

# Only Children and Idiots Babble:

## *Motley Convergences of Self and Meaning in Foreign Language Learning*

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*“Learning to speak does not mean learning to use a pre-existent tool for designating a world already familiar to us; it means acquiring a familiarity and acquaintance with the world itself and how it confronts us.”*

—Hans Georg Gadamer,  
*Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 63

**N**ot long ago, a foreign language teaching newsletter I receive published, amid foreign language tongue twisters and teaching method tips, a list of ten “Rules for Being Human.” The title piqued my curiosity; in a profession that restricts itself primarily to instrumental concerns, it is an event to see raised the question of human meaning. And so I read through several pleasant rules having to do with life as an on-going lesson until suddenly at number seven — a number sacred in so many wisdom traditions — the tone changed:

**7. Others are simply mirrors of you. You cannot love or hate something about another person unless it reflects to you something you love or hate about yourself.**

Wow — what an odd, ptolemaï statement to find in a newsletter for foreign language educators. Here’s a new spin on the familiar admonition that if you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail — now all you can see, love, or hate are hammers. This seems a fairly dangerous view if only on the principle that heterogeneity is required for life to go on; I mean to say that if to excuse or not to excuse amounts to the same thing, if the only site worthy of sustained reflection is the one contained under my hat, then I am doomed to the same condition of imploding self-sufficiency that did in Narcissus. And even if there were nothing fishy about the notion that I can only discern in another qualities that I myself possess and know I possess, even if this notion didn’t rest on the subtext that anything not immediately familiar is therefore not worthy of my interest, still it would remain that this “rule for being human,” appearing in the express context of an offering intended to leaven foreign language teachers’ thinking about what they do, represents a kind of disciplinary fatalism: why strike out from the familiar terrain off one’s own culturally contoured languaging at all if really there is no unfamiliar beyond, if all the world is one great Hall of Mirrors to my strutting Louis XIV? *Le monde, c’est moi?*

Well, actually, maybe in a way the world is me. Centrapuntality in the universe is granted any reader of Rule #7, you as well as me, so that I am merely your mirror as much as you are merely

mine. Maybe indeed the ancient, ineluctable shoots of character and experience that connect human beings constitute a network of resonant similitude wherein, so Zen teaches, the vast universe may be encountered in a grain of sand. But we must note the formulation, for it is not "You are simply a mirror of others" but "Others are simply mirrors of you." Ethically considered, globally considered, considered in terms of the face the West shows to the world in the present historical epoch, I would like to suggest that any true realization regarding the non-duality or underlying connectedness of things can be reached only after passage through certain portals, and one of them for those of us who now teach and learn in the full blush of post-colonial Western discursivity — itself a sort of recolonization — is surely a coming to terms with the particularity of the other, the character of the Not-I that is not subsumable under the rubric of my experience or conscious knowledge of myself, nor perhaps of deliberate knowledge at all.

**"Language is the house of being."**

—Martin Heidegger,  
*On the Way to Language*, p. 21

To knock on the door, to enter, to dwell in the house of another language is to disturb the sleep of pre-reflective being, and not only one's own. This is a difficult formulation, one easily miscast and misapprehended. First, and emphatically, it is surely not the case that anyone who learns something of another language undergoes conscious changes to what the person might be able to think of as her "being." Consider this nightmare Likert item:

*After German class this semester, "I" feel that the "being" of who "I" "am" has somehow been transfigured*

- 1 strongly agree
- 2 agree
- 3 disagree
- 4 strongly disagree
- 5 no opinion

Ontic evolutions through novel languaging may not be conscious, may not be intentional, may not mean the same thing to any two people, may not be reportable, may not happen at all. Compare: being physically present at the execution of a sacrament, even speaking its formulae, is not the same as participating in it fully, as experiencing its power. Still, a church remains a place where sacramental changes can and do happen, a sacra-

ment remains an invocation of such changes. You may be wondering whether I mean to say that lingual representation is a sort of sacrament (and then, neatly, that a sacrament is itself a sort of representation). Tentatively, yes. To speak, to activate in word-form, entails a form of conversion, powerful enough, even if always unfinished. To enter speech in another language has deeper implications yet. Philologist/anthropologist A.L. Becker has described his experience of learning another new language in another new culture in this way:

*I have just returned once again from an episode of fieldwork, five months in Malaysia where I was living again in a very different culture, speaking a very different language, feeling my identity eroding and reshaping once again, as it had before in Burma and Java — each time no less painfully. This last time, in fact, I was not there in Malaysia to gather information or to seek instruction but rather just to have this experience once again*  
(Becker, 1992, p. 115).

