Calmness drained out of her. Jessica felt her teeth chattering, clamped them together. Then she heard Paul’s voice, low and controlled, reciting the litany:

“Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past me I will turn to see fear’s path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain.”

—Frank Herbert, Dune

Fans of Frank Herbert’s classic science fiction novel Dune will no doubt recognize the above quotation as the Bene Gesserit litany against fear. The affirmation appears many times in the narrative, becoming so representative of the central character Paul Atreides that an edited version of the invocation found its way into David Lynch’s 1984 filmic adaptation of the book. Those who have not previously encountered the litany in either text or film, however, will likely register a fact that its more ardent fans tend to forget: namely, that it is spoken aloud. There is more to the litany than its content. Although at times Paul silently thinks the litany within the story, in dire moments—such as in the ornithopter crash excerpted above—it appears to require vocal repetition in order to calm a terrified heart.

The litany against fear is one of many vocal techniques that Herbert utilizes to construct the Bene Gesserit as a politically powerful force within his futuristic narrative. An ancient and mysterious order of women, the Bene Gesserit train (almost exclusively female) acolytes in diplomacy, espionage, sex, martial arts, lie detection, and mind control. Adherents perfect this last talent through a physiological trick they deem “the Voice,” or the meticulous adjustment of personal vocal tones to mirror a target’s own. Performed correctly, the Voice results in a frighteningly irresistible mental suggestion directed toward...
a hapless pawn. By assuming a voice uniquely keyed to each of her victims, then, a Bene Gesserit can almost unnoticeably bend the willpower of other characters in the novel by merely speaking to them.

The power and danger of the voice in these and other aspects of Herbert’s narrative resonate with contemporary philosophical anxieties surrounding the nature and scope of human embodied speech. As Mladen Dolar notes in *A Voice and Nothing More*, the voice is the site of a great many paradoxes. It appears to substantively transmit meanings to others while evading any clear substance or secure meaning in itself. The voice seems to function as a unique expression of oneself, but it is also necessarily an expression of the other. We only gain our ability to speak from others who teach us—the (m)other, after all, ascribes meaning to the infant’s voice long before the infant does. Even when the voice takes on more stylized forms in practices like singing, it registers as both beautiful and unsettling, a terminable signification coupled with an elusive excess that Roland Barthes once attempted to capture in his notion of “the grain.” The fact that we cannot locate or define something so intimately conceived of as our own establishes, in the end, a rather uncertain relationship with the voice, inspiring a mixture of both anxiety and pleasure that manifests across texts in popular culture. It follows, then, that a concern for the philosophy of voice is well served by studies that attempt to discern how cultural representations and deployments of the voice indicate the timbre of this collective anxiety and pleasure.

With its use of the voice to steer key narrative points, *Dune* certainly serves as a fruitful starting point for this kind of project. Herbert’s masterpiece is “the best-selling science-fiction novel ever” (Freierman C7), with five further novels penned by Herbert. In addition to Lynch’s cinematic adaptation in 1984, the novel has inspired television miniseries, video games, and even a modern run of eleven best-selling books set within the *Dune* universe and coauthored by Herbert’s son. Most recently, Paramount announced that it has selected a director for another film based on the original book, although a release date has yet to be determined (Fleming 1). Since the enduring appeal of the narrative is beyond question, the only thing left to ponder is the source of that appeal: Why is *Dune* so popular? What is it about the core narrative that speaks to readers across so many decades and media?

I argue here that Herbert’s particular vocal constructions in *Dune* mirror a general philosophical fascination with the human voice, and that this specific resonance significantly contributes to the novel’s enduring appeal. In short, Herbert recognizes the voice as a powerful, elusive force that individuals can nevertheless conquer and hone through applied effort. This treatment echoes Herbert’s personal fascination with the general semantics movement in the early twentieth century (see Parkerson), and it provides something like a practitioner’s approach to the voice that resembles the general semanticists’
own approach to language. In opposition to philosophical conclusions about the irreducible anxieties of the voice, then, Herbert’s emphasis on vocal control in *Dune* invites readers to believe in the possibility of the fickle voice’s ultimate submission to human ingenuity and progress. While this proposition is seductive to anxious speaking subjects, endorsing or pursuing Herbert’s logic may also diminish or even destroy the unique pleasures that vocal anxiety paradoxically affords.

In order to assess Herbert’s approach to the voice, I will begin by situating the importance of voice in the larger *Dune* universe. Then, taking the Bene Gesserit talent for “the Voice” as a particular instance of this diffuse importance, I will align manifestations of voice in the novel with specific anxieties proposed by scholars in contemporary analyses of the voice. By constructing the voice as a dimension of communication beyond signification, as an inherently feminine or motherly trait, and as a unique bond between self and other, Herbert taps into aspects of the voice that haunt contemporary speaking subjects. Finally, I will suggest how Herbert quashes these anxieties though a logic of vocal control before concluding with the implications of individuals accepting such a logic as a way of grappling with contemporary crises of the voice.

