

Student “ownership” of language: a perspective drawn from Bakhtin and Derrida

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Both Bakhtin and Derrida make central to their accounts of language, although in different ways, the paradoxical fact that the language we use is simultaneously both ‘mine’ and ‘not mine’. In Bakhtin’s account this relationship constitutes an ambivalence, since we are engaged in a struggle to make our own a language which is always someone else’s. While Bakhtin acknowledges an intractable otherness in language which is never fully overcome, there is nevertheless an emphasis on the transition of language from being another’s to becoming one’s own. In contrast, for Derrida the relationship is a strictly paradoxical one. Language which is ‘mine’ can be so only because it is iterable and as such “can be repeated in the absence of ... a determinate signified or of the intention of actual signification” (Derrida, 1988 p. 10). It can be mine only because fundamentally it can never be possessed by me: “what is most proper to a language cannot be appropriated” (Derrida, 2005a, p. 101). In this respect Derrida appears to diverge radically from Bakhtin. In this paper I will briefly outline not only divergences between Bakhtin’s and Derrida’s accounts of how language is ‘mine/not mine’, but also convergences. I then argue that the iterability of language permits the materiality of text to provide a basis for student identification with discourse and that this can account for patchwritten words being experienced by a student as her own.

Key words: Bakhtin; Derrida; language; ownership

1. Introduction

The idea that students should ‘own’ the language they use is prevalent in discussions about student academic writing. Students are exhorted to develop ‘their’ position and implicit in this idea is that they mould the language they use thematically and rhetorically to give expression to their particular, indeed unique, answer to the task at hand. The idea of ownership is more emphatically present in discussions of plagiarism, whether it be in reference to the ‘ownership’ source authors have of their texts, or whether it be in reference to students ‘making their own’ the ideas and language generated for them by their sources. This concept of ownership is, however, a complex one. For example, authors very often do not have proprietorial ownership of their texts (publishers do), although we might argue they have something called ‘moral ownership’. Students of course are fully aware that ideas they use are not ‘their own’ but are drawn from sources, and therefore may well feel very little commitment to or ‘ownership’ of the position they develop in addressing a task. They may also feel the academic register they write in is alien to them, and in consequence that the writing is not ‘theirs’. Moreover, at a general level it is clear that words and grammatical forms are owned by no one (e.g. Bakhtin, 1986, p. 85), available to all, and this element, along with others, is reflected in Derrida’s (1998, p. 1) paradoxical statement that “I have only one language: it is not mine”.

Ownership, as Marx foregrounded long ago, consists of a relationship between people, not between people and things. It is about privileged access to things and thus the concept of 'ownership' masks the true social relationship at stake. In a sense, objectively, there is no such thing as ownership, only socially sanctioned inclusions and exclusions, power and privilege. Yet clearly 'ownership' does have a subjective dimension, and it is this relationship I want to explore here. The essential position I adopt is that to experience 'ownership' of language the subject must be implicated in a certain way in the language, or rather through the language. This is to do with how the subject is constituted in language. It is this relationship I wish to explore through the approach both Bakhtin and Derrida take to 'owning' language. I begin by outlining Bakhtin's approach with the aim of raising questions I consider to arise from it and then proceed to draw on Derrida to suggest directions in which answers to these questions might lie. While this paper is largely an account of ideas presented by Bakhtin and Derrida, I attempt in the final section to use this discussion to interpret remarks made by an international postgraduate law student for whom English was an additional language about 'ownership' during an interview about her text.

2. Bakhtin

For Bakhtin (1986), language use depends on genres (p. 79) which are expressive of the social contexts within which language use necessarily occurs (p. 78). In this respect, genres are expressive of 'intention' since they are integral to how specific kinds of social activity are achieved in specific contexts. This consequently raises questions about the place of the individual; to what extent is the individual no more than an instantiation of a more social, generic type, or is there something which marks the individual as unique? Bakhtin (1986) explicitly addresses this question: for him, "the problem of the national and individual in language is basically the problem of the utterance" (p. 63). By 'national' he means the standard lexico-grammatical forms of the language shared by its users as well as established generic forms, for he subsumes under 'national' formal constraints on language use. Nevertheless, although language use is always constrained, the characteristic feature of language use for Bakhtin is responsiveness to prior utterances rather than replication of formal structures. In this sense, genres also exist as utterances, through their instantiation on specific occasions, not as formal entities or part of an abstract system lying behind use. Therefore, every utterance is unique: the individual as such is attached to the nuanced utterance (e.g. Bakhtin, 1986, p. 63), even though at the same time fully constituted within the 'chain of communication' of which every utterance is a link (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 69). Thus Bakhtin seeks to dissolve the dichotomous relationship between the social *langue* and individual *parole* which is constitutive of Saussurian linguistics. Indeed, in contrast to Saussure's notion of *parole*, Bakhtin remarks that because we have "mandatory forms of language" (grammar) and "of utterances" (speech genres), no utterance (*parole*), "with all its individuality and creativity" can be regarded "as a completely free combination" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 80). Nevertheless, this knotted question of the relationship between the social and individual, between the universal and particular, between reproduction and creativity in language is not wholly dissolved and it leaves its trace in much poststructuralist discussion about language and identity, such as in the work of Kristeva, Foucault, Derrida and elsewhere.

