University of Western Sydney, Nepean

Christopher Kelen

Poetry as a Foreign Language

Abstract:

This paper examines theoretical and practical connections between the situation of language learning and of apprenticeship in poetrymaking. It proposes the becoming foreign of the beginning language learner as a model for poetic practice.

First and second language learners and students of poetry writing are, as apprentice meaning makers, testing limits to find their way. The difference for the writer of poems is that this apprenticing in language is his or her permanent condition of practice. Between languages, or we should say in the *betweenness of language*, is the critical space for poetries.

The analogy between poetry and interlanguages (if we may broaden this formulation to include all systems of approximation by which subjects enter into language/s) draws attention to a capacity to do inside a language what happens inevitably between languages. This is to break down assumptions and spell out the reality of a culture in terms which, to approach this task, must necessarily be mediated by the fact of an outside.

Poetry stands as a differend (Lyotard's term) in the gulf of unintelligibility which is constituted by those languages (and we should say lects of any sort) which are foreign to each other. In our age we face the challenge of passing beyond the differend between civilisation and barbarism into the condition foreshadowed by Menander, in which nothing can be foreign to us. This would be the (now impossible) condition of worldwide indigeneity.

Foreign speech interests poetry as a kind of mistaken speech (such is the effect of naming it foreign) in which nothing is allowed *to go without saying*.

Transcendence of the self in community with others is the central fact of language and which language allows. Needless to say, it is out of this transcendence selves arise, I think we cannot say, *in the first place*. Becoming foreign means borrowing betweenness from beyond the self. It is a condition in which we are forced to make do with what we are able to share.

Poetry is a practice, but not the only one, which lives in what Cixous calls our 'border nature' (Cixous 1993:145) (c.f. Kristeva's borderliners), which lives, as it were, beyond its means, in places where meaning piles up unaccountably, in places where bounds are lost. A concern with borders is of very practical interest in the study and applications of language development, the study of all sorts of lectal variation and for instance diglossia, of pidgins and creoles: the study, in short, of any manner of coming into or between languages. The most obvious instance of such a study is that of translation. In *After Babel* George Steiner contends that the processes of translation and of language itself (1) are ultimately identical:

the interpretation of verbal signs in one language by means of verbal signs in another, is a special, heightened case of the process of communication and reception in any act of human speech. (Steiner 1992:436)

A similar argument might be made for the proximity and homology of poetic processes and those of the language learner, both unending practices, the voluntary nature of both of which is open to question. Merleau-Ponty writes: 'Far from being limited to the first years, language acquistion is co-extensive with the very exercise of language.' (Merleau-Ponty 1979:53) Language, only ours to the extent that it is shared, is the ultimate riddle of the self and alterity.

The teaching of language shares with poetry an interest in coming to meaning. The child and the adult learner of a foreign language, each serve to highlight the conditions of entry into language which are least visible in the other case:

The child uses certain words before he fully understands their signification, in the way that the adult, when learning a foreign language, uses certain locutions of which he does not know the meaning but which he knows how to apply in the appropriate situation. (Merleau-Ponty, 1979:76-7)

In recognising itself in the unfinalisability of these processes of entering semiosis, (2) poetry too acknowledges as inevitable this condition, of *flying blind* with words (3), the fact that meaning is never fully understood or controlled,

and never subject to the control of any single agency. Words are the community in which is shared all coming to consciousness. They are equally the means by which we negotiate and authenticate our acts.

Whereas the teacher and student of language have to make do with inter-disciplinary assistance (let us liken this to *bricolage*), the practitioner of poetry is not only between discplines but engages the discipline of remaining between. In other words it is her/his work to approximate something in the nature of a protolanguage or interlanguage. It is her/his work not to accept that language has arrived. This is achieved in the process of making the body foreign: a deliberate act.

First and second language learners and the student of poetry are all finding their way in new language (are thus making language and themselves new). They do this against great odds and against a great deal of background noise. They do it risking mistakenness and rejection and loss. Indeed without realising these *failures* they can get nowhere. Language learners get to be wrong a lot in order to get things right.

