

AN OUTSIDER VIEW / A VUE D'AIGLE: NEGOTIATING LINGUISTIC SPACES IN MULTILINGUAL EUROPE

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Abstract

Written as an autoethnographic travel journal, this critical essay interrogates spaces of linguistic performance and subjectivity within discrete, arbitrary language contexts in four (mostly) European countries. Drawing on journal entries, academic conference discourses and quotidian experiences of and through language, the author queries the negotiation of linguistic spaces on the micro, meso and macro levels, in Europe and, to a lesser extent, in Canada. Using poetics, language fragments and codeswitching, its representation enacts tensions of the spaces it seeks to critique.

Keywords: performance, subjectivity, language, context, experience, space, level

Rezumat

Prezentat ca note de călătorie, acest eseu autoetnografic explorează discret și arbitrar, de pe poziții de spațiu, performanțele verbale, subiectivitatea și contextele glotice din, cel mult, patru state europene. Referindu-se la evenimente cotidiene, discuții academice în cadrul conferinței și experiențe verbale de zi cu zi, autoarea cercetează relația spațiilor glotice (europene, în primul rând, dar, prin extensiune, și a celor canadiene) din perspectiva micro-, meso- și macronivelor. Având la bază poeme integrale și corpusuri fragmentare, studiul pune în valoare aspectele acestor spații glotice.

Cuvinte-cheie: performanță, subiectivitate, limbă, context, experiență, spațiu, nivel

Planes, Trains et l'hors-contexte

Journal Entry: *YYZ* → *DUS Hour 2+23/24 août-08*

Running from Sunsets, Losing Time

For an instant,

skimming cotton white gives way to the palest cheek

As

a sulphur halo hides beyond stratus shades of glimmering magenta

Until

a jaundiced, fading saffron yields to greying cerulean

And finally

a charcoal carpet pebbles the surface of infinity

dominating a distant horizon fading to midnight blue.

The origins of this writing (if one were to believe in the possibility of fixity) are located in a commonplace “business” trip of a new(er) academic researcher, travelling to Europe to attend two conferences: the large-scale “AI-

LA 2008¹: 15th World Congress of Applied Linguistics”, in Essen, Germany, in late August, 2008, and the small-scale “Academic Identities in Crisis?”, a conference of the University of Central Lancashire in Preston, UK, in early September, 2008. The journal entries comprising the “data” of this essay were logged over 16 days, nine trains, five planes, four (mostly) European countries, three official languages (and several dialectical iterations of said languages), and innumerable metros, undergrounds, taxis, buses, cars, foot-paths and moving walkways. The telling of this journey is autobiographical, where, as Wang reminds us, “autobiography can become a site on which the semiotic is re-memorized through narrative and poetic writings” (Wang, 2006, p. 122).

Je parle le français, l’anglais, « le métro » et « les fleurs ».

En arrivant à Essen – ayant imprimé d’avance certains documents de voyage (surtout le passe-partout pour le métro fourni par les organisateurs du colloque) – je parle (en anglais) au personnel de l’hôtel afin de me renseigner sur la proximité d’une station de métro. Je marche quelques 400 mètres et je me trouve dans la station Berlinerplatz où j’identifie, sans trop de difficulté, la direction du train qu’il me faut. Une fois dans le métro, je surveille les arrêts. Je sais que je veux aboutir à Messa West. Voyant à l’affiche du métro l’arrêt Messa Ost, je crois savoir où aller. Le problème (tous ceux et celles qui comprennent le français et l’allemand auront déjà constaté mon erreur) est le suivant : étant bilingue, je me sers de l’interlangue français/allemand, pour traduire Ouest en Ost. Hélas, Ost est Est et West is West (Kipling must be having a good chuckle on me). Je constate, alors qu’en métro, il vaut mieux parler « métro ». Pendant le restant de mon séjour, je ne me fie plus à la langue française, ni à la langue anglaise, ni à la langue allemande en matière de transport. Dans le métro, je parle (et je lis) uniquement en métro. C’est bien plus simple ainsi.

Journal Entry: Gruga Park, Essen (Botanical Gardens) 24 août-08

I enter the Gruga Park without uttering a word. I have a badge that provides me free entry and so do not need to use verbal language with the gate-keepers. Once inside, I feel myself thinking – am I thinking in language? Yes, but which language?

Meandering – without map or the German language – through the paths of the park, I happen upon a glorious array of dahlias, rows and rows of dahlias, in stands of vibrant colour, many of the groupings more than five feet high. I notice all the people moving in and out of the rows, emerging from the clusters and then disappearing again, laughing and smiling and taking photo after photo. In this place of colour and light, petals become words, and all who are present know how to read.

¹AILA is the acronym of the *Association internationale de linguistique appliquée*.

