, 2014.
http://corpus.ied.edu.hk/ace. Accessed July 20, 2016.

academic ELF (WrELFA[4]) recently compiled at the University of Helsinki includes both traditional written texts and online data drawn from scientific research blogs. This interest mirrors the prominent role that English plays in digital environments, allowing information flows and international communication to occur on the increasingly multilingual Internet. As shown by Vettorel's study on personal blogging in ELF and a number of studies focused primarily on aspects related to L2 acquisition in digital environments (Lam 2000, 2004 2006; Duff 2002; Black 2005a, 2008, 2009b; Dongping, Newgarden, and Young 2012; Peterson 2012), the use of English in online environments is not limited to specific functional purposes related to a speaker's job or education, since non-native speakers of English employ the language for leisure and social purposes. Indeed, globalisation processes occurring in modern society have not bypassed some of the more mundane aspects of human life, such as entertainment. Music, movies, literature, and comics have crossed the geographical boundaries of their countries of origin to be increasingly distributed across the world.

At the same time, fascination with pop culture and its products has spurred the emergence of sections of audiences developing a deeper emotional attachment and investment in the consumed texts. Taking their appreciation for pop culture to a deeper level, they engage with the texts in an active way, challenging and renegotiating canonical readings and expanding their experience through the creation of alternative texts stemming from the original material. They are "the most visible and identifiable of audiences" (Lewis 1992, 1); that is, fans.

Fans engage in a multitude of social and creative practices whereby the act of media consumption results in the production of new texts (Jenkins 1992a). The practice of reworking existing material is known as remixing (Knobel and Lankshear 2008), and in fandom it exists in a variety of forms—graphic, audiovisual, and written—with plenty of room for multimodal productions. Recent studies suggest that fan fiction writing— that is, the writing of fiction inspired by existing pop culture texts—is a very popular practice among fans, with an estimated 60% claiming to have written at least one piece (Meggers 2012, 25). In the early days, fan fiction and art were collected into amateur magazines called fanzines, which were mailed to subscribers and sold at conventions. However, fandom itself has become globalised over time as, from the 1990s onwards, local fan clubs and conventions developed into a mass phenomenon of worldwide

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[4] http://www.helsinki.fi/englanti/elfa/wrelfa.html. Accessed July 20, 2016; see also Carey (2013a, 2013c, 2013d).

proportions, with fans travelling across continents to attend comic and media conventions. Furthermore, thanks to the spread of internet access, fans can interact daily in digital environments, giving life to vast online networks. Often, fans from all over the world gather together in digital environments to form international social groups where discussion of the original texts and the sharing of fan-made creative products takes place. Most of these international groups employ English as a shared language of communication, even when the original texts do not stem from English-speaking culture; this is the case, for example, of Japanese comics and animation.

The fragmented, hybrid, and contingent nature of ELF mirrors the characteristics of online fandom, which may be defined as a network of interconnected, non-geographically bound groupings of people. Both notions challenge traditional definitions of community as constrained by spatial and linguistic boundaries.

A postmodern perspective may therefore be adopted in discussing ELF and fandom as two products of globalisation processes in order to hypothesise a model that can account for the complex structure as well as the contingency and diversity of ELF communicative events and fan groups online. As will be seen, both fandom and ELF are not exempt from the tension between the global and the local, which are in constant interplay with each other (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Giddens 1991).

Indeed, the local still surfaces in ELF cross-cultural interaction, as the users' linguacultural background may be conveyed explicitly in ELF talk through direct use of other languages or metalinguistic discussion (Pölzl 2003; Cogo 2009, 2012a; Klimpfinger 2007, 2009).

The linguacultural diversity of participants in ELF interactions—both online and offline—entails that every participant in a given ELF interaction is at least bilingual, speaking one or more L1 in addition to English, and potentially other LNs as well. As a result, these languages may occur in ELF communicative contexts—as they are part of the users' linguistic repertoires—as an additional resource to negotiate meaning and achieve social and pragmatic purposes. Indeed, the exploitation of plurilingual resources in ELF should not be dismissed as a way to merely fill a lexical gap in the user's knowledge of English vocabulary, even though such uses may occur, although they may be conceived as strategies that contribute to the negotiation of meaning and social rapport. The notion of ELF speakers' multilingualism is inextricable from ELF itself, to the point that a re-theorisation of ELF has been recently suggested by Jenkins in order to foreground its multilingual nature (J. Jenkins 2015, 61).