First and second language learners and students of poetry writing all practise and develop their apprenticeship through dialogic interaction with others (even where this dialogue has largely to take place in the head of the individual and with dead people). All are, we may say, apprentice meaning makers. They are testing limits to find their way. The difference for the writer of poems is that this apprenticing in language is his or her permanent condition of practice, and undertaken in a material in which writers are generally and for everyday purposes fluent; the language which they are learning will permanently need to be new to them, in order to have life, in order that is, to renew them and to be renewed by them. And because they are constantly in the process of shaping and making that language (subject to rules which they neither need nor would be able fully to articulate), a process which no one attempts or achieves in isolation, this is a constantly and necessarily dialogic process. We have to temper our romantic notion of the lonely work of writing with the knowledge that words arise from interaction and that words arise in literature from the interaction of the creative mind with the world; that literature exists for an audience, does not merely pale outside of these criterial limits, but actually ceases to be. Where that dialogic interaction which, in Bakhtin's terms makes the word, breaks down, then vitality is lost and the writer's work slips back into the vast abyss of the already said. Here is the role of the reader then - in providing that breath by which words return and are made ours.

Language learners and poetry makers face a common obstacle in language: the automatic, the buried assumption, the logic which has been lost to use. But whereas the poet works to uncover these things, to show those threads which cannot be seen (even if vigilantly concealing the threads which go into the demonstration); the language learner (to the extent that s/he learns) cannot help but uncover connections. For the language learner, child or adult, of first or second language, is only partly into the systems of the target language, and thus is naturally equipped with a naievety the poet generally congratulates herself/himself if s/he can emulate (4).

As in a landscape in which some are completely (we might say over-) familiar and some are complete strangers, the native and the foreigner, approaching the same objective reality of signs from opposite directions, each manage to not see and not hear what is before them. The foreigner cannot see the unknown, at least not for what it is, for what, that is, it means to those who know it. The unknown is a curiosity which attracts more names than it can live up to and for which none of them is the right name. Wishing to know something about time, I can look at my watch without noticing what time it is, or at least without noticing the aspect of time capable of being delivered by the watch and relevant to the 'question' borne in the glance. (An analogue watch can tell me what part of the day I am in, what part of the hour or minute, how far from the quarter hour, and so on. For most of us it is impractical to take all of this in at once. How much more complex words are, how much more general their utility. At least all of the activities referred to immediately above may be characterised as 'telling the time'. How difficult it is for any two speakers, let alone native and non-native, to share words, the specific function of which is forever being negotiated in the acts by which we make use of these words.) Just as a clock, though offering a range of views of time, fails to offer all views, so the words of any language (tools of far greater sensitivity) offer a particular culture of reality. Fluency in the known environment is not maintained by the act of constantly naming (or of making oneself conscious of) what is there. Between native speakers the necessity of naming the constituents of the shared context is always minimised by the fact of a knowledge already shared and which must be taken for granted; and in which knowledge language has (through the action of massive redundancy) made itself redundant.

We note then these two extreme states (of absolute and nil fluency) in which perception is foiled by the nature of consciousness demanded by its context. For the stranger no amount of attention will provide a knowledge which is unavailable, as yet unattained; no amount of looking will make known what is there to be seen from the native's point of view. For the native on the other hand, not only is attention dissipated through the absence of any need for it, but the limits of individual consciousness and memory are necessarily outstripped by the store of collectivity which goes into their expression.

Between these two though, native and stranger, if meaning is to be exchanged, there lives a need to draw the other's attention to a new share of knowledge. This process, whether it takes place between partners in dialogue, between writers and readers or as the *inner speech* of a particular character rehearsing her or his role, in fact constitutes the means by which meaning becomes, because it is only in such betweennesses that the names can matter at all. This

fact, to which the interaction of speakers of different backgrounds draws our attention, is totally unremarkable. It is characteristic of dialogue and we might say of all discourse. These are (at least) two-sided heuristics, in which each partner learns of the other.

When the learner finds then what is for us a lost connection, the goal being proficiency, s/he comes to understand and practice and finally to bury out of sight of conscious reflection, just as we have done, the system now internalised, which goal achieved marks (or more generally hides) a particular progression on the road to fluency. Fluency requires unconsciousness, but the path there, through practice and hopefully ever greater accuracy, generally draws attention to whatever signs there are of a foreign speech which, in theory, will be laid to rest at last.

Post-romantic poetries have the capacity to play on the whole of the continuum between accuracy and fluency, because their initial and ultimate aim is often somewhere along the road to a language disturbance - the expected overturned, attention drawn where it was never sought, awareness brought where daily life does not require it.