We expect therapy or marriage or tragedy or vision quest to mix deeply with identity, but language and culture learning? Yes, the experienced depth linguist anthropologist expects it, even seeks it. O.K., then, why? Let us consider a possibility: because each language is a precious vessel, specifically fashioned, for containing and conveying a specific precious thing: the being of those humans, sole, as "selves," and together, as "culture." More on this in a moment.

**"We know paint is not plum flesh. We do not know with the same certainty that our language does not simply, mimetically, coincide with our world."**

—A.S. Byatt,  
*Still Life*, p. 178

Meryl Connor (1991) has pointed out what an awesome matter it is to forsake unilingualism, its comfort, its carefree authenticity, its capacity to define and declare. As most of us go kicking and screaming into maturity (thanks to David Smith for this delightful truism), so do most of us hate to find ourselves in anything but a somnambullically normal, automatic, pre-reflective relationship to our speech. To have to speak *intentionally*, in public, is most people's greatest fear, to entertain a quibble about what a word precisely means or doesn't mean is dismissed as "mere semantics" (what is *mere* about semantics? — a topic for another time...). And these are but monolingual clues. We are deeply invested not just in meanings

we have apprehended, their intelligibility, their apparent discreetness, not just in the particular codes, most often thoughtlessly acquired, that we use to evoke meaning, but further and harder to tease out, we are fanatically devoted to the particular evocative link itself, to the meshing of that sign's and that sense's velcro. Maura Geisser (1994) tells the story of a student who, upon seeing her statement in American Sign Language translated to English on the chalkboard, continued to insist, no, not *that* (the English version), but *this* (the ASL version). The teacher's repeated explanation that these are the English words used to communicate that meaning was unsatisfactory, unimportant; this student, perhaps also the teacher, was quite naturally stuck on one side of what Becker calls "the abyss between the way the two languages mean" (1989, p. 281), an abyss the philologist traverses, so Becker's warning, at risk of alienation and insanity. Why? Why? Perhaps because, monolingual life abandoned, one is now at play in the beings of language, at play—with full ludic and ludicrous potential. It is as momentous a matter to forsake monontology as to forsake monolingualism—the two are co-terminous.

*"With words it is especially difficult to escape from conceptual categorizations... Remember the empty bottles? They had definite shapes and sizes even before being filled."*

—Thich Nhat Hahn,  
*The Sun My Heart*, p. 49

And so, just as 'monolingualism can be cured' (so the wry joke around foreign language departments), so is being, in identity form, adaptable to new language environments. Bilingual experience constantly witnesses both to the particular being called forth in a particular language, and to the person's being-level response to the language provisions. For the true bilingual, a cloven lingual personality is a way of life, as a respondent to Ervin's (1964) Thematic Apperception test so graphically demonstrated. In this study, a native French woman living in the US for many decades was asked to describe the same painting twice—once in French, once in English. The content of the two descriptions was, as you can guess, vastly divergent but culturally recognizable for the two cultures. Are we not now full in the realm of Aristotle's *dramatis personae*, a theme born out in Mauss's (eg. 1985) work on mask and persona, in Goffman's (1959) field-defining notion of face-work? Language from this view again reveals its sacramental character: in bearing and marking the personage who gives it instance, who gives it life,