The proposed notion of English as a Multilingua Franca shifts the focus away from English, which remains "available as a contact language of choice, but not always chosen" (ibid., 73).

The use and purpose of plurilingual processes in ELF contexts are the object of this research; specifically, the analysis will focus on the phenomena of multiple language use occurring in fan fiction written by ELF users. In this study, I will attempt to describe how and for which purposes non-native speakers of English participating in popular international fandom practices, specifically fan fiction, employ their plurilingual resources in their stories.

The first chapter introduces the concepts of fan and fandom from an academic perspective. A definition of fan and fandom is provided, as well as an overview of the social and creative practices that pop culture fans engage in. Special attention is paid to the social aspect of fandom, which is at the root of the phenomenon. The notions of "virtual community" and "sense of community" are employed to illustrate the characteristics of an international interest-based group that falls outside the traditional definition of community as a geographically-bound entity. The productive aspect of fandom is analysed and fans are described as active agents, engaging in a number of creative and social practices.

The second chapter opens with a remark on the globalised nature of fandom and the widespread use of English as a language of communication among fans. The notion of ELF is then applied to computer-mediated communication and fandom, and points of convergence are found between these elements as they can be partly seen as the result of globalisation processes that have broken traditional spatial boundaries and traditional modernist paradigms. Drawing from the rhizome model introduced by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and the notions of translocality (Hepp 2009; Leppänen et al. 2009) and super-diversity (Vertovec 2007; Cogo 2012b), it was possible to describe ELF and fandom as postmodern phenomena taking place outside traditional social and geographical spaces.

Chapter three presents the fan fiction corpus on which this research is based. The criteria for the selection of non-native writers and stories are listed and discussed. In particular, the choice of manga-inspired fan fiction highlights the international character of fandom, as native and non-native speakers of English alike employ the language to write about a culture that is extraneous to all of them, as none of the participants have a primarily Japanese linguacultural background. As a result, native speakers of English "lose" their advantage of having English as their L1 since attention has shifted to a different, non-English-speaking culture and its traditions. It is also illustrated how due attention was paid to ethical issues

related to working with internet material during the selection of data for the corpus.

A description of the corpus is followed by an account of the method of analysis: due to the peculiar nature of the data, necessitating a mixed approach, the reader is guided through the process of adopting an appropriate method of analysis, starting from the traditional code-switching theory (Gumperz 1982; Myers-Scotton 1997; Appel and Muysken 1995; Auer 1999) before moving to the newer frameworks of polylingual languaging (Jørgensen 2008) and linguistic heteroglossia (Leppänen 2012).

Chapter four delves into the empirical analysis of what is defined as the paratext of the fan fiction, that is Author's Notes and summaries as well as reader reviews. This investigation is meant to clarify the immediate context in which the stories constituting the corpus are situated and explore the writers' construction of their own identities as authors and fans as well as the establishment of a communication channel between writers and readers. These aspects are explored from an ELF perspective in relation to the use, on both the writers' and the readers' part, of linguistic elements drawn from their plurilingual repertoires. Data output appears to highlight the collaborative and supportive quality of fandom and its social nature even in practices that are not highly, or always, interactional. These characteristics are also applicable to ELF communication, where mutual support is paramount if intelligibility is to be reached and/or maintained, and the last part of the chapter is dedicated to metalinguistic awareness and the practice of flagging multilingual elements. This will show how writers engage with the linguacultural diversity of both fandom participants and the characters in their stories, and the strategies they employ to ensure that switches into other languages are accessible to their readers.

Chapter five shifts the focus to the exploitation of plurilingual resources in the stories themselves, where these resources fulfil a number of social, pragmatic, and narrative functions. Occurrences of elements of other languages are categorised according to language, type, and function in the stories. Special attention is paid to the language of the switch in relation to the linguacultural setting of the story, which highlights the complexity of such practices in the universe of fandom where they are influenced by the contingency of narrative contexts. Analysis is followed by a discussion of the results inferred from the analysis, which links the data output back to the rhizomatic model introduced in chapter two. The importance of the social element for fans and writers, who use their plurilingual competence to construct their identities as successful members of the writing community and fandom, is reiterated. Data output suggests

that plurilingual practices in written ELF are in line with results from earlier studies on spoken ELF (Klimpfinger 2007, 2009; Cogo 2009). The peculiar characteristics of the fan fiction context also entail that the functions identified in the data overlap only partly with those relating to spoken language; however, the tendency to use single-word elements or conversational routines may be related to the necessity to maintain the text as accessible to readers who may not be familiar with the languages employed in the stories. The chapter closes with suggestions for further research on fan fiction and ELF.