These *disturbances* are what the language learner cannot help but make. They are the one thing the learner is everywhere, except perhaps in the classroom, in trouble for doing. In the context of learning though we know that it is the making of mistakes which mark progression along the path to proficiency: practice and correction turn error into accuracy. For the language learner, that correction, though we often associate it with a prescriptive nagging, actually comes overwhelmingly from the solidarity, on the matter of the rules, which natives express with each other, wherever they, refusing a consciousness of those rules, engage in an authentic dialogue. For the maker of poems too, we must say that it is an authentic presence s/he strives for, and one, as for the language learner, which we must define as beyond the resources of the system they have to negotiate. These facts of common ground, make the language learner's an interesting mind for dialogue with the poet.

Various modernist emphases resonate in the idea of *poetry as a foreign language*. We should perhaps feel more comfortable in undermining some of these. The condition of modernist *man*, as the eternal stranger, rootless in the anonymous city, is one of the patriarchal aesthete whose aloneness is the only practical position allowed *his* elitist work as individual opposing the bourgeois conditions without which *he* and *his* productions would be impossible. Modernist *man*, always at the end of his tether, is superseded by a new kind of lostness: a post-modern of inescapable connectedness, of limits which fold back on themselves, a necessarily reflexive sense of being lost in the cracks of that consciousness by which and in which loss is perceived.

Raymond Williams, in *The Politics of Modernism* points out that the cities of strangers, which modernist artists inhabited, were the capitals of imperialism. Williams is interested in the linguistic affinities which these groups possessed for each other, in the suppression and marginalisation or leaving behind of languages. Modernist exile and alienation, city obsessed as it was, can now be seen as having been about both Europe's diaspora in the new Europes, and the alienation of their prior inhabitants. These themes are sublimated by the inversion of their image in the city where, ironically, the wealth generated by empire means that exploitation and suffering guarantee each other at home and abroad. Brennan's protagonist in 'The Wanderer' could well have been asked by the victims (and it must be admitted the beneficiaries) of European wandering (i.e. the inhabitants of the rest of the world) why he foolishly desired to go:

hither and thither upon the earth and grow weary
with seeing many peoples and the sea.
(Brennan 1960:156)

But what is *modern* in Brennan's consciousness here could be characterised as (a solipsism in the form of) the refusal to acknowledge alterity as elsewhere than in the self.

Poetry, in modern times (and later), equipped with a fondness for the impossible, takes moments of seamlessness and failure, together as its model. And the losing of the self, dislocation or dismemberment of the subject, continues to haunt what we know as poetry and to make it a language of the foreign, to make what de Certeau describes as 'an art of being in between' (de Certeau 1988:30).

For de Certeau, who urges us to make a '*perruque* in the economic system and to make a kind of *perruque* of writing itself ' (1988:27-8), 'popular' culture is that which is ' not a corpus considered as foreign.' (1988:26). In de Certeau's estimation it is in popular tactics that order is 'tricked by art.' The *perruque* is work which is foreign by virtue of having no dwelling but time stolen from official consciousness. It is the opposite of *homework*, a homeless-work, a kind of reclamation, of something irretrievable, stolen by an agency which has so well covered its tracks that we cannot remember the theft, and believe rather that is we who have transgressed, who are transgressing.

The (heuristic) practice of context for which I wish to argue is that of becoming foreign, a strategy which I wish to distinguish from the Russian Formalists' '*defamiliarisation*'.

Bakhtin and Medvedev in their 1928 work, 'The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship', (1994:135) are the authors of a damning critique of the Formalists' dicta about poetic language. For Bakhtin/Medvedev it is unreasonable to speak of 'poetic' language because poetry is not a language in the sense that Russian or English are. In fact we use

and qualify this noun *language* already in innumerable senses: philosophic language, scientific language, the language of commerce, the language of love. Bakhtin/Medvedev write of 'the language of linguistics' themselves. (1994:144). The meta-discourses invoked in each of these cases are an abstraction of a different order from that which we engage when speaking of *natural* languages. There is little evidence to suggest that Jakobson or Schklovsky or any of the other formalists accused, had fallen into the mistake of regarding systematicity of 'poetic' language as akin to that of 'natural' languages. What they sought to draw attention to, among other things, was the 'foreignness' of poetic expression to the everyday language.