The concept of 'utterance' has been much utilised and much discussed in accounts of language and language learning which draw on Bakhtin, and those that go beyond Bakhtin, but these often still appeal to the common distinction between language form and language use. Consequently, language use and genres are still viewed primarily in terms of a subject gaining mastery over forms at various levels – morphological, syntactic, generic and stabilised social and pragmatic practices. Bakhtin does at times give support to such an understanding. While on the one hand language and genres have their life and origin in actual, situated language uses, he does also suggest that a certain sedimentation occurs of such practices into forms which in turn become integral to language use. For instance, he states that genres can be subjected to "free creative manipulation", but for this to occur "genres must be fully mastered in order to be manipulated freely" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 80). He argues that it is only through gaining full control over language and genres that a subject can fulfill his or her speech plan or will (Bakhtin, 1986,

p. 77) which for Bakhtin is integral to an utterance. This free creative manipulation includes "orchestrating" genres and discourses (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 299) to create hybrid forms, and Bakhtin speaks of this in terms which suggest the speaker controls the meanings produced and consequently the meanings the listener can respond to (e.g. Bakhtin, 1986, p. 96). This potential for masterfully orchestrating different genres into hybrid forms to address one's own unique context has often been taken up and presented as integral to the emancipatory potential of language (e.g. Cazden, 1989; Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, & Cain, 1998).

However, this emphasis on individual creativity is in tension with the other strong theme in Bakhtin: that the individual is indeed a social product constrained by what is given to him, capable of no more than reproducing that which is available to him or her, and which constitutes her or him as a subject. Foucault's understanding of 'discourse' is often (mis-)read in this way, leading to accounts of how subjects are 'positioned' by the discourses they engage with (for example in Fairclough, 1992). Such approaches often leave unstated who precisely the subject is that might resist such positioning, for if the subject is constituted through discourse, their horizons are bound by it. This has led in critical discourse analysis, as in identity politics, to foregrounding the conflict between different identities, and how marginalised ones might resist impositions placed on them by more privileged, established identities and the social organisation that sustains their privileged position, although of course both privileged and marginalised identities are equally products of social contexts.

Thus, with respect to the idea that language might be 'one's own', we can see two opposing interpretations. On the one hand, for the identity approach, language is experienced as one's own because one is fully assimilated into a certain discourse, such that one experiences this dominant or marginal discourse as truly 'mine', in which I find my 'self'. Similarly, a national language is claimed as 'mine'. In this sense individuality is dissolved since one surrenders wholly to an already given discourse or language. On the other hand we have the idea that one *masters* a discourse, with the instrumental connotation that one remains distant from it but capable of turning the discourse tool to one's own independently forged individual interests (wherever they might come from). Thus, there are two irreconcilable notions of making language 'one's own'; in the first, one wholly identifies with a given discourse and in being thus subjected to and constituted in it one necessarily experiences the discourse as 'mine'. In the second, the subject remains separate from such discourse but 'masters' it and manipulates it freely. In this sense it is 'mine' because I bend it fully to my unique purpose. This accentuates the sense of language as a 'tool' with which I create something uniquely mine, with connotations of ownership, exclusiveness and so on. Both of these tendencies are found in Bakhtin, I would suggest.