1. The Importance of the Voice in *Dune*

The narrative of *Dune* unfolds in a universe both futuristic and feudal, where powerful families compete to control planetary resources and influence precious, interstellar trade through acts of deception, bribery, and occasionally brute force. At the center of the narrative is House Atreides, composed of Duke Leto, a rising star in the galactic empire; the Lady Jessica, Leto’s wife and a Bene Gesserit acolyte; and Paul, their adolescent son who may or may not be a prophesied messiah. Upon the request of the Imperial Emperor, House Atreides assumes control of the desert planet Arrakis and its lucrative spice trade. Arrakis is the only planet in the known universe that naturally produces the spice *mélange*, which, in addition to its powerful narcotic effects, allows for the possibility of interstellar travel. Soon after the family relocates, however, House Harkonnen—the previous rulers of Arrakis—descend on the planet in a devastating coup that results in Leto’s death and Jessica and Paul’s escape into the deep desert. Jessica and Paul survive in the desolate climate by befriending the nomadic tribes there known as the Fremen, virtually indigenous humans who arrived on Arrakis thousands of years before and adapted to the arid environment. Mother and son ultimately assume leadership positions within the loose confederacy of tribes and lead their forces to take back Arrakis at the end of the novel.

Part of *Dune*’s narrative appeal is its ubiquitous, delicate, and volatile political climate constructed through the subtlest of communicative interac-
tion. Individual characters in the novel possess an almost Machiavellian sensitivity to power, regularly scanning for the deeper implications of otherwise simple communicative qualities like facial expressions, word choice, or the intonation of messages. Consider, for example, the role of these paralinguistic factors in the following pre-dinner conversation between Leto, Jessica, and Lingar Bewt, a local water shipper for the moisture-starved society. After the Duke refuses to uphold a wasteful hand-washing custom whereby wealthy citizens display their status, Bewt defends the tradition.

The water shipper asked in an angry voice: “Does the Duke imply criticism of our custom?”

“This custom has been changed,” Leto said. He nodded to Kynes, marked the frown on Jessica’s face, thought: A frown does not become her, but it’ll increase rumors of friction between us.

“With the Duke’s permission,” the water shipper said, “I’d like to inquire further about customs.”

Leto heard the sudden oily tone of the man’s voice, noted the watchful silence of the group, the way heads were beginning to turn toward them around the room.

“Isn’t it almost time for dinner?” Jessica asked.

“But our guest has some questions,” Leto said. [. . .]

“Water customs are so interesting,” Bewt said, and there was a smile on his face. “I’m curious what you intend about the conservatory attached to this house. Do you intend to continue flaunting it in the people’s faces . . . m’Lord?”

Leto held his anger in check, staring at the man. Thoughts raced through his mind. It had taken bravery to challenge him in his own ducal castle, especially since they now had Bewt’s signature over a contract of allegiance. The action had taken, also, a knowledge of personal power. Water was, indeed, power here. (136–37)

Planted frowns, artful silences, calculated interruptions, tonal power plays—much meaning in the novel is present not in what its characters say, but in what accompanies what its characters say and how they say it. Voice becomes an integral component in this structure.

It is no accident that Jessica is an adept political player in the above exchange. She is the primary means by which Herbert introduces to the reader the politically motivated Bene Gesserit and their unique concern with voice. Again, on the surface the women’s order appears to function as a quasi-magical finishing school for the future wives of feudal rulers. Secretly, however, the Bene Gesserit work toward their own political ends: They place acolytes into families as a means of crossing bloodlines and engineering a messiah they call
the “Kwisatz Haderach,” or a male who can endure the formidable Bene Gesserit training without perishing. In fact, although outsiders regularly refer to adherents as “witches” in the book, all of their supposed “powers” extend from an intense, scientific regimen of physical and mental exercises that grant them complete control over physiological processes and, especially, the voice.

One result of this vocal training is the Bene Gesserit ability to isolate the speaking patterns of strangers as a means of gauging their political affiliations. Another extended passage from the dinner scene in the novel summarizes this ability explicitly:

Jessica sat remembering a lecture from her Bene Gesserit school days. The subject had been espionage and counter-espionage. A plump, happy-faced Reverend Mother had been the lecturer, her jolly voice contrasting weirdly with the subject matter.

A thing to note about any espionage and/or counter-espionage school is the similar basic reaction pattern of all its graduates. Any enclosed discipline sets its stamp, its pattern, upon its students. That pattern is susceptible to analysis and prediction.

Now, motivational patterns are going to be similar among all espionage agents. That is to say: there will be certain types of motivation that are similar despite differing schools or opposed aims. You will study first how to separate this element for your analysis—in the beginning, through interrogation patterns that betray the inner orientation of the interrogators; secondly, by close observation of language-thought orientation of those under analysis. You will find it fairly simple to determine the root languages of your subjects, of course, both through voice inflection and speech pattern.

Now, sitting at table with her son and her Duke and their guests, hearing that Guild Bank representative, Jessica felt a chill of realization: the man was a Harkonnen agent. He had the Giedi Prime speech pattern—subtly masked, but exposed to her trained awareness as though he had announced himself.

It is only through the Bene Gesserit concern for the voice that Jessica uncovers an expert spy for the antagonistic Harkonnen family who has infiltrated her own family’s stronghold. Her correct prediction of his next conversational move confirms these suspicions.

Voice is therefore a central tool that the Bene Gesserit use to surveil their surroundings. Even characters without “stamped” speech like the spy can be located and assessed through their voices. After House Harkonnen overthrows House Atreides, for example, and forces Jessica and Paul to flee into the deep desert of Arrakis, the displaced duo soon find themselves cornered by a band of hostile Fremen scouts. The voice takes on a special prominence.
here because the chance encounter occurs at night; voice is the only tool that Jessica can use to assess danger.

“Please do not run, intruders,” the [Fremen] voice said as Paul made to withdraw into the defile. “If you run you’ll only waste your body’s water.”