Here it is that we apply metaphorically to poetic discourse this idea of foreignness: one which finds support in a number of formalist claims for poetry, particularly those of Schklovskii. The practice of the formalists in *making strange* was purposed to set the poet and poetic observation apart from the practice of the automatised everyday world. *Becoming foreign* by contrast entails risking one's own identity and niche in context, in order to examine the process by which one has become and is becoming: one's presence is risked in the act of becoming present. This is not a one-way process - context is always practising with us and on us and in us. Participating in unlimited semiosis, it locates us in all places and in all relations. Our *becoming foreign* is precisely related to the sense in which, through words, we manage to be everywhere at once. I mean this both in the sense that what gathers into our consciousness is the failure of memory on the grand scale, and that what our consciousness scatters like seed is the pattern of identity framed by the necessity of reduction: the fruit of that past failure.

As if in the exercise of a *universal* subjectivity, at every stage we are apt to speak as if the whole picture is where we are - as if poetry is a matter of inspiration or of technique or of judgement, when it is really to do with that same impossibility in which language is concerned - of meaning many things at once. The wall of sound (that impenetrable mystery of context) of which the non-native is made aware in approaching a target language, is exactly what poetry must seek in the everyday. This is not a process of 'making strange' but rather of apprehending what is already thus.

Becoming foreign is that exile which forces us to deal with our own abject - it presses us into an archaeology of the self as practice - forever throwing up a new beginning beyond which we are forbidden and therefore, as Orpheus, we cannot help but look. *Becoming foreign* can only ever be a work of *re*cognition, of the strangeness of the self which is lost in the effort of regarding with other eyes; of offering its eyes to others, that they may see out of their foreignness the paths which lead away to home.

These efforts must entail as well the recognition of the past of one's becoming, those means by which I am possessed and have possession. It is not these means but rather their recognition (in the effort at a memory longer than my own) which bring me into the *face to face* with the other, even where that other has effectively ceased to be a presence. Alterity in this sense is an unbounded haunting, an infinite falling away of echoes, of cadences in which I must listen not to hear my own voice.

The country in which I assert my authority in this ultimate act rescinding it, is one in which I cannot become indigenous. I may however be able to make myself a barbarian. There is, that is, an outside of the law yet, which the restitution of past wrongs cannot appeal to. Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*:

The infinity of responsibility denotes not its actual immensity, but a responsibility increasing in the measure that it is assumed; duties become greater in the measure that they are accomplished. The better I accomplish my duty the fewer rights I have; the more I am just the more guilty I am. (Levinas 1969:245)

Herein lies the pastoralist's (and the prime minister's) nightmare: indigenous claims will always be the thin edge of the wedge, the crime enabling can never be expiated. If the land were emptied of invaders tomorrow, if the descendants of the invaders were to divest themselves of the spoils, what would they be giving back, how would the land returned resemble the land invaded? That land no longer exists. How would we tell its new old inhabitants (and their means of possession) apart from their dispossessors? Indeed how can we now? When everyone puts the empire behind them, when nobody wishes to be a colonist, how viable (and for whom) is the indegene's persona? If we ask what sort of country makes me mine, we acknowledge that pride still shows in the cracks now, shows the pragmatist works by considered rights, distressed at the fraying of the law which made him. The kingdom of vast regrets remains one. It is the bland voice resigned to its spoils, to its great good fortune, which consoles itself saying ' there's no going back'.

Subject to the absence of limits which dwells in the universality of the judgement I now cannot help but exercise, what I omit to recognise is that only the other can belong, can be placed. I myself am doomed to the exile of an *everywhereness* in which my *civilised* consciousness over and above the world and my place in it is exercised at the expense of the possibility of dwelling (of being of) anywhere in it.

Such a recognition imperils as well the indigeneity of the other, threatens it with the prospect of reduction to, not merely an atavism of my present state, but its barbaric outside (an outside, that is, which knows enough of me to threaten me, to be my *own* outside).

Poetry stands as a differend in the gulf of unintelligibility which is constituted by those languages (and we should say lects of any sort) which are foreign to each other. The dialectic of our age entails the challenge of passing beyond the

differend between civilisation and barbarism into the condition foreshadowed by Menander, in which *nothing can be foreign* to us. This would be the (now impossible) condition of worldwide indigeneity.

Except for the hymn singers and praise sayers, the laureates and anthem-grinders, poetry's community has been established by tradition (following Romanticism and Shelley's Plato into the Modern) as on the outside, in exile. To ask how can that outside be taught or learned or even become, not belonging anywhere, is to ignore the facts of its presence (the facts, that is, of its being learnt everywhere, of its teaching itself).