The social dimension of language is clearly central to Bakhtin's understanding of language. For Bakhtin, the listener or receiver of a message does not passively decode a fully formed message. The nature of an utterance – in contrast to a linguistically formed unit such as a sentence – is such that "when the listener perceives and understands the meaning of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude towards it" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 68). The listener agrees with, acts on or resists it and so on. An utterance is thus not reducible to its linguistic form, since it entails this mutual participation. Language thus gains life and momentum not by reference to formal properties it might have incorporated into it (syntactic, generic), but through this lived experience which it brings forth in subjects. In so far that language has its *existence* through such mutual participation, it is not something an individual can gain control over. This theme in Bakhtin's model of language leads him to speak in several places of 'grammar' and 'dictionary meanings' of words being abstractions from the language of lived life. The "lexical composition and grammatical structure" of our language we learn "not from dictionaries and grammars but from concrete utterances that we hear and that we ourselves reproduce" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 78) and as such once "the living impulse towards the object" entailed in lived use is removed, "all we have left is the naked corpse of the word" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 292). 'Systems' as such are dead, yet at the same time he suggests they are necessary: "behind each text stands a language system" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 105). Although "everything in a text that is repeated and reproduced, everything repeatable and reproducible, everything that can

be given outside a given text conforms to this language system” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 105), everything that is *unique* is of the utterance, “and this is the aspect of it that pertains to honesty, truth, goodness, beauty, history” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 105). Bakhtin’s criticism of linguistics is that it takes as its object the systematic, reproducible dimension of language, and thus misses that which *marks* language as such (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 81). Bakhtin here implicitly foreshadows the spectral quality Derrida sees in language, in that this ‘corpse’ is in fact a vital element of language: on the one hand the ‘system’ is merely an abstraction from lived use and alone it is dead, yet on the other hand it necessarily lies behind language use and hence is vital – a kind of living dead.

An utterance is always a response to prior utterances (e.g. Bakhtin, 1986, p. 94) and also “finds its response in the subsequent speech or behaviour of the listener” (p. 69). As such my own intention cannot bring to completion the meaning my utterance has. It always remains open. Bakhtin (1986) asserts that “any utterance is a link in a very complexly organised chain of other utterances” (p. 70), and therefore its meaning remains not only open to my immediate addressee’s response, but in addition will always retain the possibility of meaning something different as the chain of utterances of which it becomes a part leads to new retrospective interpretations of it. Thus while on the one hand Bakhtin (1986) suggests a speaker will attempt always to anticipate the response his utterance will get and will “try actively to determine this response” (p. 95), at the same time the closure and control over meaning one seeks remains never quite within reach and is invariably doomed to failure. Every utterance is therefore a response, yet in so responding it also contributes to the constitution of that which it responds to. Utterances “are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 91), and so for each utterance “it is impossible to determine its position without correlating it with other positions” (p. 91). Thus we might ask: to what is the response being made if the response itself contributes to the constitution of that object (an utterance, and indeed the speaking subject)? It would thus appear that on the one hand the utterance *must* already be given to us, yet on the other hand it *cannot* be already given to us. The relations between utterances are thus central, although crucially these “relations among utterances cannot be treated grammatically” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 72). Utterances are not reducible to the formal properties attributed to a language.

The speaking and listening subject is thus also produced within this ongoing process, since responding to prior utterances and addressing another is integral to the utterance. The subject therefore does not precede the utterance in the sense of controlling its meaning and effect, and consequently the sense that an utterance is ‘mine’ must emerge within this process, rather than belong to a prior identity possessing that which he or she says. We get a hint here of the difficulty with the concept of ‘identity’, since this must now be viewed as an attempt to stabilise the self (and other), to state who one *is* in opposition to this ongoing movement where a state of ‘being’ is never finally achieved. Yet, as Bakhtin’s model of language suggests, we *must* assume there is a speaker and an utterance to which we respond, even if in the moment of responding we also contribute to the constitution of that which we are responding to.

This dichotomy between being assimilated to language and of assimilating language to our purposes corresponds to the question of the individual as subject and agent: does the subject precede language (as mastery suggests) or is the subject a (an incomplete) product of and constituted by language (as assimilation to the interminable processes of discourse suggests). This is not simply a question of an order of events – for example, that one first of all learns to speak within given discourses, and then subsequently makes something of these for one’s own purposes – since it raises questions about where such ‘individual purposes’ might come from if they are not ones already forged by existing discourses. This question is particularly pertinent with respect to learners of a discourse and language. One reading of Bakhtin suggests that one acquires existing discourses and this mastery over them enables effective use of them (e.g. Braxley, 2005). Yet acquisition would seem to be never quite possible. That which must be acquired (eg pre-given forms such as grammar and the practices embodied in genres) is problematic because these themselves are secondary abstractions from actual lived language experience, and as such are subjected to the dialogic process rather than a ‘given’ which makes

dialogism possible. Furthermore, an utterance produced dialogically presupposes an anticipated response which never actually arrives prior to the utterance being made, and in addition the utterance is dependent upon its place in a chain of communication which, of course, is never finalised. We can also add that the addressor and addressee will always bring different histories to an utterance, and so collectively all these considerations ensure that convergence of meaning cannot be achieved. Thus where the subject-agent lies is extremely difficult to establish; and who the subject is who states this language is 'mine', and what the relationship between the subject and that language is remains inherently problematic.