They want us for the water in our flesh! Jessica thought. Her muscles overrode all fatigue, flowed into maximum readiness without external betrayal. She pinpointed the location of the voice, thinking: Such stealth! I didn’t hear him. And she realized that the owner of that voice had permitted himself only the small sounds, the natural sounds of the desert. (281–82)

Through an analysis of voice alone, Jessica surmises the exact nature of the present danger (brutally utilitarian), locates her opponent (immediately above her), and determines his abilities (talented enough to evade her surveillance and expertly mimic the desert surroundings). The voice functions here like a reversed sonar, where the Bene Gesserit can absorb the vocalized sound of another in order to map out her environment.

Of course, the most dazzling Bene Gesserit vocal talent in the narrative is the “Voice” by which adherents not only take in the particular vocal intonations of others, but also utilize them as a form of mind control. Herbert structures the Voice as the Bene Gesserit’s direct access to another character’s subconscious. A victim of the Voice cannot easily resist a stylized command because he/she understands the directive as incorporating aspects of his/her own voice, a twisted form of persuasive self-talk. Herbert introduces this talent in the first chapter of the novel, where Jessica submits Paul to a test by a Bene Gesserit Reverend Mother in order to discover if he might, in fact, be their messianic Kwisatz Haderach come a generation early.

Paul faced the old woman, holding anger in check. “Does one dismiss the Lady Jessica as though she were a serving wench?”

A smile flicked the corners of the wrinkled old mouth. “The Lady Jessica was my serving wench, lad, for fourteen years at school.” She nodded. “And a good one, too. Now, you come here!”

The command whipped out at him. Paul found himself obeying before he could think about it. Using the Voice on me, he thought. He stopped at her gesture, standing beside her knee. (7)

Despite the contempt he holds for the Reverend Mother, Paul cannot resist her command. Once she has heard him speak and distinguished his unique register, she can forever use it against him.

Clearly, then, the human voice assumes a central importance within the narrative universe of Dune. Although it is a key medium by which readers...
come to understand the nuanced political atmosphere of the story, the voice is especially important in Herbert’s characterization of the powerful Bene Gesserit order. The Bene Gesserit Voice ability, in turn, stands as one manifestation of this much larger significance, and it therefore provides a good foundation for considering how the novel grapples with contemporary anxieties surrounding the voice. It is to these specific anxieties that I turn attention now.

2. “The Voice” and Cultural Anxieties about the Voice

Although the Voice appears in adaptations of *Dune* to other mediums (distinguished from regular speech, for instance, by a mechanically raspy quality in the 2000 Sci-Fi Channel miniseries based on the book [see *Dune*, Harrison]), the ability is certainly best explicated in Herbert’s original novel. As a result, the present analysis will only engage in an exploration of the Voice in the novel with an understanding that a comparison between literary and filmic renderings may provide a later and worthy extension of the present findings. Furthermore, the Voice and other powerful Bene Gesserit abilities established in *Dune* become more complex and, in some ways, more problematic in later entries in the series. Because this analysis seeks to understand the popularity of the *first* novel, however, it will only consider manifestations of the Voice within Herbert’s seminal work. Without the wild success of the first novel (success that, I argue, depends in large part on Herbert’s treatment of the voice), it is unlikely that the Dune saga would have progressed far enough for these complexities to arise in the canon narrative.

Within *Dune* the novel, then, the Voice exemplifies three contemporary anxieties regarding human speech explored in academic work. These are, in order, the voice as a dimension of communication beyond signification, as an inherently feminine or motherly trait, and as a unique bond between self and other.

2.1 Voice as Dimension of Communication beyond Signification

The first philosophical consideration of voice exemplified by the Bene Gesserit is Barthes’s notion of “grain.” Barthes defines vocal grain as a component of singing, “the very precise space (genre) of the encounter between language and a voice” (181). The grain of the voice should not be confused with the cultural overlay of emotional expressivity in song, a difference that forever leaves grain-less the more calculated performances of opera. Instead, taking a clever turn on Julia Kristeva, Barthes characterizes the grain as the bodily geno-song at odds with the semiotic pheno-song. Whereas the pheno-song “covers all the phenomena, all the figures which belong to the structure of the language being sung,” the geno-song “is the volume of the singing and speaking voice, . . . that apex (or that depth) of production where the melody really works at the language—not at what it says, but at the voluptuousness
of its sounds-signifiers, of its letters” (182). Put more directly, though perhaps not more simply, the grain is “the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs” (188). It is extraneous to but not completely independent of meaning, a delicious imperfection of the singing voice whose evasion of homogenized expression grants the listener access to an unraveling of subjectivity via jouissance. “It is not the psychological ‘subject’ in me who is listening,” Barthes writes. “The climactic pleasure hoped for is not going to reinforce—to express—that subject but, on the contrary, to lose it” (188). In the end, the grain is the voice beyond signification that threatens, in the most erotic sense, the discursively situated and listening individual.

The multi-dimensionality and excess of voice represented in the grain is a key aspect of the Bene Gesserit Voice in *Dune*. In “Terminology of the Imperium,” a detailed glossary for readers that appears as an appendix at the end of the novel, Herbert defines the Voice as “that combined training originated by the Bene Gesserit which permits an adept to control others merely by selected tone shadings of the voice” (556). From this, readers can gather that the Voice operates through two distinct but related levels: a discursive command (a meaning), and a material, tonal stylization (a grain). The power of the Voice is certainly derived more from the latter than the former; it is a fantastic training in *grain* that transforms *a voice* into *the Voice*. Without this bodily instruction, a Bene Gesserit’s imperative would be indistinguishable from a particularly haughty plea.