Of Politics and (Language) Policy

"If you don't have explicit language policy, you have implicit language policy" ~ Neville Alexander.

Journal Entry: AILA 2008 - Opening ceremonies & keynote 24 août-08

- "Perhaps we will no longer need [to talk about language policy] when there is no longer a need to legislate policy" – Susan Glass, President, AILA.
- "The developments of EU language policy are of great significance to Africa, and indeed to the rest of the world." – Neville Alexander, Keynote
- Middle class people have a vested interest in maintaining "profits of distinction" (Alexander, after Bourdieu (1984)) associated with bi/multilingualism. And, I wonder as I listen, are these perhaps similar to the profits associated with the hegemony of unilingualism in Canada?
- "Laissez-faire [language] policy notoriously reinforces agendas of dominant groups." – Neville Alexander, Keynote.

The conference opens in a fashion typical to its genre, as various dignitaries and organizational representatives bring greetings to the congregation. Of note – to me – is a particular comment by Armin Laschet, Shirmheerr (Minister für Generationen, Familie, Frauen und Integration des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen). Minister Laschet makes a number of remarks about the changing linguistic demographics of Germany, and of the Ruhr region hosting the conference, in particular. While interesting, his narrative of the German context is not what catches my attention; rather, it is his matter-of-fact observation of the context I call my own: "We can see in these countries [Canada and certain other colonial States] language policy is even more complicated".

Even though I have travelled to Germany to give a paper on implications of language policy for bilingual citizenship in Canada, it is not until I hear this view of the Other, that I come to see the language policies of my own context more clearly.

La forme autobiographique donne à chacun l'occasion de se croire un sujet plein et responsable. Mais, il suffit de se trouver deux à l'intérieure du même « je » pour que le doute se lève, et que les perspectives s'inversent. Nous ne sommes peut-être en tant que sujets pleins, que les personnages d'un roman sans auteur. La forme autobiographique n'est sans doute pas l'instrument d'expression d'un sujet qui lui préexiste, ni même un « rôle », mais plutôt ce qui détermine l'existence même de sujets (Lejeune, 1980, p. 242).

Indeed, I have come to here, to Germany, but to this conference in particular, to argue in favour of alternate and complex views of official language policy in Canada. But, it is through the eyes of the Other that I glimpse altered, more "complicated" and more complexified views of self. As a result, I see the opening words of the paper I have brought to Germany turning in on myself. Through my autoethnographic retellings, I review my words, seeing the challenges I have set for others as first – and perhaps foremost – my own:

Throughout this paper, I encourage you to imagine bilingualism – and perhaps in imagining, to imagine it differently. Different from what, you may ask? Indeed, there is no universal point of departure other than the space where each one of us brings discursively produced notions of bilingualism to our individual and collective acts of naming language and languaging (Brogden, 2008)...

“The Call from the Familiar on a Journey Abroad (*apud* Wang, 2004)”

The evening before I leave Germany, my husband calls. We speak of this and that, and I share with him my linguistic fatigue, noting that while I have enjoyed my time in Germany, it will be nice to be in Belgium the next day.

“That’s right,” he says, “you’ll be able to speak French in Belgium”.

“In fact,” he continues, “you may fare better in Belgium than you do once you get to England”.

I chuckle in response, not yet realizing how prophetic his observations will turn out to be...“the ‘significance of place’ (Kincheloe et al., 1991) is simultaneously historical, cultural, and personal (Wang, 2004, p. 168)”.

« Un éléphant se balançait sur une toile d’araignée... ».

Après une grande semaine de colloque, je me lève tôt afin d’assister à une dernière communication avant le train. Je suis à la recherche de Kizitus Mpoche, récipiendaire d’un des Solidarity Awards annoncés lors de la cérémonie d’ouverture. Je ne sais pas encore pourquoi, mais son titre m’interpelle: « Second Language Learning in a Multilingual Setting: The Primary School Experience in Cameroon » (Mpoche, 2008). Il est vendredi matin, 8h 30, et la salle n’est pas tellement remplie. Pourtant, la présence des autres, tout comme la mienne, semble intentionnée.

- “Inter-individual variability within primary school learners in Cameroon leads to linguistically interesting paths of acquisition of English as a second or foreign language (*ibidem*)”.

- “There is systematic variation in the interlanguage of the learners and acquisition and exposure to input correlate” (*ibidem*).

- “Learners negotiate identities on sociolinguistic lines” (*ibidem*).

Certes, des perles sortent de la communication de Mpoche – mais celle qui brille le plus fort à mes yeux n’a même pas été mentionnée. Mpoche aborde le cadre théorique de Selinker, un continuum de l’interlangue qui date de 1972 (*apud* Mpoche, 2008). C’est alors que je constate le pourquoi de ma présence dans un sens heideggerien (Heidegger, 1969 ; Heidegger, 2002), car, en effet, ma présence est la présence de l’autre, sous forme d’un cadeau que m’offre ce Kizitus Mpoche sans même le savoir...