The difficulty of establishing the position a subject occupies in language is also highlighted by Bakhtin's description of the centrifugal and centripetal forces of language. In essence, the unity of language, represented by grammar and rules of practice, are for Bakhtin imposed: "a unitary language is not something given but is always in essence posited" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 270) and as such "constitutes the theoretical expression of the historical processes of linguistic unification and centralization, an expression of the centripetal forces of language" (p. 270). These forces impose specific limits on heteroglossia, "guaranteeing a certain maximum of understanding" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 270) as they crystallise the language into a posited unity. But it is important to note that this unity does not inhere in language, but rather is imposed, posited. It is produced by a meta-discourse and while it seeks to ease the process of communication, in the same way that appeal to cliché and readymade phrases can be said to do so, it opposes the heteroglossia and the centrifugal forces this generates which for Bakhtin are central to language. This therefore brings into question the status of these unifying forces such as grammar since while appearing necessary for communication, they are nevertheless secondary, always, in the final analysis, subject to the dialogic and centrifugal forces at work. An utterance may transgress what is posited as 'correct' yet nevertheless work effectively as communication *because* that which sustains the capacity to do so is given by the dialogic processes, not by ready-made templates (grammar; genres) which must be referred to in order for meaning to be achieved. Holquist, in his introduction to Bakhtin (1981), states that it is centrifugal forces which are "more powerful and ubiquitous – theirs is the reality of actual articulation" (p. xix), and so the centripetal forces "are less powerful and have a complex ontological status" (p. xix). That is, the ontological status of the unity of language, and of characteristics such as grammatical forms burdened with guaranteeing that unity, is problematic. As Bakhtin in fact notes, "language...is never unitary. It is unitary only as an abstract grammatical system of normative forms, taken in isolation from the concrete, ideological conceptualisations that fill it" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 288). What is given to us is a multitude of concrete worlds which we posit as occurring "within an abstractly unitary national language", or we might add, unitary discourses.

The uncertain ontological status of this 'posited' unity has parallels in Bakhtin's concept of the 'superaddressee'. He argues that we not only address an actual addressee, presupposed in one way or another, but also a non-existent yet necessary superaddressee, the supposed guarantor of meaning (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 126). That is, when a person speaks, they *necessarily* assume their message can be understood (regardless of whether in reality it is) – without this assumption one is not engaged in speech but in making noise. This necessity, and hence the assumption of an addressee "whose absolutely just responsive understanding is presumed" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 126) is inscribed in the nature of an utterance. Again, like grammar, this superaddressee has very unclear ontological status; indeed we might argue it is wholly imaginary, yet nevertheless necessary, and in this respect it does not have psychological but transcendental, *a priori* status. We might also note the radically non-historical nature of such concepts, which are in full contrast to the historicism that Bakhtin so emphatically insists upon and which results in such *necessary* concepts having such uncertain ontological status.

This dichotomous relationship between centrifugal and centripetal forces overlaps with Bakhtin's account of making language 'one's own'. He argues that "each text (as an utterance) is individual, unique and unrepeatable" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 105). That is, even when 'repeating' a sentence or chunk of text, as an utterance it is unique since one is now using this 'same' language in a different context, for a different purpose (as quotation, to challenge it, to reaffirm it and so on – Bakhtin, 1986, pp. 106 & 107), and thus it occupies a different place "in a chain

of texts” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 105). Utterances are always unique, insists Bakhtin. Thus what is linguistic in an utterance is always a means to an end (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 105; 107). As a result an utterance can never be properly translated or paraphrased, a view shared by Derrida. Yet for Bakhtin the authorship of one’s text and its uniqueness is nevertheless constituted of, and in response to, the utterances of others. Thus Bakhtin (1981) states that a language “is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others” (p. 294), it is “shot through with intentions and accents” and so always belongs to someone (p. 293). Consequently “the word in language is half someone else’s” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293) becoming “one’s own” only when the speaker “populates it with his own intention...when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention” (p. 293). But what then is appropriated if every utterance is unique? How do I appropriate what another has said if it remains untranslatable (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 106)? That is, what is *the same* that transfers from the other’s speech to mine if its repetition means it cannot be the same? Is it only the ‘materiality’ of the language (its phonemic or graphemic embodiment) which remains the same? This has to do with the problem of ‘nuancing’ language which is central to Bakhtin – that a unique utterance is a nuanced take-up of the words of others. *What* indeed am I nuancing if I cannot transfer from one context to another some essential element which carries across utterances and remains identical with itself? Bakhtin freely acknowledges that sentences can be reproduced, “everything repeatable and reproducible...conforms to this language system” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 105) but he is also now suggesting that utterances can be reproduced (we speak others’ words) but simultaneously *cannot* be reproduced (since every utterance is unique).