Poetry, all literature, is reflection on (in Bahktin's terms, refraction of) the conditions from which it emerges. The general and permanent condition of the spoken animal is dialogic and polyglossic. The betweenness which we attribute, as intertextuality, to particular discourses, is characteristic of all instances of discourse: language is between people as languages are between peoples. We may say (with Nietzsche 1993:41) that poetry casts off the supposed reality of culture. It proposes a barbarising of the inside of a language (thus culture) such as is unavoidable for those coming to a culture (and language) from its outside. But poetry does this from the inside and in the spirit of its enabling, with all the resources of the particular language which haunt this next considered saying. Poetry makes itself foreign because it takes what is within its grasp and sets it at distance. It takes itself apart with doubt, with undeciding. From the inside then poetry draws out the exile of words, confounding *as is* with *as may be.* Poetry, as fiction, is a gamble against common sense. Such is the nature of daring not to know.

Bakhtin credits the novel, via Dostoyevsky, with rediscovering the polyphony which is the natural condition of human voices when they arrange themselves in conversation. Mythic, monologic and automatic instances of language and literature - all participate in the rule of unspoken assumption in the interest of and with the effect of reifying the status quo as that which *goes without saying*. They are all in the manner of what has generally been considered concealed by ideology. The dialogic, the de-automatising, the poetic, similarly are, in the terms of this analogy, in the manner of what has been considered liberating, de-mystifying, as if exhuming the truth from the very process of its burial. Foreign speech is one in which nothing can *go without saying*. The mistakenness of the foreigner where s/he gets beyond her/himself in words is demonstration of this. Take John O'Grady's Nino Culotta, in trouble with a policeman for avidly repeating the phrase, *King's bloody Cross*, as taught him by a taxi driver (1964:68-70) . The foreigner only gradually becomes responsible for the words of the language s/he has borrowed. The foreigner's attention is, in this way, always drawn to the fact that expression *is* the theft of thought. (Sartre, 1989:374) Poetry, too (paradoxically because of the degree of native skill expected of it) exercises, as does the foreigner, a practice of becoming responsible for words, one in which, indeed, nothing must *go without saying*. In doing so it merely plays out as practice the fact, to which Sartre alerts us, that the meaning of my expressions always escapes me. (1989:373)

Between languages, or we could say in the *betweenness of language*, is the critical space for poetries, if only because we know nowhere but in language to be between subjects (subjects becoming in language as such). The analogy between poetry and interlanguages, if we may broaden Selinker's (1972) formulation to include all systems of approximation by which subjects enter into language/s, draws attention to a similarity of practices, which informs the function of all language, and not of any exceptional or exclusive variety alone, because all language is between subjects. Or rather: language, for practical purposes, is the *all* between subjects. Just as the language learner's situation foregrounds (and also produces) both the difference and the bridges between cultures, so poetry draws our attention to a familiar language (one we know as our own) as if it were a foreign language (5). Poetry slows us down, makes us look at words twice, as if they were no longer ours. Paradoxically it is in this apparent movement of our own words away from us that we are able to reclaim them and to make sense of a haunting which was always there with us.

We may be wary of assigning any task to poetry and yet acknowledge that poetry cannot help but effect inside a language - by in Jakobson's terms, orienting itself towards the expression, through an 'indifference to the object of the utterance' (1994:146) - exactly what happens inevitably for subjects between languages, which is the breaking down of assumptions and the spelling out of the reality of a culture, in terms which to approach this task, must necessarily be mediated by the fact of an outside. Because the language in which we are native as individuals is borne of a transcendence (interaction) become immanence (the system is in the words I speak without thinking of the system), we may say that poetry exercises the between of subjects in language as if this substance (though their making and of their making) were foreign to them. Poetry then is a reflexive step, we could say intention, in the self-making of subjects.

Of such a step we need to ask how can this outside, the diaspora in which poetry postures, be anything but a simulation, when we know that the resources on which (a canonic, i.e., a surviving) poetry depends are the full resources of the language which it represents (or is given to represent) as literature. How can poetry but be in bad faith when it fails to acknowledge its own enabling consciousness? What is authentic in poetry, as in all discourse, is the failure to acknowledge what enables it, a failure of consciousness, which makes us all mistaken, especially as to who we are; which makes us subjects foreign to ourselves. Poetry then is the failure of an effort at self-consciousness, characteristic of that reflection which Sartre names as *diasporatic.* (1989:157) Poetry, I would argue, is as any discourse, in bad faith when it denies itself an ethics of presence, when it refuses the failure of knowing

which bears it. It is as we all are in order to transact the business of everyday life, which is for one thing full of equivalences and other relations which never could have been negotiated in good faith.