The Voice as grain is especially apparent in the novel during a scene where Jessica, painfully, cannot speak. House Harkonnen’s devastating overthrow of House Atreides in the middle of *Dune* is successful in part because the attackers prepare for every conceivable resistance, including the Voice. Baron Vladimir Harkonnen, architect of the coup, gives special orders to gag the drugged and bound Jessica so that she cannot use her talent against him when she wakes. The Baron even gloats about his success as he and his Mentat, a kind of human computer named Piter, loom over Jessica after she comes to powerless consciousness:

> “Such a pity we cannot have our conversation, my dear Lady Jessica,” the Baron said. “However, I’m aware of your abilities.” He glanced at the Mentat. “Isn’t that true, Piter?”
> “As you say, Baron,” the man said. [. . .]
> “In many ways, Piter is quite naive,” the Baron said. “He doesn’t admit to himself what a deadly creature you are, Lady Jessica. I’d show him, but it’d be a foolish risk.” (172)

The Baron’s decision to further appoint a deaf soldier to guard Jessica underscores this caution: “The Baron knows I could use the Voice on any other man”
Without the ability to physically speak, to invoke a vocal grain here, Jessica’s own Voice is utterly useless.

It is important to note the ways in which Herbert associates vocal grain with danger and anxiety in this scene. The very grain of Jessica’s voice forces the Baron to display extra care in handling her during the coup, designing a level of security unnecessary for other characters. For the Baron, the grain of Jessica’s Voice marks her as a deadly creature, more deadly, perhaps, than the average person could ever imagine. In the same way that the excessive grain of the voice always threatens to dissolve the listener’s subjectivity in a Barthesian sense, then, the excessive grain of the Bene Gesserit Voice always threatens to wreck the willpower of other characters in *Dune*. Such danger and power will become even more apparent during later discussion of how the Voice links self and other. Before exploring this transcendental link, however, I would like to consider a more specific bond that involves a central consideration of the voice: that of mother and child.

### 2.2 Voice as Inherently Feminine and Motherly Trait

Echoing Barthes’s discussion of the vocal grain, Dolar notes that historical literary accounts of the voice-divorced-from-meaning position it as “senseless and threatening—all the more so because of its seductive and intoxicating powers. Furthermore, the voice beyond sense is self-evidently equated with femininity” (43). If the non-sensible voice can threaten the subject, then it must have some inroad or claim to subjectivity in the first place, an association which justifies an exploration of the link between the voice and the infant-mother dyad. In *The Acoustic Mirror*, Kaja Silverman draws upon Kristeva’s theory of the multi-faceted chora in order to theorize the centrality of the mother’s voice in human subjectivity and art. Silverman characterizes Kristeva’s “most familiar” definition of the chora as the sonorous envelope of the mother’s voice that surrounds her child and stands as the precondition of subjectivity:

> The infant invokes the mother as a source of warmth, nourishment, and bodily care by means of various vocal and muscular spasms, and the mother’s answering sounds and gestures weave a provisional enclosure around the child. That enclosure provides the child with its first, inchoate impressions of space, and with its initial glimmerings of otherness, thereby paving the way for the mirror stage and the entry into language. However, the chora is more an image of unity than one of archaic differentiation; prior to absence and an economy of the object, it figures the oneness of mother and child. (102)

Ironically, the erotic wholeness of the sonic chora is disrupted by the very product of that joy—laughter—which the infant directs at objects first sensed
as discrete within the space: breast, light, music, voice (Kristeva 283). For Kristeva, infant laughter identifies spaces and places, and it functions as both the link between personal and other and the evidence of their distinction. This doubling orient[s] the infant toward language acquisition in the mirror stage and also establishes conditions that “constitute the semiotic disposition and insure its maintenance in the symbolic” (285).

The child is, as a result, never beyond the mother’s voice, which maintains a psychical presence through Kristeva’s notion of the “semiotic.” The child’s later ability to name spaces in language recalls the earlier sonorous designation through laughter, thus implicating the mother’s voice as precondition for all signification. Rather than dissolve, the chora recedes to the interior; the ability to name in language “is a replacement for what the speaker perceives as an archaic mother—a more or less victorious confrontation, never finished with her” (Kristeva 291). As Silverman concludes, “this account of the chora thus extends its function well beyond the infantile scene, giving it a longevity equal to the life of the subject” (103).

As if drawing directly from Kristeva’s theory of the chora, Herbert constructs the Voice in *Dune* as a quality unique to women and motherhood. A conversation between Paul and the Reverend Mother regarding the “Truth-sayer drug” at the end of the first chapter posits Bene Gesserit membership, training, and talent as women’s endeavor. The Reverend Mother suggests that the messiah will be the only male who can consume the drug and look into the memories of both male and female ancestors for wisdom. “Your Kwisatz Haderach?” Paul questions.

“Yes, the one who can be many places at once: the Kwisatz Haderach. Many men have tried the drug . . . so many, but none has succeeded.”

“They tried and failed, all of them?”

“Oh, no.” She shook her head. “They tried and died.” (13)

Men simply cannot bear the training or talents of the full Bene Gesserit. In fact, the only reason that Jessica decides to train Paul as a Bene Gesserit, and particularly in the Voice, is because she believes that he may be their young messiah in need of defense. The Reverend Mother agrees with her logic and implores Jessica to continue training him: “Now I caution you [. . .] to ignore the regular order of training. His own safety requires the Voice. He already has a good start in it, but we both know how much more he needs . . . and that desperately” (28).

