

DARMOK

Science Fiction Showing that Language is More than Vocabulary and Grammar

by Bryce Hedstrom

"Darmok" is an episode from the fifth season of the science fiction TV series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Season 5, episode 2). It is well known and admired by foreign language and social studies instructors because it makes us think about the nature of language and cultural literacy. In this episode the starship Enterprise encounters an alien race, the Children of Tama, whose language is not comprehensible to humans. The crew of the Starship Enterprise can understand the words, but not the meaning, because they do not know the culture's stories. The Tamarian language is based on shared cultural stories and metaphors as much as on words and grammar. The Tamarians communicate by citing examples of similar situations from their mythology, so even though the humans can understand many of the individual words, it is impossible to communicate without knowing something of the Tamarian culture, mythology and history that is incorporated into every sentence. And our actual human languages are not all that different.

The fictitious Tamarian language is similar, in some respects, to languages here on Earth. In classical written Chinese, for example, ideas are represented by pictographs. Each pictograph is a little symbolical picture laden with history and culture that conveys a thought. In mathematics, a simple symbol can represent a complex idea. In English, we tend to use at least six metaphors per minute of speech. Kendall Haven, in *StoryProof*, explains the power of metaphor (see the quotes and citation in **Darmok Fun Facts** on the next page).

The entire episode is available on YouTube and other platforms (just type in "Darmok"). It can also be purchased as a download. Below is a list of some key phrases in the episode. As you watch, listen for these odd sayings. See what you acquire as you watch the story and figure out what they mean from context:

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| 1. ___ The river Tamak, in winter | a. <i>An understanding, an epiphany. He's got it!</i> |
| 2. ___ Shaka, when the walls fell. | b. <i>Let's go. Full speed ahead. Let's get out of here</i> |
| 3. ___ Temba, his arms wide. | c. <i>That's enough. Be quiet. Stop. No more. Don't go there.</i> |
| 4. ___ Darmok on the ocean. | d. <i>Failure, death, or the inability to do something</i> |
| 5. ___ Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra. | e. <i>An experience of shared danger resulting in friendship and respect.</i> |
| 6. ___ The Beast of Tanagra | f. <i>Giving, taking, receiving</i> |
| 7. ___ Darmok and Jalad on the ocean. | g. <i>It's yours; you're welcome; thank you</i> |
| 8. ___ Sukath, his eyes uncovered / open | h. <i>Being alone and isolated</i> |
| 9. ___ Kalash, when it rises. | i. <i>A necessary risk; a chance we'll have to take</i> |
| 10. ___ Mirab, with sails unfurled | j. <i>We / They have become friends</i> |
| 11. ___ Temba at rest | k. <i>a common foe; a test of trust between strangers</i> |
| | l. <i>These dorky-looking outfits sure are itchy!</i> |

Give a brief, but thoughtful, answer based on this episode and on your own experience:

12. What might this episode say about the role of **imagination and patience** in helping to learn a new language?

13. What might this episode say about **the power of telling stories** in learning a language?

14. How might this episode **relate to you as you learn** a new language?

15. What are some **common myths or stories from your culture** that might be important to know?

DARMOK FUN FACT # 1:

This is a useful story for language teachers:

"Many teachers at both the high school and college level are using *Darmok* in class to illustrate points about language and cultural literacy. Perhaps *Darmok* itself is becoming part of our cultural literacy."

—Paul Cantor in *Star Trek and Philosophy*, edited by Jason Eberl and Kevin Decker (2008), p. 16.

DARMOK FUN FACT # 2:

Language use in *Darmok* is somewhat accurate. Some linguists believe that the nature of language is mostly metaphor. The way the "Tamarians" are portrayed is not all that different from the way we communicate. We speak with metaphors. We talk like this because shared metaphor is the fastest, surest, and clearest way to get your point across:

"Primarily on the basis of linguistic evidence, we have found that human thought processes are largely metaphorical."

"The average American uses almost six metaphors or metaphoric references per minute of spoken language."

Story Proof: The Science behind the Startling Power of Story, by Kendall Haven (2007), p. 58.

DARMOK FUN FACT # 3:

An unexpected benefit of this episode was a revival of interest in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, an ancient Sumerian tale from around 2600 B.C. As the alien captain Dathon is dying, he asks Captain Picard to tell him a story from his own culture. Picard tells a simple version of the Gilgamesh story, which echoes the theme of shared danger in Dathon's references to "Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra." The story Gilgamesh also shows that struggling against a common foe can result in bringing people together—the very type of situation that Dathon had hoped to create with himself and Picard against the alien being on the planet.

Picard's version of Gilgamesh also ties in with his own experience with Dathon—a **linguistic and cultural triple play**: **Combining simple language with (1) history and (2) culture, as well as (3) his own experience**. Language teachers would do well to emulate this practice.

Here is a transcription of Picard telling part of the tale of Gilgamesh. The delivery by Patrick Stewart, a classically-trained Shakespearean actor (who later played Professor Charles Xavier in the X-Men movies), is exquisite. Notice how he even uses the same type of imagery and rhythm that the Tamarians use as he tells the tale:

"This is a story, a very ancient one, from earth. I'll try to remember it:

"Gilgamesh, a king. At Uruk. He tormented his subjects. He made them angry. They cried out aloud, 'Send us a companion for our king! Spare us from his madness!'

"Enkidu, a wild man, from the forest, entered the city. They fought in the temple. They fought in the street. Gilgamesh defeated Enkidu. They became great friends. Gilgamesh and Enkidu, at Uruk.

"The new friends went out into the desert together, where the Great Bull of Heaven was killing men by the hundreds. Enkidu caught the Bull by the tail. Gilgamesh struck him with his sword. They were victorious.

"But Enkidu fell to the ground, struck down by the gods. And Gilgamesh wept bitter tears, saying, 'He who was my companion through adventure and hardship, is gone forever.' "

DARMOK FUN FACT # 4:

"Darmok" was chosen as the classic episode (out of 152 total episodes) to represent the series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* in [TV Guide: Guide to TV](#).

DARMOK FUN FACT # 5:

The singer and actress **Ashley Judd** appears in a cameo role as "crewman Leffler" in several scenes in the engineering section of the starship Enterprise.

DARMOK FUN FACT # 6:

The original activity I published is cited on the German Wikipedia website (of all places!): <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darmok>, look in the **Einzelnachweise** section.



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*** ANSWER KEY ***

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Don't go there.*
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friendship and respect.*
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