The reader of poetry hopes to be, as the student of a foreign language inevitably is, bracing for the unexpected; expecting that is to be shown, in the act of its overturning, the assumption thus far unseen. But the language learner (native or foreign) and poetry's permanent apprentices approach this overturning from opposite directions. The language learner's uses and attempts at use, are prior to that knowledge, and its burying borne of having heard a thousand times, of having spoken a thousand times; that knowledge and the necessity of its fading which Mallarmé described as *the worn coin placed silently in my hand*; the *necessity* we may say of hearing without attention.

The language learner's efforts are based on, what is from the general viewpoint of the language they are entering, a more or less severe restriction of resources and methods. At first nothing is automatic because there is neither consciousness nor unconsciousness of system. At first it is a struggle to mean anything. The language learner is able to stumble upon something new because her or his language is not fully formed by the patterns of assumption which operate unconsciously in the fluency of the native. Thus the language learner may stumble on (or into) mistakes which interest the avowedly conscious attentions of poetry's apprentices (6). And thus there may always remain something charmingly foreign (and other than accent, something in the turn of phrase) in the speech and in the writing of the long-term resident of another culture. And equally something grating, an annoying failure to live in the terms of the adopted idiom. The language learner may uncover or create errors which interest the conscious attentions of poetry's apprentices because the poetry maker too is interested in what charms and grates in language and if s/he wishes to escape from the fact of meaning's erosion in pragmatic speech must acknowledge an impossible position which is both beyond and before the wearing to which Mallarmé refers. Beyond *and* before, because poetry is, as we have noted, both the effort at and the defeat of consciousness.

The passages beyond (or within) the mundane which aesthetic uses of language attempt, always, however they disguise themselves (as imitations or revivals), consist in attempts at a speech which has not yet been spoken. It is a necessary condition of such attempts that they retain a maximum of awareness of those echoes which they can neither fully avoid nor fully remember, those echoes and nuances which naturally adhere in the choice of words and their arrangement.

And it is from this point of view (that is, from the point of view of a knowledge, if not full then fluent) that the errors of the non-native learner of a language (and often children) seem charming or poetic. As we have said the language learner and poetry's permanent apprentices (at least in part) approach from opposite directions the object of the expectations they are to overturn. The language learner finds rules by breaking them but the poetrymaker finds rules also *in order to* break them.

The coming into a language of the child or non-native must be imagined as closely homologous with the becoming of languages both in particular and in the general manner of poetry's interest: in the creative manner. Common in both cases, whether intended or not, is what we might describe as the heuristic value of being mistaken. For the language learner a discovery of mistakenness has an heuristic effect, which has generally come to be perceived as a benefit, as a sign of progress. The utility of mistakenness (i.e. it is by being mistaken I cease to be mistaken), is for the language learner, in the hope of its being the means to its own transcendence. For poetry's permanent apprentice, the condition of being mistaken is a practice which needs to be learned (and the learning of which may well be assisted by the example of the lanaguage learner) for its own sake (or for the sake of a foreign view of the self). It is a practice closely aligned with that of *daring not to know*. We can say that it is by means of this relation, in which consciousness fails to escape the exigencies of its own regime, that poetry absolves itself of the taint of bad faith: daring not to know does not exempt us from being mistaken, it guarantees both this outcome and the consciousness of it. Heidegger writes on the practice of being mistaken:

Everything here is the path of a responding that examines as it listens. Any path always risks going astray, leading astray. To follow such paths takes practice in going. Practice needs craft. Stay on the path, in genuine need, and learn the craft of thinking, unswerving, yet erring. (Heidegger 1971:186)

Foreign speech is a kind of mistaken speech (such is the effect of naming it foreign) in which nothing is allowed *to go without saying*. In his lectures on 'The Psychology of Errors' in the 'General Introduction to Psycho-analysis', Freud tells us that errors represent the concurrence of two different ideas. Freud's subject here, while by no means trivial, concerns the slips (now *Freudian slips)* of people fluent in the idiom they employ. (The President of the Parliament pronounces the session closed when he means to open it, thus betraying his ambivalence about the whole dreary business.) Our subject concerns what is innermost in the grammar and lexicon of a language, those aspects of it which make it unique, which render impossible its perfect fit with the *weltanschaung* of any other language, which, in short, make it untranslatable, and in so doing furnish it with the status which Coleridge demanded for poetry in relation to its own idiom. What distinguishes the learner's errors from the flow they disturb, is their being drawn to attention, whether or not they elicit correction.