In this way, the taught Voice becomes a crucial link between Jessica and Paul, between mother and child, within the narrative. Jessica’s training, of which the Voice is a central aspect, functions like the maternal chora to structure Paul’s subjectivity. As the Reverend Mother indicates, Paul’s very
survival depends on Jessica effectively passing her Voice on to him. Paul is an eager child and accepts her instruction without question, and it is precisely this training in equal parts Voice and discernment that equips him to negotiate his capture by House Harkonnen during the political coup. Bound and gagged next to her son, Jessica fears that Paul will misjudge the situation and use his Voice incorrectly. Instead, he is the perfect Bene Gesserit specimen:

He mustn’t try the Voice! she prayed. The deaf guard!
Paul’s eyes closed.
He had been practicing the awareness-breathing, calming his mind, listening to their captors. The deaf one posed a problem, but Paul contained his despair. The mind-calming Bene Gesserit regimen his mother had taught him kept him poised, ready to expand any opportunity. (174)

Overdetermined as a subject by Jessica’s training, Paul knows to withhold the Voice until the right moment presents itself. In the same way that linguistic identification and signification find basis in the internalized chora, Paul’s ability to correctly perceive his surroundings—to relate to his world at all—springs forth from Jessica’s internalized Voice.

It is not until later, after the two escape and find themselves contemplating Leto’s death and their options as displaced aristocracy, that each begins to realize the very different costs of the training. For Jessica, Paul’s ability to transcend her training unnerves her:

Jessica turned away, frightened at the bitter strength in her son’s voice, hearing the precise assessment of chances. She sensed that his mind had leaped ahead of her, that it now saw more in some respects than she did. She had helped train the intelligence which did this, but now she found herself fearful of it. Her thoughts turned, seeking toward the lost sanctuary of her Duke, and tears burned her eyes. (198)

Paul’s realization is very different. Finding himself unable to mourn his father’s death as his mother does, Paul worries that Jessica’s extensive training may have structured him into a terrible, mechanical subjectivity:

The emptiness was unbearable. Knowing how the clockwork had been set in motion made no difference. He could look to his own past and see the start of it—the training, the sharpening of talents, the refined pressures of sophisticated disciplines, even exposure to the O.C. Bible at a critical moment [. . .]. And he could look ahead—the most terrifying direction—to see where it all pointed.

I’m a monster! he thought. A freak!
“No,” he said. Then: “No. No! NO!” [. . .]

“Paul!”

His mother was beside him, holding his hands, her face a gray blob peering at him. “Paul, what’s wrong?”

“You!” he said.

“I’m here, Paul,” she said. “It’s all right.”

“What have you done to me?” he demanded.

In a burst of clarity, she sensed some of the roots of the question, said: “I gave birth to you.” (203–04)

It is birth—the mother-child dyad—that allows for all other forms of interpelation to emerge.

Regarding theories of the maternal voice as “retroactive” cultural fantasies which help to construct a “reading of a situation which is fundamentally irrecoverable,” Silverman notes that

the fantasy of the maternal-voice-as-sonorous-envelope takes on a different meaning depending upon the psychic “lookout point”; viewed from the site of the unconscious, the image of the infant held within the environment or sphere of the mother’s voice is an emblem of infantile plenitude and bliss. Viewed from the site of the preconscious/conscious system, it is an emblem of impotence and entrapment. (73)

In the same way, the Voice is simultaneously the blessed precondition for Paul’s survival and the source of his deep anxiety regarding the determination of his identity. Paul’s subjectivity is guaranteed and sustained through Jessica’s Voice, but the inescapable, sonic link to his mother paradoxically threatens the very sense of self it constructs. In addition, the vocal bond between Jessica and Paul also acts as a template for greater links between self and other, giving rise to new anxieties when they utilize the power of the Voice on others outside of their familial dyad.

2.3 Voice as Bond between Self and Other

In A Voice and Nothing More, Dolar tacitly rejects ontological configurations of the voice as a dimension of communication beyond signification and as a maternal kernel of subjectivity, submitting in their place a theory of the voice as the object of the acoustic psychoanalytic drive. “All the objects of the drive,” he writes, “function precisely through the mechanism of—excessive—incorporation and expulsion,” which situates them as “the very operators of the division into an exterior and an interior, while in themselves they do not belong to either[;] they are placed in the zone of overlapping, the crossing, the extimate” (81). One of the crucial ways that the voice divides subjective
external from internal, for example, is in relation to language and the body. The voice somehow links impersonal linguistic systems to the biology of the throat while evading the scrutiny of linguistic phonemes and also leaving the body at the moment of its existence. As a result, the voice “floats” between language and the body, a common factor between the two sites that belongs to neither (72–73).

A more striking overlap of the object voice is the continuum it forms between self and other. On the one hand, the voice as expression of self points to an unstoppable power to invade the other. The ears have no natural lids, and so the “power of the voice stems from the fact that it is so hard to keep it at bay—it hits us from the inside, it pours directly into the interior, without protection” (78). The audible world does not possess the same affirming distance and stability that the visible world affords to the perceiving subject; we cannot easily locate or stop the voices in our environment. On the other hand, the speaker of the voice also exposes herself as a product of the system, of the Other, in the moment of speaking:

The voice comes from some unfathomable invisible interior and brings it out, lays bare, discloses, uncovers, reveals that interior. [. . .] What is exposed, of course, is not some interior nature, an interior treasure too precious to be disclosed, or some true self, or a primordial inner life; rather, it is an interior which is itself the result of the signifying cut, its product, its cumbersome remainder, an interior created by the intervention of the structure. (80)

As a result, the voice complicates the typically clear division between interior self and exterior Other. “It cuts directly into the interior,” Dolar summarizes, “so much so that the very status of the exterior becomes uncertain, and it directly discloses the interior, so much so that the very supposition of an interior depends on the voice” (81). The evasive voice is the slippery other of signification, embodying the object of the Freudian drive toward enjoyment rather than the trough and tracks of meaningful Lacanian desire.