This study attempts to position itself within the emerging interest for written ELF as mentioned above and for the study of plurilingual practices as integrating characteristics of digital contexts generally, and of ELF communication specifically. Multilingualism online not only perceives the internet as an environment where multiple languages coexist and are used at the same time (Danet and Herring 2007), but also includes contexts where multiple languages—and varieties—appear in the same space (Leppänen 2012; Leppänen and Peuronen 2012; Lee and Barton 2012; Barton and Lee 2013) and come to fulfil different functions in the discourse. As English has become the globalised language of communication and is to this day the most likely language to be used in international groups (Crystal 2001; Danet and Herring 2007; Vettorel 2014), interest for linguistic practices online is growing in the ELF research community.

Especially where ELF is concerned, this study is meant to investigate the use of the participants' plurilingual resources in an ELF-related online context, as the manifestation of plurilingual competence in terms of switches into other languages has so far focused mostly on spoken contexts (Pölzl 2003; Klimpfinger 2007, 2009; Cogo 2009). This research tries to expand on research on online language uses in a translocal context that does not involve physical mobility, but exists within geographically-unbound digital environments. Here, groups of like-minded individuals come together, creating and maintaining social relations with other members of their communities, producing shared content via ELF communication: its use in leisure contexts exists alongside ELF as the working language in professional and educational environments, and can constitute a vast and fertile ground for research in ELF communication and related aspects.

CHAPTER ONE

PARTICIPATORY CULTURE:
FANS AND THEIR PRACTICES

1.1 Special Audiences

Becoming passionate about something has happened to everyone at one or another stage in life: a sports team, a music genre, a singer or a band, or again a book, comic, TV show, or movie. This appreciation might be expressed in a number of ways and with varying degrees of intensity: it is one thing to own and love all the *Harry Potter* books and quite another to spend hours queuing outside a bookshop in a Hogwarts costume to buy a copy of the last book of the series on the day of its release.[1] There is a similar difference in enjoying Elvis Presley's music and making a yearly pilgrimage to his mansion-turned-museum Graceland. The second type of audience just described has a much deeper, emotional investment in the object of their interest, and has become known as a separate group from what is commonly referred to as an audience: they are fans.

This is a very recognisable and familiar term, but at the same time it is hard to pinpoint what a fan is. Henry Jenkins, who focused his academic study on media fans,[2] wrote in the introduction to his seminal book *Textual Poachers* that his "most difficult claim [would] be that such a widespread and diverse group may still constitute a recognizable subculture" (H. Jenkins 1992a, 1). There is indeed such a wide variety of fan types, engaging in a number of social and creative activities, both face-to-face and in virtual environments, that it is extremely difficult to circumscribe and define a specific group of fans and associate them with activities that are distinctive of that group.

The overview of the practices presented here will attempt to give at least an idea of the complexity and heterogeneity of the universe of fans

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[1] "Harry Potter Mania Peaks as Hundreds Queue," *The Telegraph*, July 20, 2007. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1557992/Harry-Potter-mania-peaks-as-hundreds-queue.html.
[2] "[E]nthusiasts of film and television" (H. Jenkins 1992a: 1).

and how their interests and activities overlap and knit together to create a complex network. However, due to the vastness of the topic and the issues associated with it, only the category of media fans will be taken into consideration. According to H. Jenkins: "this group embraces not a single text or even a single genre but many texts—American and British dramatic series, Hollywood genre films, comic books, Japanese animation, popular fiction (particularly science fiction, fantasy, and mystery)" (ibid.). In other words, these fans engage in social and productive practices inspired by one or more source texts, either printed or audiovisual, involving fictional narratives. Indeed, for our purposes we might adopt the definition of fandom put forward by Sandvoss "as the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text" (2005, 8). Fandom, a derivational term formed by adding the suffix –dom to the word "fan," is also the term by which the ensemble of individuals engaging in fan practices is designated. As Coppa (2006, 42) points out, fandom originally referred to sports and theatre, and it was later taken on by science fiction aficionados, who "developed much of the fannish infrastructure, jargon, and language still in use today." In contemporary use, the term is its own hyperonym and hyponym at the same time: it has a more generalised meaning by which it functions as an umbrella term to encompass all fans which exists alongside a narrower connotation. The word is indeed used to define a group of enthusiasts "for some amusement or some artist,"[3] describing both the type of entertainment or the specific object of the fan's attention. To make a clarifying example, we may speak of science fiction fandom and of fantasy fandom, which include all the fans of the respective genres; in turn, the fantasy fandom incorporates *Lord of the Rings* fandom, *Harry Potter* fandom, and *Merlin* fandom, which refer to different media (literature and cinema for the first two and television for the latter).