It is in the errors to which ever more delicate negotiations commit the learner, that the practice of these negotiations becomes possible, thus proving learning, as it is always proved (i.e. only after the event). Freud writes:

errors are *compromise*-formations; they express part-success and part-failure for each of the two intentions; the threatened intention is neither entirely suppressed nor, apart from some instances, does it force itself through intact. (Freud 1952:470)

Of central importance is Freud's insistence that the slips of the tongue (and other errors with which he deals) have meaning. And the meaning of such occurrences is always one which the conscious mind wishes to deny as *accidental*. (1952:467) From the point of view both of a poetics and an heuristics of language, the meaning of most interest in the foreign learner's errors is not so much individual, but rather illustrative of that which dwells in the gap between languages, meaning which tells us about those languages, and their provenant cultures, by furnishing us with an outside of them, and which tells us about the becoming of all subjects in language, because it illustrates the ambivalent moment which we may think of, ontogenetically, as fluency; or phylogenetically, as creolisation. In that moment a certain style of consciousness (a learner's consciousness, an awareness that is, of the struggle for sense) is lost in favour of meaning (that is, the authenticity of sense).

In the case of both heuristics and poetics, we deal, as we have suggested, with a differend between unintelligibles. In this way we may say that, whether hidden or avowed, the only curriculum possible in a language classroom, is an inter-cultural curriculum. Likewise, that indirection which we name poetry, depends on a becoming foreign in which nothing is *allowed to go without saying.*

As for the affinity of an approach to meaning which dwells on or in mistakenness, Freud suggests that:

it would not be surprising if more were to be learned from poets about slipsof the tongue than from philologists and psychiatrists. (1952:458)

References:

Auden, W.H *Selected Essays* London, Faber and Faber 1956.

Bakhtin, Mikhail *The Bakhtin Reader* (ed. Pam Morris) London, Edward Arnold 1994. Return to text

Brennan, Christopher *The Verse of Christopher Brennan* (ed A.R. Chisolm and J.J. Quinn) Sydney Angus and Robertson 1960. Return to text

Cixous, Hélène *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (tr. Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers) New York, Columbia 1993. Return to text

de Certeau, Michel *The Practice of Everyday Life* (tr. Steven Rendall) Berkeley, University of California Press 1988. Return to text

Eco Umberto *The Role of the Reader* Bloomington, Indiana University Press 1984.

Fernandez, James W *Beyond Metaphor: The Theory of Tropes in Anthropology* Stanford, Stanford University Press 1991.

Freud, Sigmund (tr. C.J.M. Hubback) in *Freud*, Vol 54, Great Books of the Western World, Chicago, Encyclopaedia Britannica 1952 Return to text

Heidegger, Martin *Poetry, Language, Thought*, (tr Albert Hofstadter) New York, Harper Colophon 1975. Return to text

Kristeva, Julia *Strangers to Ourselves* (tr. Leon S. Roudiez) New York, Columbia University Press 1991. Return to text

Levinas, Emmanuel *Totality and Infinity* (tr. Alphonso Lingus) The Hague, Martinus Hijhoff 1969. Return to text

Lyotard, Jean-Francois *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute (*tr. George Van Den Abbeele) Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 1988. Return to text

Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich *The Marx-Engels Reader* (ed. Robert C. Tucker) New York, Norton 1978.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language* (tr. Hugh J. Silverman) Evanston, Northwestern University Press 1979. Return to text

Nietzsche, F.W *The Birth of Tragedy* (tr. Shaun Whiteside) Harmondsworth, Penguin 1993. Return to text

Sartre, Jean-Paul *Being and Nothingness (*tr. Hazel E. Barnes) London, Routledge 1989. Return to text

Steiner, George *After Babel* Oxford, Oxford University Press 1992. Return to text

Williams, Raymond *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* London, Verso 1989. Return to text

Wittgenstein, Ludwig *The Wittgenstein Reader* (ed. Anthony Kenny) Oxford, Blackwell 1994.

TEXT
Vol 2 No 1 April 1998
http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/

Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady
Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au