In *Dune*, the Bene Gesserit Voice mimics Dolar’s object voice by similarly complicating divisions between exterior and interior, self and other. When a Bene Gesserit uses the Voice, she is not using her voice—she is adjusting her vocal tones to match those significant to her victim. As a result, the Voice is neither wholly reflective of the adept nor her target. It is something that shares qualities of both while remaining independent of either. This is most evident when Jessica and Paul escape their Harkonnen captors, Czigo and Kinet, by using the Voice during the coup:

“Remove her gag,” Paul commanded.

Jessica felt the words rolling in the air. The tone, the timbre excel-
lent—imperative, very sharp. A slightly lower pitch would have been better, but it could still fall within this man’s spectrum.

Czigo shifted his hand up to the band around Jessica’s mouth, slipped the knot on the gag.

“Stop that!” Kinet ordered. [. . .]

Jessica twisted her neck, spat out the gag. She pitched her voice in low, intimate tones. “Gentlemen! No need to fight over me.” At the same time, she writhed sinuously for Kinet’s benefit.

She saw them grow tense, knowing that in that instant they were convinced of the need to fight over her. Their disagreement required no other reason. In their minds, they were fighting over her now.3 (177–78)

The Voice here is a synthesis of Paul’s tonality with Czigo’s unique “spectrum,” Jessica’s pitch with her captors’ desires. The sensation of the Voice rolling through the air between parties captures Dolar’s “floating” voice as distinct entity belonging neither to self nor other.

To take a turn of phrase from Dolar, however, the power of the Voice “cuts both ways” (80). The commanding Voice certainly invokes the inescapable authority that marks the speaking subject in Dolar’s philosophy, but the Bene Gesserit reliance on speaking as an other also undermines some of her authority through the exposure of her fictive interiority constructed against the Other. In other words,4 although the Voice always takes root in a particular Bene Gesserit, it also leaves an acolyte beholden to the Other because the ability is, in essence, a systemic and liminal entity that preys upon everyone rather than anyone.

Returning to the scene where Jessica and Paul find themselves surrounded by Fremen in the darkened desert, we see that Jessica’s apparently unique Voice is shot through with remnants of many O/others. After the leader of the nomads emerges from the shadows to confront Jessica, asking her if she is capable of speech, “Jessica put all the royal arrogance at her command into her manner and voice. Reply was urgent, but she had not heard enough of this man to be certain she had a register on his culture and weakness” (291). She becomes surer of her chances to invoke the Voice effectively only through extended conversation with the man: “I have his voice and pattern registered now, Jessica thought. I could control him with a word, but he’s a strong man [. . .] worth much more to us unblunted and with full freedom of action. We shall see” (293). This exchange betrays Jessica’s reliance on the Other for Voice. Her all-powerful Voice is an amalgamation of contextual factors: the Fremen leader’s own pattern, his cultural overlays, and the demands of the situation (potentially leaving him “unblunted”). One could also add the Reverend Mothers who taught her the Voice and the expectations of Jessica’s royal station. In the end, then, there is very little “of Jessica” in her Voice. She is as much its
victim as her targets.

And yet, there is no sense in the narrative that Jessica feels any significant anxiety regarding this troubling effect of the Voice, an absence that stands in especially stark contrast when we consider how its grain inspires feelings of danger in the Baron and its chora inspires feelings of suffocation in Paul. Despite the fact that Dolar’s careful philosophical exploration of the voice positions its object inflection as arguably the most upending of subjectivity, Jessica appears unfazed by the complication of self and other via Voice in the narrative of *Dune*. What are we to make of this absence of anxiety? A possible answer to this question can be found in Herbert’s personal fascination with the general semantics movement in the 1950s—a historical link that forms the key to understanding Herbert’s ideas of vocal control and the seductive appeal of such control for readers.

### 3. General Semantics and Herbert’s Logic of Vocal Control

In his own exploration of the Voice in *Dune*, Paul Q. Kucera argues that Herbert structures the novel as “a study of the perils and seductions of absolutes,” with the Voice as his central trope for exploring the human desire for both possibility and security (233). Although, for Kucera, the Voice suppresses a liberating heteroglossia through the transformation of dialogue into command, it also encourages its users to steep themselves further in totalizing myths and systems of belief that come to dominate their character. Similarly, Kucera notes that the generic form of the novel works on the same logic as the Voice, where a clever author can “register” the cultural desires of his/her readers in order to direct their hermeneutic activities through narrative style. Herbert, however, undermines this generic convention by using the Voice to support a stifling biological determinism in *Dune*. “Could Herbert,” Kucera questions, “be telling us one last time that the absolute is death?” (243).