The difference between fans and a regular audience is not only defined by the intensity of the fans' appreciation for their text(s) of choice but also by the collective character of fandom, whereby the enjoyment of the source text is enhanced and expanded beyond the text proper by engaging in a number of related social and creative activities with other likeminded individuals. Indeed, the phenomenon is also referred to as participatory culture, "which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts" (H. Jenkins 1992a, 46), as will be seen throughout this chapter. Since the very beginning of fandom as it is conceived nowadays, one of the crucial elements was contact among fans.

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[3] "'fandom, n." *OED Online*. September 2013. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/68041?redirectedFrom=fandom. Accessed July 20, 2016.

The communitarian element of fandom is at the very core of fan life, as the fans' individual experience as audience is shared and reworked through interaction with other fans, which leads to the creation of new and multiple layers of interpretation of the original texts, and, as a consequence, prolonged enjoyment of both the original text and the social element itself. Participating in fandom entails "automatically more than the mere act of being a fan of something: it [is] a collective strategy, a communal effort to form interpretive communities that in their subcultural cohesion evaded the preferred and intended meanings … represented by popular media" (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington 2007, 2). Likeminded individuals come together in face-to-face direct interaction as well as in mediated communication, from letters and fan magazines to the online modes that constitute the main media that fans use nowadays to discuss source texts and engage in creative multimodal reworkings of the original texts (Andrejevic 2008). While the term "community" is often used in relation to fandom as a whole, it is hard to circumscribe the heterogeneity of the media fan population within an encompassing definition of community: they are "an amorphous, but still identifiable grouping of enthusiasts" (H. Jenkins 1992a, 1). Jenkins' words are suitable for illustrating the notion of fandom in its broader sense: its inability to fit within a traditional notion of community while at the same time being recognisable as a group of individuals sharing a passion for one or more media texts and engaging in social and productive activities. It is a complex and multilayered universe that is often challenging to understand for "mundanes" (H. Jenkins 2006) and sometimes even for fans themselves, as the countless subsets and facets of fandom make it tricky to propose generalised assumptions that might be valid for fandom in its entirety. Indeed, "that collective, what we might call *fandom*, is itself not cohesive" (Busse and Hellekson 2006, 6, emphasis in original). The fan population as a whole is divided into individual, distinctive fandoms, which still fall under the same broad category but work according to their own norms and rules, developed over time and learned by fans as they participate in their activities and practices. Self-identification as a fan and feelings of membership, as will be seen, are two of the most important elements in defining the notion of fandom as showing elements retraceable to the notion of community. In turn, fans associate in a variety of smaller groups, revolving around specific texts or specific media of communication—a discussion forum, a website—that might be identified as self-regulating communities functioning within the wider fandom network.

These communities are becoming increasingly international. The structure, scope, and diffusion of fandom have changed over time due to

processes of globalisation and digitalisation which have significantly internationalised the phenomenon. Growing numbers of people distributed across continents are nowadays participating in online fan activities based on media texts, meeting online to discuss their favourite TV show, comic, or movie, sharing thoughts and interpretations as well as alternative narratives produced through multiple modalities: visual, audiovisual, and textual, all the while engaging in social interaction within a global environment.

Due to the heterogeneous, multi-faceted quality of contemporary online fandom, this chapter does not have the ambition of giving a complete taxonomy of its workings and structure; its purpose is to provide a framework for the sociolinguistic context from which the data for this study is drawn, as well as familiarise the reader with the jargon and language underlying the practice under examination.

1.2 Fans and Fandom: Definitions

Fans are "the most visible and identifiable of audiences" (Lewis 1992, 1). In every audience consuming mass commercial entertainment today, a group can usually be identified that stands out because of the active and interactive engagement of its members with the consumed text; in Lewis' words:

> they're the ones who wear the colors of their favorite team, the ones who record their soap operas on VCRs to watch after the work day is over, the ones who tell you every detail about a movie's star life and work, the ones who sit in line for hours for front row ticket to rock concerts. (ibid.)