language acts as the vestment of being. And so we were not surprised to learn of Guiora's (1975) study (one that earned a national award and a lot of snickers) in which he demonstrated what amount of alcohol ingested would allow a person to most authentically mimic native pronunciation of a language unknown to that person previously: One ounce was not quite enough—the contour of individual being, the self, was still too retentive. Two ounces were too much—now the self was too flaccid. But (this is sounding like the tale of the three bears) 1/2 ounces was just right—just enough ego permeability to accommodate this strange personage, this language-entity, not in an insouciant episode of cross-dressing nor in a quick whirl with a one-stand dance partner but, as Heidegger teaches, an inner accommodation a necessary re-alignment within, inside, one's being. It does not suffice to say that living in more than one language suggests the possibility of freedom from monolingualism and monontology, from the strictures of particular being in particular form: polylingual living is an experience co-extensive with that freedom. I note in this connection the nearly universal use of some form of perception-altering substance in the practice of spiritual ritual or sacrament—incense, herb, peyote, unguent, alcohol, for instance. Humans turn to such substances to solemnify, indeed to catalyze, moments taken to hold the greatest significance, moments of invocation beyond the scrutable, of transmutation of being. Language use itself, from this view, appears as an incantation, second language use a sacred doxology.

*"The hermeneutical problem is not one of the correct mastery of language, but of the proper understanding of that which takes place through the medium of language."*

—Hans-Georg Gadamer,  
*Truth and Method*, p. 346–47

Learning another language is one of those rare life activities that offers an experience of what remains when one's inherited symbolic system—with its unspeakable power to condition thought, action, axiology—is unearthed, foregrounded, un-tacited, made relative. New foreign words, so strangely abstract, so apt to amuse or annoy, so arbitrary-seeming, become part of a person only with the passage of time and under certain affective conditions. somewhere in between the pre-relativized nativity of the home language—a miracle one must wait and work to acquire—is the buoyancy of the abyss. Learning another language can leave a person, a person who is attuned to such a possibility, floating in the primordial mid-

dle; learning another language holds out the possibility of a fleeting, perhaps, but powerful experience of the suchness of things, directly, for a moment not fooled by the intervening, normally pre-reflective conceptual categories of various shapes and sizes that words and syntax are.

Like what is called in German an "Aha-Erlebnis," like the Buddhist "satori" (sudden unfakable, undeniable understanding or awakening), the sensations the attuned one may experience in the giddy leap of faith across the abyss between languages are not repeatable nor actually describable in any satisfying way, probably for reasons similar to those that make humor, explained, no longer funny and therefore, ex definition, no longer humor, similar to those which ordain that, in moments of greatest brimming, we come to each other along wordless paths. This is to affirm, from a teleological perspective that foreign language learning is not simply an alternative gesture among many on the hermeneutic buffet, a gesture that can be opted for without further ontic ado, a gesture that can be undertaken from a fixed pivot point—be this point understood as something like the "Self," or as something less personal, such as culturally normed taxonomies of worthiness, truth, and beauty assumed firm, even universal. Foreign language learning, seen in its particular character, peeled and stripped as I try to do here,

reveals itself as a lesson about the illusion of fixedness in any ultimate sense, or, put another way, it reveals the variable manifestations of fixedness, the gaming character of point itself.

### *The Pregnant Mode*

*NOT a word said outright,  
Yet the whole beauty revealed;  
No mention of self,  
Yet passion too deep to be borne;  
And a true arbiter has the heart  
To guide us as we drift,  
Like wine bubbling over the strainer,  
Abrupt return to autumn in blossom-time,  
Dust whirled through space  
Or foam flung up by the sea...  
So the motley pageant converges only to scatter,  
Till a myriad shapes are resolved at last in one.*

—Sikong Tu (837–908)  
*in Poetry and Prose of the Tang and Song*  
p. 198

The teacher's job as an attendant to this sacramental process is peculiar. First, it has something of the shaman, of one who has passed through,



one who by virtue of a transformation of being she has herself undergone, is eligible to act as a true arbiter for those flung up like foam by this particular sea, in this sea she has herself learned to navigate. Next, it is pedagogic through and through, for it demands that the teacher assist meaningfully in her students' developing sea legs without really being at sea. And how? Via tales of marine voyages, perhaps, tales that both narrate and themselves constitute (the German term is more fitting here: *darstellen*, "put out there") the experience of exhilaration, rhythm, nausea, loneli-