My own reading of the Voice is far less optimistic than Kucera’s. I do not see evidence within the narrative that suggests those who use the Voice find it problematic to become trapped in the “absolute” of its mythologizing. In fact, quite the opposite appears to be true: those who use the Voice are among the most powerful characters in the novel, characters who come out as righteous victors at the conclusion of the narrative. Indeed, in the middle of the narrative, Jessica and Paul win over the allegiance of the Fremen tribes through their use of the Voice and Bene Gesserit prophesy. Playing one prophesy against another, Paul assumes the mantle of the Lisan al-Gaib, the Fremen messiah prophesied to return control of the planet Arrakis to the nomads, and he successfully overthrows the evil House Harkonnen and the corrupt Emperor with the help of the desert people at the conclusion of the novel. Paul, who at one point experiences a crisis based on his Voice training, comes to embrace this ability by the end of the novel when he encounters the Rever-
end Mother again and confronts her about the breeding program from which he arose:

“You mustn’t speak of these things!” the old woman hissed.
“Silence!” Paul roared. The word seemed to take substance as it twisted through the air between them under Paul’s control.
The old woman reeled back into the arms of those behind her, face blank with shock at the power with which he had seized her psyche. “Jessica,” she whispered. “Jessica.”
“I remember your gom jabbar,” Paul said. “You remember mine. I can kill you with a word.” (500)

Rather than warn readers about the problematic tendency inherent in the absolutism of the Voice, Herbert instead positions the Voice as a tool of redemption, a means by which his displaced and manipulated protagonists can regain power through careful application of their skillful abilities.

In this way, Herbert’s treatment of the Voice betrays his association with the general semantics movement in the mid-twentieth century. Drawing from Herbert’s biographer Timothy O’Reilly, Ronny Parkerson claims that Herbert studied general semantics while writing *Dune* and actually worked for a time as a ghostwriter for S. I. Hayakawa, one of the foremost proponents of general semantics at the time (405). Alfred Korzybski, the founder of the movement, envisioned a “general semantic” as a “new language of communication with a structure similar to mathematics [that] would give mankind a true description of reality” (Paulson 41). The creation of such a language, for Korzybski, was necessary if humanity hoped to ever transcend its many problems. General semantics proposes that most of the “insoluble” social problems that human beings face are in fact the result of failure “in organizing human co-operation—in using the machinery of human communication” (Hayakawa 185). As a result, practitioners and supporters of general semantics promote the belief that training people to better understand their language results in a more accurate understanding of the world in which they live—the basis for all problem solving.

The central metaphor for this alignment between language and reality, writes Elwood Murray, “is the map-territory, word-facts formulation. A statement is to its facts as a map is to its territory. The measure of the adequacy of maps is their correspondence to their territory. Similarly with words, their suitability depends upon their correspondence to their fact territory” (38). Individuals who consciously work on ensuring accuracy of their language “maps” have a much better chance of living life effectively than those who never check their maps against reality. Hayakawa provides the curious with a list of “rules” that should be memorized in achieving this goal:

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1. A map is NOT the territory it stands for; words are NOT things. A map does not represent ALL of a territory; words never say ALL about anything. [. . .]

4. Beware the word “is,” which can cause more trouble than any other word in the language. [. . .]

8. BEWARE OF DEFINITIONS: In one way, they say too much—a “chair” is not always “something to sit in”; in another way, they never say enough, because characteristics are left out in any verbalization.

9. Use INDEX NUMBERS and DATES as reminders that NO WORD EVER HAS EXACTLY THE SAME MEANING TWICE.

Cow₁ is not cow₂, cow₂ is not cow₃ [. . .]. (194)

And so on. One can see here why Lee Thayer, an editor of a volume on general semantics and communication, might characterize the movement as a cultish and “substantively [. . .] hygienic discipline, not a scientific one,” whose value is “in its potential for stimulating man’s variety and diversity, not in its potential as an integrator of a science of man” (ix, xi).

Given the Bene Gesserit order’s intense attention to perfecting physical and mental faculties within the narrative of *Dune*, Parkerson concludes that “the whole of the Bene Gesserit technology of consciousness is based on general semantic principles” (406). One must admit an eerie similarity between the Bene Gesserit achievement of almost magical control through applied physiological regimens and the general semanticists’ belief in the improvement of humans through linguistic training and perfection, a similarity substantiated by Herbert’s own involvement with the hygienic movement. His appropriation and refashioning of Sanskrit words to provide a vocabulary that describes the order’s unique programming of the miniscule, including *prana* (“The body’s muscles when considered as units for ultimate training” [549].) and *bindu* (“Relating to the human nervous system, especially to nerve training” [537].), underscores the resonance between the fictional and the historical.

The glaring difference between the two, however, is Herbert’s narrative choice to extend the realm of training to include the bodily with the discursive, crafting a fictional order of women who are effective because of their mastery of physiological processes in addition to verbal and mental abilities. The Voice is the crowning achievement of such an extension, melding a careful linguistic consciousness with a biological awareness of vocal tonality and grain. In light of the anxieties surrounding subjectivity which philosophers have posited as central to the voice, including the grain’s threat of dissolution, the chora’s suffocation and haunting, and the object’s tendency to collapse everything into Other, this crucial melding captured in the Voice also stands as a significant literary gesture toward a world where the voice is, instead, under control of the subject. Paul finally escapes the underpinnings of the chora by dazzling
the ultimate Mother with the power of his own voice. Jessica feels no anxiety toward the Other at the base of her Voice because its very presence ultimately allows her to command the Other. In the world of *Dune*, then, the voice is not something that causes anxiety in speaking subjects; it is a tool that allows speaking subjects to gain power over themselves and others.