Fans do not content themselves with passive enjoyment of their favourite text but develop an affective attachment to them, enhancing the pleasure derived from consumption by engaging actively with them. They turn "personal reaction into social interaction" (H. Jenkins 2006, 41), sharing thoughts and opinions with other likeminded people and transforming passive reception into active production. There are many types of fans who associate into groups devoted to more specific interests and topics. These communities share a set of practices and related jargon that are often not intelligible to outsiders (Harris 1998, 8); such jargon in turn branches out into terminology and linguistic features distinctive of each individual group of fans, distinguishing them from others. As will be seen, the communitarian experience is fundamental for the fan, who could not be called such without a network of other fans supporting and sharing their attachment for a given text (McQuail 1997, 121). Membership of fandom

can be described in terms of the degree of attachment to a given text on the part of a group that stands out in contrast with passive audiences (McQuail 1997; Hills 2000). Indeed, affiliation with fandom cannot be defined with sharp boundaries; on the contrary, the concept of fandom should be understood as a continuum where each single member is placed according to their involvement with the practices associated with the group of fans they belong to. However, certain attitudes and behaviours can be perceived as too excessive even within a given fan community; in Brooker's view, fandom is characterised by:

> an immersion in the detail of the text and often its surrounding intertexts; a sense of monkish study leading to effortless familiarity that tends to inspire contempt or ridicule in those outside the culture or even sometimes from those inside it who regard this kind of obsession as a step too far. (2005, 866)

The engagement with fandom can indeed be marginal in terms of fan experience, or more absorbing, with active participation in creative transformative practices inspired by the source text or fan gatherings and meetings, known as conventions: "individual acts of media choice, attention, and response can be more or less active, in terms of degree of motivation, involvement, pleasure, critical or creative response, connection with the rest of life, and so forth" (McQuail 1997, 22). Fandom implies a productive element, which constitutes its main essential characteristic: as was said, fan activities go beyond mere reception of an event or text.

1.2.1 Fans as active agents

Fiske (1992, 46) defines fandom as a "heightened form of popular culture," which "echoes many of the institutions of official culture" (ibid., 33). Fandom is indeed primarily associated with mass cultural forms that are considered lowbrow and thought to appeal to those segments of society that, because of discriminating factors of race, gender, age, and class, have no or limited access to what is seen as "high" culture (ibid., 30). The fan is seen as an inadequate individual, unable to function normally in society, with "fragile self-esteem, weak or nonexistent social alliances" (Jensen 1992, 18); mass-media products, on the other hand, provide a space that falls outside society and traditional cultural hierarchies so that fans may "bolster, organize and enliven their unsatisfying lives" (ibid.).

However, fans show the ability to exploit mass-industrial products to their own ends as a sign of rebellion against mainstream society; to discuss and elaborate on socially and politically controversial topics relatable to

the fans' real life and contingent historical and political situation, such as women and minority rights, homophobia, and discrimination (Fiske 1992; H. Jenkins 1992a; Becque 2012; Coker 2012). They are not the "cultural dopes" (Grossberg 1992, 53, see also Black 2008, xiii) often depicted by public opinion—mindless consumers ready to squander their money on concert and convention tickets, CDs, DVDs, comics, and the plethora of gadget merchandise that can be associated with media and sports fandom. According to Grossberg, fans are aware of being pawns within a commercial and economic structure of "power and domination" and that they risk being manipulated by the messages conveyed through such cultural forms (1992, 53). Jenkins similarly points out that fans' critical abilities are not overshadowed by blind appreciation of the original text; on the contrary, a "sense of proximity and possession coexists quite comfortably with a sense of ironic distance" (H. Jenkins 1992a, 65). However, it is by means of this very awareness that most fans are able to partake in popular culture according to their own conditions; not as passive audiences being bombarded by content with underlying economic and political interests, but by turning consumption into production and transforming the source text into something new. Fandom indeed implies a productive element which constitutes its main essential characteristic: fan activities go beyond the mere reception of an event or text. One of the main reasons fans find so much pleasure in repeated readings of the original texts lies in "what the reader brings to the text, not what she finds there" (ibid., 74). They are not manipulated by their chosen texts—on the contrary, it is they who manipulate the texts which constitute "raw materials for their own cultural productions and the basis for their social interactions" (ibid., 23–4). The vision hereby presented has shifted over time, thanks also to the role the early scholar-fans played in drawing a picture of fandom that illustrated the complexity of the social and productive practices involved (Busse and Hellekson 2012). Understanding of fandom and acceptance of its practices as part of a normal manner of engaging with media texts is now more widespread; acknowledgement and acceptance of fandom has seeped into the mainstream audience as well as the original media source, as demonstrated by the references to fandom, and specifically fan fiction, that have started to appear on popular TV shows (ibid., 50). This type of "meta-commentary" is made a "part of the show itself" (Coker 2012, 94), suggesting at least a partial bridging of the gap between the mainstream audience and the aficionados. As Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington (2007, 5) similarly point out, in terms of fan perceptions from outsiders, "none of the high-profile fan cultures in recent years—from X-Philes via Eminem fans to *Sex in* [sic] *the City*