ness, adventure, and so on, tall tales told by sailors, the one present in the classroom, those who come by as guests, those present in the textbook and to her materials. This part of the pedagogic function involves a prior and on-going commitment to sojourn, to turn out, to abandon the circle in favor of circulation with a larger "us." And then, on the other more kinesic side of things, there is the need to set things up so that each may have a little go at sailing: something like a large basin, about the size of a 20-person hot tub, with a rubber dinghy floating on top that the least em-

barrassed students hop into for a short spin when their turn comes round. This part of pedagogy is about commitment to the group as it is presently composed, this semester, these people, this intimate "us."

The one thing that really doesn't work, that only ever detracts from the learning, is any resort by any participant to talking about the process. First, where the possibility exists, one quickly loses oneself to speaking in the native language. Second, and maybe more importantly, it's not possible to discuss the whole matter reasonably, with sterile detachment. Heidegger's formulation works inside and out to explain: "The language of dialogue constantly destroyed the possibility of saying what the dialogue was about," (1971, p. 5) just as the language of saying what the dialogue is about, how it works, constantly destroys the possibility of "saying"



from within it. To disregard this distinction is to ignore the particular integrity of each of these languagings. Often, too often, in our escapist quest for certainty that Dewey (1929/1960) so soundly criticized, we hasten away from oral-izing (the expressions and silences of dialogue) and rush to anal-ize, to take refuge in analysis, to find asylum in our capacity to analyze, in the pace from whence we may assume authority to do so. The mad ghost of Louis XIV continues to haunt classrooms in this regard, my own, too. Here, an important portal, one perhaps finally realized in silence: an unfamiliar language is the one thing you can't talk your way out of.

***"This is not to discredit words, but to avoid becoming stuck in them. It is to encourage us to use words as skillfully as possible for the sake of those who bear them"***

—*Thich Nhat Hanh,*  
*The Sun My Heart, p. 49*

It is not exactly nonsense to speak of the origin of common language-learning anxiety as being strictures within what the West calls "the Self." But this is not the whole story, and it is not pedagogically creative, in the sense of helping something to grow in the student who is having the experience that waits coiled for her in language learning. The perspective of the world being but a mirror of the self is not only misleading, it places an undue and ungenerative burden on the person learning in the throes of anxiety. To refer all the anxiety to structures within the self is to amputate part of the experience, it is to ignore the particular character of the task and its demands in favor of thinking only about the one engaging in the task, it is to expand the conception of Sisyphus to the point where pushing this rock uphill adds no new meaning to his life. From this perspective of 'the Same,' it is not possible to speak of transformation, nor to speak responsibly to those undergoing it. Certainly too, the ptolemaic-self perspective has another, more general drawback—it ignores the dynamic of dynamic: self-and-language, language-and-culture, and all the other mutually constitutive relational valences that make up reality. Cut off from the dynamic, what can this view be but static, stagnant?

From a culturally sanctioned position of positive identification, how is a teacher to respond to a student's embarrassment at his clumsy, jerky efforts with the second language? Shall the teacher reply just that he might consider counseling since whatever odd sensations he's experiencing in language learning are rooted in his own deep-seated neuroses? Of course, there is a great deal of in-

sight in that view, as it points to larger cultural neuroses a Western individual can hardly help but inherit. In his book *Voice* (1990), which is not explicitly about foreign language learning at all, David Applebaum writes of the Western "insane fear of a loss of phonemic control," a deepest fear that we teeter on the verge of inarticulateness, and so, non-identity or demeaned identity, because, after all, "only children and idiots babble" (p. 69, both). So, too, do drunks, and of course also foreign language learners, if they can humiliate themselves enough to think "babbling" a permissible, a worthy endeavor, and this without benefit of youth, dementia, or narcotic. For a North American or European (particularly adults), where cultures tend to form and define virtually every relationship according to spoken negotiation (Hsu, 1985), learning a new language, the experience of trying to locate and express, in this *other* phonopisteme, meanings and self-concepts that have been configured in and through the native language, is not just difficult (as any project or school subject may be), but threatening, embarrassing, a sort of lingual incontinence.