Journal Entry: AILA 2008 – Kizitus Mpoche 29 août-08

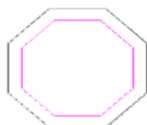
Mpoche (2008) identifies a problem with the continuum model of interlanguage as pertains to the simultaneous development of both languages – he mentions the child whose parents each speak a different maternal lan-

guage in the home, and my mind immediately jumps to les enfants issus de familles exogames au Canada, and then I start to doodle:

What about a braid of two languages, where one might see the space of interlangue as a twisted mélange of lines and colours ?



From this, my errant pen jumps to the notion of a proximity iteration.



And finally, from my scribbles of a proximity iteration, I see a spider web emerge:



Zygiella orb-web, reproduced by permission of Laura Bassett

The “toile linguistique” – this is not a new saying, but perhaps offers some new insight in this particular interpretation – might offer a more complex and dynamic representation of interlinguistic competence in bilingual and polylingual speakers than does a continuum, for in a continuum, I cannot escape the visual representation of two languages remaining distanced from one another on opposite ends of an imaginary existence.

Instead, I can see that while the spider web invokes spaces of difference, intersections and co-mingling along language lines, it also allows for third spaces – or in-between spaces – of multi-language usage. This opening up of third space heeds interpretations of the interlangue by Alber and Py (1985), and also reinforces ideas from Claire Kramersch’s keynote earlier in the week, whereby she encourages a view of “‘thirdness’ as relational, [and applied linguistics as] relation building space” (Kramersch, 2008).

Yes, this idea of spider web is useful, if precarious, because like a spider web, languages – and by extension, spaces of interlanguage – are susceptible to the perils of the environments in which they are produced. C’est ainsi que je me rappelle alors de la comptine enfantine de l’éléphant qui s’amusait à se balancer sur une toile d’araignée ; tout comme l’éléphant, tout comme les jeux d’enfants, j’ose proposer qu’aussi précaires soient-elles, les langues, et les espaces entre les langues, méritent d’être jouées.

“Where is my comfort zone? (apud Lennox, 2003)”

Journal Entry: Bruxelles-MIDI 9h21, 1C 30 août-08

- BUIZENGEN (sp?)

- HALLE (stop)

- o *rivière*
- o *moutons, vaches, blé, summerfallow w/crows*
- o *countryside is hilly farms but losing lots of elevation*
- ENDINGEN (stop)
- SILLY (stop) J too funny J
- o *de nouveau des éoliennes – plus grandes qu’en Allemagne, plus comme SK*
- o *even on this summer day in the countryside it seems the whole of Europe lives in a polluted haze*
- ATH (stop)
- o *a prosperous place L: find out what they do here*
- LEUZE (stop)
- TOURNAI
- o *EEKS! J’ai failli rater le transfert! – too many languages can sometimes be a problem*
- BAISIEUX (sp?)
- LILLE (stop)

Pourquoi ai-je noté ces noms de gares, de villes, de lieux ? Peut-être c’était pour pouvoir faire comme si je pouvais un jour retracer mes pas ? Peut-être c’était pour pouvoir garder trace de ce que je pense avoir vécu ? Ou, c’était peut-être tout simplement pour pouvoir noter quelques marqueurs de relations, même si de tels marqueurs ne sont que plutôt arbitraires, tout comme les langues dans lesquelles ils s’inscrivent...

Having left Germany I find myself, as my husband predicted, feeling some sense of linguistic relief. A Bruxelles, je suis bien dans ma peau (linguistique) même si je n’y parle plus ma langue maternelle. This particular séjour linguistique through Europe (and soon the UK) is most peculiar indeed. Perhaps the confidence of language comes less from one’s linguistic abilities, than from the contexts in which one produces (and is produced by) language(s).

Social Capital (and Deficits) with/in a Maternal Language

Though Bourdieu might agree with Coleman that social capital in the abstract is a neutral resource, his work tends to show how it can be used practically to produce or reproduce inequality, demonstrating for instance how people gain access to powerful positions through the direct and indirect employment of social connections (Wikipedia, 2008).

As I journey through the United Kingdom on my first visit to the “colonial Motherland,” my journal entries become erratic and fragmented. This country I have previously associated with Europe is clearly an island (islands really) unto itself. Although “English” is my maternal language, my English is not this country’s English. Only a few days ago, my ability to speak English in a country with an official language other than English brought some amount of social capital, allowed some degrees of negotiation, and even, on occasion, facilitated my doing and being in linguistic spaces. But here, in “England” I am well and truly Other.