enthusiasts—had to endure the derogative treatment of Star Trek fans." Being a fan has lost part of its negative connotation over time; fandom is now perceived as an existing aspect of popular-culture consumption, with fans being marketed to as consumers of media-related merchandise and memorabilia (ibid., 5), reinforcing the notion of a reduced distance between fans and audience, as well as text producers and fans.

1.2.2 Fan productivity

Fandom constitutes a medium of construction and of expression of one's identity as well as a fertile environment for social contact. Identity construction through fandom is one of the three types of productivity identified by Fiske (1992) in relation to the fan experience, respectively labelled as semiotic, enunciative, and textual. Semiotic productivity is "essentially interior" (Fiske 1992, 37) and "consists of the making of meanings of social identity and of social experience from the semiotic resources of the cultural commodity" (ibid.). Semiotic productivity turns into enunciative productivity when the created meanings are publicly expressed and shared within the fan community.

The most important semiotic vehicle of enunciation is verbal language, which translates into "fan talk" in fandom (ibid., 38). Discussion and elaboration of the contents and meanings of the chosen texts and their relation to the real lives of fans are one of the most frequent social practices fans engage and find pleasure in. Online discussion groups about television shows, for instance, have thrived since the very dawn of the internet age (Baym 1993; Wakefield 2001; Sturgis 2006; Rifà-Valls 2011). As Jenkins states, "such discussions expand the experience of the texts beyond its initial consumption" (H. Jenkins 1992a, 45); negotiation and the creation of meaning determine and shape the relationship fans have with the original text. However, verbal communication is not the only means of enunciation fans have at their disposal.

Affiliation to one or more fandoms can be communicated visually through clothes, styling, and accessories. A band or team shirt, accessories, and assorted memorabilia can convey, within and outside a particular fan community, an individual's tastes and potential adherence to the values and messages perpetrated by the subject of a fan's admiration (ibid.). Clothing style not only fulfils the enunciative function theorised by Fiske but also operates as a beacon of recognition for other likeminded individuals in the real world. Indeed, despite what has often been said about fans, they are not always members of the deprived and unprivileged sections of society, trying to find through popular culture the kind of

empowerment that is denied to them by the standing power structure of modern society. On the contrary, they are often highly educated individuals (H. Jenkins 1992a, 18) for whom enthusiasm for popular culture and knowledge and appreciation of highbrow culture go hand in hand.

The first redeeming studies of fan culture came in the early 1990s from academics who were also fans themselves and who, for this reason, labelled themselves as Aca/Fen (more recently acafans and scholar-fans)—a blend of academic and fen, which was an alternative plural of fan used within fan communities at the time (H. Jenkins 2006, 4). As Jenkins himself wrote in the introduction to *Textual Poachers* (1992a, 5), "I have found approaching popular culture as a fan gives me new insights into the media by releasing me from the narrowly circumscribed categories and assumptions of academic criticism." His ethnographic studies of media fan culture concentrate on fans' transformative practices, which correspond to the third type of productivity theorised by Fiske; namely, textual productivity.

Where media fandom is concerned, textual productivity consists mostly of the creation of new texts inspired by the originals, which are then circulated among fans. Fan productivity is the reason why fan culture is also known as participatory culture. These activities range across many genres—textual, audiovisual, graphic—and have become much more widely distributed and visible since the diffusion of the internet gave fans access to an extensive space to host their products freely. As a result, these materials are now accessible to fans internationally, which was rare before the 1990s, when the distribution of fan-produced material was narrow and limited to a small number of aficionados.