So in a way, yes, one's psychic arrangement has a great deal to do with it, but it is so salient not because the other is basically like me — *déjà vu* — but because the other (language, person, or culture) is different from me in so many significant ways — *jamais vu*. Gadamer (1986) says that we invite precisely that guest who offers something new to our curiosity—I imagine this impulse is at work when we chuckle to learn something startling, for instance that certain male bats develop prominent mammary glands (Clark, 1994). We don't always invite that grist-bearing guest, of course, but I think Gadamer means that we must do this, we must be open to the transformations such meetings will engender, if we want life to go on and be lifelike. Clearly, it is only possible to know which guest to invite, it is only possible to learn anything if invited into another's living room, if we have understood that neither of our respective knowledges and forms of being is essentially the same as or encompasses the other. In ever particular ways ever to be discovered, Other means Not-I.

*O dear white children casual as birds,  
Playing among the ruined languages,  
So small beside their large confusing words,  
So gay against the greater silences  
Of dreadful things you did.*

—*W.H. Auden,*  
*The Ascent of F.6*

But, one might cry, it is possible to translate, it is possible to be together, within, despite, beneath talk. It well may be, but, but... the relations that make it possible must be held in perpetual tension. Let us first hear from Shiv Visvanathan, a scholar working out of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi, India, a part of his reaction to a global economic development plan forwarded by the influential Club of Rome a few years ago:

*The new modes of surveillance are more subtle. There is little blatant aggression, no group of colonials sitting around a table and carving colonies like steak... Why kill when you can co-opt? ... There is no Cortez or Shakba here. It is killing through concepts, through coding, by creating grammars that decide which sentence can be spoken and which cannot. (Visvanathan, 1991, p. 378)*

Linguistically and rhetorically operationized forms of neocolonialism, wherever and from whomever they may arise, must be sought, scrutinized, opposed. But first, and this is the innocuous-seeming part, the very possibility of their discursive neocolonialism must be recognized, by those in a position to hold sway over others, and by those who feel the press of imposed grammars. The strategic, even sometimes well-intentioned machinations of the global powers is a striking example (see tandon, 1994, for further discussion), and there are other examples of imperious word-wielding, of unscrutinized, unexplained sifting-for-value-according-to-syntax-or-lexicon, stupid chronic daily examples too numerous to mention here or anywhere. As a graduate student who had switched from psychology to history recently remarked to me, it is nonsense to think that the world will ever advance past communicative inequality, imposition, disrespect and breakdown. I have only to ask what best I can do with the constant spectre of these nasties, in myself and in you, as given. How shall we go on together? How is it that you in particular may be, not understood, but honored?

And now perhaps this train of writ has come to a point beyond which there is not much place for words, another great leap of faith, having to do with what Derrida (1978) calls "hyperessentiality," having to do with that tense but limpid portal through which we may hope for translation, where the motley pageant converges only to scatter, where myriad shapes are resolved at last in one. Gadamer struggles to conjure:

*I am trying to call attention here to a common experience. We say, for instance, that understanding and misunderstanding take place between I and Thou. But the formulation "I and Thou" already betrays an enormous alienation. There is nothing like an "I and Thou" at all—there is neither the I nor the thou as isolated, substantial realities. I may say "Thou" and I may refer to myself over against a Thou, but a common understanding [Verständigung] always precedes these situations. We all know that to say "Thou" to someone presupposes a deep common accord [tiefes Einverständnis]. Something enduring is already present when this word is spoken. (Gadamer, 1976, p. 7).*

Whatever that "something enduring" is from which Gadamer says all further relations spring—and we know from the fact of achieved multilingualism that *is* something—let us assume it to be a humble muscle, a gnarled divining rod, a hot tub with a dinghy, but not, not, decidedly not a world team of mirrors with feet, reflecting *Me!*, branding me with my own image for evermore. Let this be a call for foreign language teachers, present and potential multilinguals, to babble themselves into service as acolytes in the cross-germination of souls. You bring the candles, I'll bring the wine.

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