The dialogic privileging of heteroglossia and the centrifugal forces of language suggest the communicative moment lies in the relationship between utterances rather than in the transmission of something which remains ‘the same’, such as ‘meaning’. Bakhtin (1986) does indeed suggest that “the life of a text, that is, its true essence, always develops *on the boundary between two consciousnesses, two subjects*” (p. 106, original italics; see also Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293). The real issue in Bakhtin thus concerns intersubjectivity; to understand language use in terms of a discrete subject exercising mastery and choice is to begin from a false premise. An utterance is neither mine nor another’s. This of course appears to go against the many repeated statements by Bakhtin that we make language our own, or a word belongs to someone else, and so to try and throw further light on this I wish now to comment on Derrida’s view of language, which in my reading overlaps in many ways with Bakhtin, but nevertheless makes a crucially different move. For Derrida, such oppositions as centrifugal/centripetal, ‘mine/other’s, and so on, are not to be viewed as two separate concepts or entities in a dialectical or simply contradictory or opposing struggle but rather, are embedded within one another, constituting irresolvable aporias. That is, each side of each contradiction is integral to the constitution of the other side, and thus neither side is itself, but fundamentally ‘non-identical’ with itself. For Derrida this is unavoidably so because of the operation of language itself.

3. Derrida

For Bakhtin, language is forged in the process of communication and thus he argues that both intention and context are critical constraints on the meanings an utterance has. Consequently, formal properties of language and genre, often viewed as properties which define them, are instead abstractions made from communicative practices and do not precede such communicative practices and render them possible. I have already suggested, however, that Bakhtin exceeds this historicist foundation of language by his appeal to such phenomena as the superaddressee, and to the ‘accented’ or ‘nuanced’ meaning which Bakhtin presents as the locus of language change and the source of its dynamic. For example, the element of an utterance which is nuanced exceeds reference to that which precedes it and is thus not reducible to its historical antecedents. I have also pointed out that at times Bakhtin refers to a language system “behind every utterance”, presented as prior to and a grounding for language use, even though he also argues that this system is contingently abstracted from use. Clearly, however, if use predominates then any such posited system remains vulnerable to being constituted differently as a consequence of changes in use: language use itself draws its communicative power from elsewhere and indeed dominates any such posited system. Such systems therefore might be

given the status of established convention but they will not have constitutive force over utterances. It is in this space between conventions (of grammar, of genre) and the production of utterances – which are not reducible to such conventions – that students often find themselves and flounder. Indeed, being equipped with ‘rules’ of such conventions (linguistic; discursive) and responding to these can result in a student producing a text which is not suitable for the task. The experience of language as ‘one’s own’ lies elsewhere, not in ‘mastery’ over language. For Derrida, if it lies anywhere it lies in judgment.

Derrida’s thought overlaps in many respects with Bakhtin, but differs fundamentally in the independence he gives to ‘writing’ from communication and meaning. For Derrida ‘writing’ describes the language process which is marked by deferral and difference (Derrida’s neologism is ‘*differance*’) and not writing as distinct from speaking: in this sense ‘writing’ underpins speaking too (see Derrida, 1988). Derrida notes that communication is traditionally taken to mean the transfer of an idea from one person to another, and in speech, recognition of the intent of the speaker and the context of the utterance enables understanding of the speaker’s meaning. Writing is usually seen simply as a tool by which the same operation is reproduced but in the absence of the reader, and of the writer for the reader (Derrida, 1988, p. 2). But as Derrida points out, while this absence is typically viewed as a deferral of the presence said to characterise speech, a presence which in writing is restored when the reader takes up the meanings encoded in the text, in fact “this deferral [*differance*] must be capable of being carried to a certain absoluteness of absence if the structure of writing, assuming that writing exists, is to constitute itself” (Derrida, 1988, p. 7). That is, in principle a text “must remain readable despite the absolute disappearance of any receiver” (Derrida, 1988, p. 7), and thus what constitutes writing for Derrida is the iterability of a sign, not the ‘presence’ of an encoded meaning. A sign operates as a sign because it can be reproduced and subjected to many iterations, not because it is the carrier of some determinate meaning. Neither can meaning be finally settled by appeal to context. A word is capable of being iterated in an innumerable range of contexts and so in principle “can break with every given context” (Derrida, 1988, p. 12). Furthermore, any such context itself can never be empirically given but can only ever be the product of a judgment which determines which features will count as contextually relevant.