Herbert’s world is fictional, of course, but his Bene Gesserit Voice is a literary vision that extends the general semantic project concerned with the problems of inaccurate language to the everyday felt anxieties of the voice. In the same way general semanticists propose that human beings do away with social problems through the harnessing of language, Herbert suggests that humans can quash personal anxieties of the voice through careful attention and training of the body. Readers who experience the kinds of anxieties postulated by Barthes, Kristeva, and Dolar discover a world relieved of these threats in the pages of *Dune*, an offering that in part explains the seemingly timeless appeal of the novel. That the general semantics movement may sound to some like science fiction and yet continues to attract adherents in the scholarly world suggests Herbert’s fiction could also function as a literary template for individuals frustrated with the physiological habits and problems of humanity. The very assurance granted to the Bene Gesserit through their Voice certainly makes Herbert’s vision of stamping out vocal anxiety a seductive one for his millions of readers around the globe.

As a result, the Voice is also the site of a great danger for readers of *Dune*. Admittedly, it is unlikely that Herbert’s readership (or humanity in general) will ever attain the kinds of vocal mastery exemplified in the novel, but for Herbert even to suggest that this mastery is desirable is foolhardy. If the human voice is indeed a site of anxiety for emplaced subjects, it is only because that anxiety involves a concurrent pleasure. For Barthes, the pleasure is the *jouissance* that results from the temporary displacing of subjectivity through the grain; the threat of the subject’s undoing is also the momentary orgasmic release from the confines of subjectivity. For Kristeva, the pleasure is the feeling of blissful union that results from the envelopment of the forming subject in the chora; any anxiety is only a shadowy reminder of the intensely pleasurable, pre-subjective state of the child. For Dolar, the pleasure is the enjoyment that accompanies the drive as it always, always misses the object voice and its challenges to the barriers between interior and exterior. The voice is thus a source of human pleasure as much as it is a source of anxiety. In fact, the voice inspires anxiety because it is a source of pleasure, and vice versa. To be seduced by Herbert’s vision, to pursue a reining in of the voice’s maddening excesses and paradoxes in the name of human evolution and improvement, would also be to ignore—and perhaps even destroy—the unique pleasures that the voice affords. That Herbert ultimately appeals to the reading subject through this very lure is, therefore, an unspeakable act in more ways than one.
Notes
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1. The fact that many singers refer to the voice as “their instrument” underscores this simultaneous possession and alienation.

2. While Paul’s struggle with his Bene Gesserit honed prescience and the suffocating destiny it entails make up significant aspects of the next two entries in the series (*Dune Messiah* and *Children of Dune*), it is his sister, Alia Atreides, who displays the most acute struggle over the issue of voice here. Jessica gives birth to Alia toward the end of the first novel. The unique conditions of her birth, however, bestow upon Alia an otherworldly maturity and the full abilities of a Bene Gesserit Reverend Mother, including Voice, telepathy, and the fabled “Other Memory” that grants full access to one’s ancestral memories. These gifts position the four-year-old as a powerful force who helps her brother seize control of Arrakis at the end of *Dune*, but they become a burden as the canon narrative progresses as she becomes haunted by the “voice” of her grandfather, the Baron Vladimir Harkonnen. By *Children of Dune*, Alia succumbs to what the Bene Gesserit call “abomination,” where an acolyte surrenders her consciousness to the voice of an ancestor—in this case, the evil Baron himself.

3. Careful readers will note that the interplay between the subconscious and the negative suggestion in this exchange resembles certain Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) techniques, a quasi-science of human improvement first advanced by Richard Bandler and John Grinder. Given the fact, however, that Bandler and Grinder did not publish even their initial ideas until 1975 (see Bradley and Biedermann), ten years after Herbert published *Dune*, it is unlikely that tenets or methods of NLP significantly influenced Herbert’s construction of the Voice. Any resonance between the two is formally, but not historically, significant. The author wishes to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing this formal resemblance to his attention.

4. The author wishes to note the delicious irony of that phrase in this paragraph.

5. Of course, Herbert is not the only mid-twentieth-century sf writer with ties to general semantics. A. E. van Vogt and Robert Heinlein have both explicitly acknowledged the effect of general semantics on their work. Neither of them, however, extends general semantic principles to the human body in the same way that Herbert does with the Voice. For more information regarding the links between their work and the general semantics movement, see Drake.

6. Murray was also one of the foremost proponents of the speech hygiene movement, which historically coincided with general semantics and promoted similar methods for human improvement through verbal communication.

7. The Institute of General Semantics, based out of Fort Worth, Texas, currently publishes the research journal *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* and hosts schol-
ary conferences every year. For more information about their unexpectedly extensive reach and influence, visit www.generalsemantics.org.

Works Cited


Abstract
Frank Herbert’s *Dune* is the bestselling science fiction novel of all time, but the reason for its supremacy is unclear. This article argues that Herbert’s narrative treatment of the human voice is a major source of the novel’s enduring appeal. In opposition to philosophical explorations that ultimately position the voice as a source of anxiety for speaking subjects, Herbert constructs a fictional world where focus and discipline grant characters control over their otherwise fickle and threatening voices—a product of Herbert’s own fascination with the twentieth century’s general semantics movement at the time that he wrote *Dune*. After addressing three major philosophical approaches to the voice (Barthes’s *grain*, Kristeva’s *chora*, and Dolar’s *object*) that resonate with the narrative, this article suggests that Herbert’s promotion of vocal control functions as a seductive offering to speaking subjects—one that, if seriously pursued, would destroy the unique pleasures that the voice affords.