1.3 The Communitarian Value of Fandom

The idea of community is an essential tenet of fandom, and not least one of the main factors distinguishing fans from other types of audiences: "fan reception cannot and does not exist in isolation but is always shaped through input from other fans" (H. Jenkins 1992b, 210). The fan experience has no reason to exist outside a social dimension: it necessitates a communitarian space where semiotic and textual input can be shared and negotiated with others.

Fandom can be defined as an interpretive community (ibid.), because interpretation and negotiation of the meanings of the original texts, or of new ones introduced by others, are continuously ongoing: "fan interpretations need to be understood in institutional rather than personal

terms" (ibid.). In social events, such as fan club meetings and conventions, and textual spaces such as zines (Perkins n.d.), printed or online newsletters, message boards, and chats, the original texts are analysed and reinterpreted, traditional readings—the canon[4]—are challenged, and new interpretations are put forward and shared with other members of the community for evaluation and feedback. Fan interpretations are in turn debated and disputed by other fans, or well received as acceptable alternative readings. Fan communities foster the discussion of topics and issues that relate to the fans' real-life experiences as well as the contingent historical-political context; indeed, fan talk "sparks conversations soon drifting far away from the primary text that had initially drawn them together" (H. Jenkins 1992a, 81).

These types of social interaction suggest that fan communities are ascribable to the category of communities of interest, that is, groups that are "concerned with the quality and character of human relations without reference to location" (Obst, Zinkiewicz, and Smith 2002a, 88). The other main definition of community, on the other hand, entails a geographic element and, as a result, "a sense of belonging to a particular area" (ibid.). While the earlier concept of community highlighted the territorial element, the fragmentation of modern society has shifted the fulcrum of communities to shared interests and goals—either professional or personal—around which these social groups develop. It is hard to give a complete definition of community due to the number of facets and elements that combine in the structuring and maintenance of a given community, and it is just as difficult to determine the essential elements which give a specific group the status of community. There was initially a certain reluctance to forgo the geographical or location element as essential in communities, and it was argued that groups without roots in a physical environment, such as online groups, should not be considered communities. At best, they may be defined as "pseudo-communities" (Jones 1998, 13), as the lack of face-to-face interaction is considered a hindrance to the successful development of the strong social ties that are usually associated with communities.

Fan communities exist in both physical and virtual environments, with online communication increasing exponentially and giving life to fandom as a mass phenomenon. Social practices and association with communities occur in real life trough fan club gatherings, conventions, and participation in events such as matches and concerts. In the digital world they occur by

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[4] "[T]he events presented in the media source that provide the universe, setting, and characters" (Busse and Hellekson 2006: 9).

means of one of the many social platforms and networks that allow group interaction online. Obst, Zinkiewicz, and Smith (2002a; 2002b) have carried out research on the notion of community applied to science fiction fandom, which constitutes a very large and active segment of fandom. As a result, the reasoning at the base of their research can easily be applied to other fan communities sharing the same social and participatory practices of science fiction fandom: as the authors point out, "this community is of particular interest, as it is a community with membership from all over the world, yet one that is clearly aware of its own identity and history" (Obst, Zinkiewicz, and Smith 2002a, 92). Indeed, even though it "operates on an international basis with fewer geographic connections than other relational communities" (ibid., 97), it fosters the formation and maintenance of strong social ties among members, who demonstrate high levels of what is known as the Psychological Sense of Community (PSOC). PSOC is defined as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan and Chavis 1986, 9, in Abfalter, Zaglia, and Mueller 2012, 400). It consists of four dimensions that interact dynamically with each other: membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection.

Membership includes the sense of belonging, personal investment, and emotional safety that are involved in being part of a community. Influence relates to a community's cohesiveness and attractiveness, involving the community's influence on its members and the members' perception of control over the community. Integration and fulfilment of needs are based on the assumption that community cohesiveness is provided by "common needs, goals, beliefs, and values" (Obst and White 2004, 692); participation in a successful community and interaction with other members allow participants to fulfil a number of their perceived needs. A shared emotional connection refers to the social bonds formed between members of the community over time, and depends on "a shared community history, shared events, positive interaction, and identification with the community" (Abfalter, Zaglia, and Mueller 2012, 401). These four elements that make up PSOC are primarily measured according to different scales, among which one of the most established is the Sense of Community Index (SCI), which has been used in a variety of studies to determine PSOC levels in various types of communities, from geographical communities to communities of interests to virtual communities (for a list of references see Obst and White 2004, 693).