Yet a sign is iterable only if it can be repeated, and for repetition to be possible we are inclined to think something must remain ‘the same’ across its many iterations (although Bakhtin’s concept of ‘responsiveness’ might offer a different way of thinking about what is entailed in ‘repetition’). Clearly however, this sameness is not empirically given (differences in accents and fonts, for example, suggest empirical differences are always present). Thus, it is “to the extent it is organised by a code...[that] it is constituted in its identity as a mark by its iterability” (Derrida, 1988, p. 7). But such a code or system is never actually encountered: language, for both Derrida and Bakhtin, is encountered only through specific instantiations, in utterances. But these utterances are meaningful only in so far as a language code/system is presupposed, thus for Derrida such a code itself is constituted as such only through an act of judgment; it is not given. Thus, we might add, it is the product of a meaningful act which necessarily *presupposes* the very code it is meant to provide an account of.

Thus, for Derrida there are no “internal or structural features” which disclose what a language is, or, for example, which distinguish a language from a dialect (Derrida, 1998, p. 9). Any such boundaries are given by a judgment, and so “there is no natural property of language” (Derrida, 1988, p. 24). Therefore, the language which we presuppose to exist, and “the language of the other” (Derrida, 1998, p. 21) which I seek to acquire and make mine, is informed by “an immanent structure of promise or desire, an expectation without an horizon of expectation” (Derrida, 1998, p. 21), and this promise “gathers the language together” (p. 22; see also pp. 67 & 68). This promise “heralds the uniqueness of a language to come”, that is, a language, a code or practice which is the guarantor of my utterance. Thus for Derrida “there is no given language, or rather there is some language, a gift of language, but there is not a language...it does not exist” (Derrida, 1998, p. 67). Elsewhere Derrida says that “the intelligible face of the sign remains turned towards the word and the face of God” (Derrida, 1976, p. 13), and here he is suggesting that within meaning is a move whereby a guarantor is necessarily presupposed, a

move not unlike that which Bakhtin (1986) incorporates into his concept of the superaddressee “whose absolutely just responsive understanding is presupposed” (p. 126) in any act of communication.

This leads to an irresolvable aporia: the possibility of meaning (the use of language as communication) is dependent upon the use of a sign which is by definition iterable, which in turn ensures precisely that the meaning of a sign can never be finally settled. The sign is given as such by its place in a code, but this code does not exist other than as posited by a meaningful judgment which *presupposes* the code. While we may experience a “great force of certainty” in the meaning we experience, it can never be finally justified (Derrida, 2005b, p. 164). For Derrida such an aporia is not a contradiction to be resolved but rather is the *condition* of language as such. That is, the certitude of meaning we experience is possible *only because* meaning is fundamentally ungrounded. To resolve this uncertainty would *at the same time* dissolve the possibility of ‘certain’ meaning or successful communication.

Thus there is a “linguistic spectrality” (Derrida, 2005a, p. 105); language consists of a presence and a non-presence simultaneously which is *constitutive* of language. Language and the possibility of determinate meaning must be presupposed. We have already noted that Bakhtin resorted to a non-existent or imaginary ‘superaddressee’ as the guarantor of an utterance. Thus when Derrida asks what it can mean for language to be ‘mine’ (Derrida, 1998, p. 17), it is only within an appeal to a language which most emphatically is not mine that such an experience of it being ‘mine’ can arise. There is a fundamental alienation of the subject, and this alienation for Derrida *is* the subject. This is not the alienation of some prior, already given substance/subject, alienated through their entry into language. Rather, both language and the subject are constituted *within* this “inalienable alienation” which is “not only the origin of our responsibility, it also structures the property of language” (Derrida, 1998, p. 25). Language *necessarily* entails judgment and thus implicates the speaking subject. This judgment integral to language supports the code yet exceeds what can be understood in terms of code, even while at the same time for judgment to be possible the code/discourse/genre one is engaging with *must* be presupposed. Therefore, there is ‘nothing there’ prior to this fundamental ‘non-identity’ of both language and subject with their selves. This spectral quality is for Derrida most evident in the work of a poet: “whoever has an intimate, bodily experience of this spectral errancy, whoever surrenders to this truth of language, is a poet, whether he writes poetry or not” (Derrida, 2005a, p. 105), but he adds that it marks all language. This experience is gained through subjection to the body of the language, a lived encounter. My argument here is that a student who is determined to ‘acquire’ a posited disciplinary or other discourse, who resists the temptation to assimilate new texts to schemata they already hold, but instead struggles with the language she engages with (“one never appropriates a language, but rather [carries] on a hand to hand, bodily struggle with it”; Derrida, 2005a, p. 99), is a student who experiences heightened exposure to the uncertainty Derrida speaks of. This uncertainty is not just cognitive but ontological, to do with the formation of the student subject in their engagement with the discourse and its representative texts.