I ask for translations of restaurant terms – crisp English gem, grilled tor-bay plaice and rustic ploughman’s – and wonder aloud why one would possibly think to serve gravy with pudding? I amuse my “British” hosts by calling them British – after all, they tell me, they are English or Scottish or Irish, but as a Canadian, I am the one who is British. Some of the good humoured conference attendees help me with contextual and linguistic (and class) scaffolding, offering mini-lessons on ‘Red Brit universities’ and cities located ‘north of the gravy line’. All of these linguistic encounters lead me to the conclusion that my maternal language is not, in fact, English. Rather, it is something closer to “white-settler-invader-Western-Canadianmiddle class-academically bent-English.” I knew this in theory before travelling to the UK, but now, in England, I gain new insights into language constructions (my own and those of others) in and about (not-yet-post)colonial Canada.

As I journey through linguistic, cultural and academic spaces in England, I am both privileged and marginalized by my tonguing of things. My accent is both capital and deficit, my vocabulary too. I must find new ways of negotiating for meaning within language, and at times, these negotiations take all of the interlinguistic and intersubjective abilities I have managed to acquire throughout my life.

Micro, Meso and Macro iterations of Language(s) and Context(s)

Journal Entry: Preston – Trowler Keynote (still raining) 6 sept · 08

- Paul Trowler (2008) wants us to problematize identity (me thinks he is not alone), noting “it [identity] is a bit singular and has a fixity about it”.

- He too invokes the meso level of social interaction, and I flip back to review notes from Lin Norton’s (2008) opening workshop on the first day of the conference: o Fanghanel’s (2007) framework tells us various influences (or what Fanghanel calls ‘filters’) operate at three levels of our academic work:

§ The micro, or, internal factors of the individual;

§ The meso, or, those influences related to our department or subject discipline; and,

§ The macro, or, institutional and external factors.

o Norton further notes that these filters are fluid mechanisms.

- Here is where Trowler, Norton, and my musings on language converge: languages – at all levels – are fluid mechanisms.

As my journey draws to a close on my last day before more trains, planes and moving walkways on my way “home,” I connect my two weeks of interactions of and in language and context to Fanghanel’s (2007) interpretations of the micro, the meso and the macro. On the micro level, language frames individual experience; my (or another’s) abilities (and lack thereof) to function in daily life, and to negotiate personal meaning from experiences, reside in the discrete contexts where language, languages and the spaces in between are interpreted, spoken and remain silent. On the meso level, I place languages themselves, associating Fanghanel’s term “subject” with discipline; and, as Foucault (1983) reminds us, the discipline of the discourse ex-

erts its own power on the spaces we inhabit with and through language. Finally, on the macro level, language and context merge, as language produces and comes to be produced by the socio-linguistic spaces – the multiple and contingent contexts – of the collective, by its politics, its policies, and by the State itself.

Postscript

L'une des thématiques de cette nouvelle revue « Langage et contexte » est celle des « langages et communication dans l'espace européen ». Que puis-je tenter d'offrir, en tant que canadienne, à une telle thématique ? Et bien, je tente d'offrir, en guise de remerciement, ce que j'en retire : une perspective de l'autre ; une perspective qui tourne et retourne sur soi-même – où, les philosophes français font bien de me rappeler, « je est un autre » (Lejeune, 1980) et « soi-même [est déjà] comme un autre » (Ricoeur, 1990).

It is indeed difficult, if not impossible, to write without metaphors (Jeffrey, 1997). We are metaphors and we live metaphors (Lakoff et al., 2003), in life, in language, and in our writing out of language(s). I argue, therefore, that taking an outsider view of language – un regard à vue d'aigle – is one way of seeing our own language(s) and language making differently. Or, as Eliot (1942/1974) echoes still and again, it is one (more) way to “know the place for the first time” (Eliot, 1942/1974, p. 221).

Journal Entry: Place Montparnasse, Paris n.d.

There is, in this noisy neon square, a quiet family of four; perfectly coiffed mother, heels clicking on asphalt in time with the flash of the pedestrian light, prepubescent son, windbreaker brushing against that of his father's, crossing the metropolitan gorge in the safety of a paternal embrace, daughter, swinging her purse, her adolescent German lilt audible above the claxon of taxis and the roll of ball bearings as skaters weave, tip boards, and lithely jump through the steeplechase of populous. From across the traffic circle I hear the young girl screaming: Look at me Paris!, as she authoritatively explains something of nothing to her idyllic vacationing family... There is, in this deafening moment, the silence of a thousand footsteps passing by the mute vagabond, his sign a beacon – J'ai faim. And hungry words echo in the hearts of the able, who turn a blind eye to another portion of the exhaust-stained, urine-infused sidewalk...

Language turns as/in a kaleidoscopic cacophony, b(l)ending and falling in unique and intertwined colours. How might we reconceptualize language(s) and contexts?

How indeed...

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