

LINGUISTS AT THE MOVIES SCREENTEST

Mary Ann Walter gives us the linguist's view on Hot Skull

Title Hot Skull / *Sicak Kafa*
Studio Tims&B Productions, Netflix
Year of release 2022
Director Mert Baykal
Writer Mert Baykal
Starring Osman Sonant, Şevket Çoruh, Hazal Subaşı
IMDB page imdb.com/title/tt11988676

What's the story?

This dystopic sci-fi series is a bit of a departure for Turkish television, which is best known for lavish historical costume dramas and tangled family soap operas. Hot Skull is set in a sepia-colored, almost post-apocalyptic version of Istanbul, in which the main character is at first hiding out from draconian and sinister government forces, and then on the run. Oh yeah, and he's also a linguist!

What's the linguistic component?

In addition to having a linguist protagonist, Hot Skull is based on the concept of a 'semantic virus', transmitted through spoken language. Infected people are called 'jabberers', and hearing their speech for just a few seconds is enough to infect the listener. 'Jabbering' basically reflects the real phenomenon of Wernicke's aphasia, in which people produce grammatically-correct but semantically meaningless speech, typically after a brain injury.

What does the series get right?

The jabberers are represented quite realistically as suffering from real-life Wernicke's aphasia, which is specifically referenced in the first episode. The series will surely raise awareness about this language disorder and its effects.

In addition, due to the main character's linguistic career interests, there are fun linguistic Easter eggs sprinkled throughout for those in the know. For example, the second episode opens with an allusion to Chomsky's famous sentence illustrating the dichotomy between grammatical correctness and semantic meaning: 'Colourless green ideas sleep furiously'. In the dystopic world of Hot Skull, the line goes "Colourless green ideas sleep in danger... Let Chomsky explain that!"

Finally, the linguist protagonist is mysteriously immune to this disorder. Is it due to the fact that he has previously undergone brain surgery? Experimental work with his linguistics research group? His linguistics training, with the cognitive advantage that many researchers believe to be associated with multilingualism? This is never clarified, but leaves space for various language-related concepts.

What does the series get wrong?

Not much. However, disappointingly, the linguistics content lessens as the series progresses, and almost disappears by the halfway point (the protagonist's adventures



continue throughout eight episodes of one hour each, and the series is available on Netflix at the time of writing).

Unfortunately, there will be no second season, but fans may want to seek out the original book with the same title (by Afşin Kum), or the Turkish versions of the episodes, which are over twice as long.

If you like this...

Hot Skull is not the first fictional work to tackle the concept of a 'language virus'. The 2008 horror film Pontypool also features a fatal virus of this type – if a listener hears certain English words, then they go on to attack and eat both others and themselves. It's a thrilling exploration of English as a literal, rather than metaphorical, 'killer language', committing linguicide against others, and the Canadian context is evocative given the background of colonisation and struggle between English, Quebecois French, and indigenous languages. Because the virus is English-specific, in the world of Pontypool, multilingualism is life-saving.

Another example is Peter Greenaway's bizarre and hypnotic film The Falls, in which an unexplained event involving birds results in people suddenly speaking new and unique languages, among other anomalies. And in literature, Neal Stephenson's novel Snow Crash is based on a virus that spreads through writing and crashes human brains, with Sumerian serving as a kind of underlying operating system and programming language that can control human behavior

The verdict

Hot Skull's virus is neither zombie-style, bird flu-style, or software-style. Rather, it is the linguistic pandemic movie for our times, and resonates with our collective COVID experience. In the series, people wear earphones rather than masks, but they face the familiar issues of lockdowns, quarantines, and the extent of government control, all while racing in search of a preventative or cure. It's an exciting and timely exploration of such a crisis through a linguistic lens. ¶

Star rating ★★★★

Schwa rating ə ə ə

Other viewing and reading

Films

Tony Burgess (2008) *Pontypool*, Ponty Up Pictures / Shadow Shows.

Peter Greenaway (1980) *The Falls*, British Film Institute.

Neal Stephenson (1992) *Snow Crash*, Bantam.

Article

Robert Phillipson and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (1995) 'Linguicide and linguicism', in Robert Phillipson and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (editors), *Papers in European Language Policy,* Roskilde Universitet.

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