A language or a discourse can therefore never be acquired. It exists in this spectral form. It must be presupposed, yet it can never be finally discerned. In this sense there can be no metalanguage, since to speak of a language or discourse or genre is to construe it in the language with which one speaks: “*a language shall always be called upon to speak about the language*” (Derrida, 1998, p. 69, original italics). Thus there can be no ‘pure’ translation or paraphrase, there can only be a rewriting. Any paraphrase therefore provides a substitution through (metonymic) *displacement*, rather than (metaphoric) *replacement*, and rewrites the original source rather than writes the ‘same thing’ in different words. This rewriting is thus an “untranslatable translation” in that the language one produces is “impossible, unreadable” (Derrida, 1998, p. 66) since no prior language which provides its source of reference exists. Yet this new idiom “makes things happen...produces events in the given language, the given language to which things must still be given” (Derrida, 1998, p. 66). That is, language exists only through a gesture of giving, which Derrida links elsewhere to hospitality (see Price 2013).

4. A case of student 'ownership'

I comment now on remarks a student made in the course of an interview about her assignment text. This text was discovered subsequent to the interview to have been largely patchwritten. Howard (1995, p. 788) defines patchwriting as "copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym-substitutes". However, the student insisted during the interview that the language she used was her own. An understanding of the nature of her relationship with her text such that she experienced this language as her own was consequently intriguing.

This student had expressed a strong desire to improve her English and to understand the common law and its discourses, and the terms she used suggested both had intrinsic interest for her and were not merely instruments she needed to acquire to complete her Master of Laws. Although she referred on numerous occasions in the interview to her lack of knowledge about common law, of its discourses and the background understandings she assumed the authors of texts and their typical readers shared, she nevertheless perceived the source texts to embody the language and discourses she sought to acquire. It can be argued that her desire for both a language and discourse which she felt she was not in possession of reduced her confidence to paraphrase, since she felt she lacked the discursive understanding necessary to make reliable paraphrase. Thus her desire both facilitates and presents an obstacle to engagement with the discourse. We may therefore conclude that her patchwriting represents an attempt to produce her text through instrumental appropriation of source texts and possibly an attempt to learn through imitation. However, I will argue that such a conclusion cannot be sustained. I will argue that she is constituted as writing subject through her engagement with the *texts* (rather than discourses) she draws on and thus her sense of self as writer becomes tied to them. Following this line of argument I suggest that when the student stated the language was her own, she was giving sincere expression to her subjective experience. This interpretation is supported by the fact that she made no attempt to hide from view the sources from which she drew, neither in the interview nor in her list of references. The openness she displayed about her sources suggests that rather than her patchwriting being a wilful, instrumental manipulation of source texts by a pre-formed, instrumental subject, the experience that the language was hers points to a self which is constituted within the fabric of the language with which she is engaging.

In certain respects, we might suppose paraphrase is always possible. However, this student, whose grasp of English was relatively good, eschews paraphrase despite having been subjected to all the entreaties not to plagiarise and despite her own fear of plagiarising (amongst other elements causing this fear, she also stated that she was afraid to use her own ideas in case someone else had already expressed similar ones and she might be unwittingly guilty of plagiarism). Significant here then is her relationship with her sources through which I suggest her sense of self as writing subject is constituted. This relationship is predominantly with the source texts as *embodiments* of the discourse, rather than with source texts as *representations* of ideas which lie behind the text which she can paraphrase. Text in its material – we might say surface – quality remains integral to the student's engagement with it; it is not an invisible medium through which she accesses ideas lying beyond and independent of the text and capable of being said differently. The source *texts* embody the 'promise' of that which she desires to acquire, and to rewrite them is to *lose* that desired object. Such a rewriting indeed effects a displacement (of text) rather than a replacement of 'the same' (ideas). For this student, we can argue that the body of the discourse lies in the "uniqueness incorporated, incarnated, in what one used to call the 'signifiers', in the graphemes, which in themselves cannot be translated" (Derrida, 2005b, p. 168). The materiality of the text acquires huge significance in that it is the text she identifies with. Derrida argues that "an identity is never given, received or attained; only the interminable and indefinitely phantasmatic process of identification endures" (Derrida, 1998, p. 28), and for this student it is precisely a lack of identity in the promised common law discourse which she experiences. It is precisely this lack which supports her desire to acquire it, and sustains the 'promise' of the discourse. Thus, I am arguing here that it is through identification with the material text that this student subjectively assumes a place in the discourse and thus is caught up in a movement towards fulfilling and satisfying her desire. This

is not a deliberate identification as such, but is forged through the promise the texts hold for her. Patchwriting, in this respect, has a certain inevitability. I would therefore argue it is not a process by which a discourse is acquired through imitation (see Angelil-Carter, 2000). For imitation to succeed one must *already* be able to identify what is to be imitated, and since in discourse this is not empirically given, to identify and select what is worthy of imitation the learner must already understand what is relevant, i.e., must understand the discourse in advance of acquiring it. I am suggesting patchwriting is part of the process whereby the student can engage in and carry on a “hand to hand, bodily struggle” with the discourse (Derrida, 2005b, p. 99; see also Derrida, 1998, p. 46) before creating a familiarity with it. I do not believe it is accidental that this student spoke at a certain stage when writing the two essays that she felt “depressed” and at a complete loss. This is because she struggled, in my interpretation, with a discourse she experienced as ‘other’ to her, which entailed at the same time a letting go of ‘identities’ she might feel relatively secure in. Her engagement with her sources is not solely cognitive in nature but has ontological ramifications.

In support of this interpretation, I would draw on comments she made. She stated that she had “no strong commitment” to the position she developed in her essay, but she nevertheless felt very satisfied with her essay such that, she said, “it doesn’t matter how the result is”. This suggests firstly, a satisfaction which is not tied to the instrumental goal of getting a good grade, nor secondly, to the ideational content of her text. Instead, her comments suggest an identification with the *text* as the source of her satisfaction. As subject of the discourses she engages with, who she has become finds its image more in the text and words that constitute it, rather than in its ideational content. In this sense she experiences the words as ‘her own’ despite having little attachment to the content. Her lack of background in the discourse, of which she was so acutely aware, led to a foregrounding of the materiality of the text as the embodied discourse with which she could engage, in a way that brought satisfaction to her.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to show how making language one’s own in the case of a student, whose text was heavily patchwritten can be tied to the nature of the engagement she had with her sources. This engagement was shaped by specific desires she had with respect to English and the common law discourses she was engaging with. I have argued that she engaged with her source texts, and that she was not involved merely in an instrumental appropriation of them to achieve goals established prior to her writing process, leaving her unchanged as a writing subject. She was deeply implicated in her writing, and the sense of who she was – with respect to the language she engaged with – was shaped by that engagement. I have shown elsewhere (Price, 2012) that for her and other students, the nature of the engagement, and the understanding their lecturers bring to the student text (their reading and assessment of the texts) cannot be explained by appeal to ‘rules’ (for example, about what constitutes plagiarism; what constitutes proper and appropriate use of primary and secondary sources), since these rules are themselves nuanced, becoming meaningful in light of the relationships, amongst other things, that exist between students and their lecturers, both in the institutional sense, and in the more personal relationships that exist between individuals. This nuancing might be understood in a Bakhtinian sense, with its appeal to an underlying ‘sameness’ of meaning to which nuances are added. However, I have also attempted to show that the nuances have a more radical nature. As Derrida argues, language and the rules attributed to it and to specific discourses do not exist other than as *necessarily* posited entities, and the nuanced meanings carry over sameness, but at the same time are different from that which precedes them. For students the sense of discursive continuity (and hence also of self as an identity within a posited discourse) can be sustained through an identification with the *words* as embodiments of the discourse. The student discussed here created a sense of a ‘self’ within the discourse through this identification. Consequently her text was very satisfying for her, and as noted, it was indeed the text rather than the position developed within it which mirrored this sense of self and provided the consequent satisfaction.

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