

## The provocations of Luce Irigaray

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In her seminal works, *Speculum of the other woman* and *This sex which is not one*, French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray teaches us to seek out what is hidden, silent, unknown and seemingly unknowable in language. For her, it is in the fractures in the text, the breaks in coherence, the lapses of sense and meaning that the feminine – which she defines as a mode of being that can only take place outside of Western philosophy’s ubiquitous binaries – may be glimpsed. In the work of Academic Language and Learning (ALL) practitioners, however, the focus is quite different. We seek to heal the fractures and smooth over the lapses of meaning in the student texts we work with. In fact, our aim is to usher students into the very discourses Irigaray argues oppress and suppress the feminine in Western culture. This paper reflects on this seeming contradiction and the ethical and philosophical questions it raises. In particular, it draws on Irigaray’s recent work on language and teaching to suggest that through a “horizontal” relationship between the learning adviser and the student, it may be possible to create the conditions in which the feminine can take place.

**Key words:** Luce Irigaray, phallogentrism, the feminine, the other, academic language and learning.

### 1. Introduction

My first encounter with the writings of renowned French philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray was an article entitled “This Sex Which Is Not One”, which I read as part of a cultural theory course when I was an undergraduate, more than twenty years ago. In it, she uses female morphology – a woman’s body – as a metaphor for female subjectivity, and is quite explicit (for literary theory, if not for pornography). She describes how women’s bodies are figured in Western discourse as a gap or absence – a hole – and imagines how this “hole” might have pleasures of which this discourse is entirely ignorant. I had never before encountered a theorist who used women’s genitals, let alone their sexual pleasure, as the basis for a critique of culture. It was a crash course not only in Irigaray’s arguments but in her methods. She is often shocking. She is often angry. She is always subversive. She loves to play games with the big names of Western thought – from Plato and Hegel to Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida, with detours via Freud and Lacan. She mimics them, teases and taunts them, turns them upside down. She delights in finding the flaws in their texts, the gaps in their logic, the lacunae in their ideas. She excels in using their limitations against them.

She also rejects what we might consider to be the ‘rules’ of scholarly discourse. She does not put forward a thesis statement in her introductory paragraph, along with a nicely elaborated ‘map’ of her progression. She proceeds instead by association, negation and what I want to call – for want of a better term – sarcasm. She does not seem to have heard of topic sentences. She favours hints, indirection, obliquity. She has little patience for such pedestrian considerations as referencing. Often, she gives no clue as to which philosopher she is engaging at any one time, let alone which particular books, articles, passages or ideas of theirs she is addressing. She

seems to assume that everyone will know that when she is talking about alterity, she is riffing on Emmanuel Levinas, and when she is talking about the Other, she is taking pot shots at Jacques Lacan – for instance. It is clear that consistency and coherence are not her priorities. For her, repetition is playful and generative. Mimicry is a productive writing strategy. Words can be tinkered with letter by letter until they avow entirely unexpected meanings.

None of this is incidental. Irigaray wants her readers to feel exasperated. Their frustration is a sign that she has succeeded in putting a spanner in the works of a discourse that, in her view, only ever ends up reproducing the same old thing: the same ideas, the same values, the same subject (Irigaray, 1985b). That subject is, of course, a masculine one. Through what she calls her methods of indirection, through speaking “only in riddles, allusions, hints, parables” (Irigaray, 1985a, p. 143), through a relentless focus on the weak points of Western discourse, she is able to hijack that discourse, to force it to say – if only by accident and at random – something else, something other than what it always says. She enables it to speak of something she claims has always been unspeakable: a female subjectivity, a feminine being (Irigaray, 1985a).

In this paper, I want briefly to outline – without any pretence of doing them justice – the key Irigarayan concepts of the dominance of the masculine within Western discourse and the unimaginable possibilities of the feminine, as well as how these possibilities can be fostered through a different use of language. In this, I want to emphasise – because of its relevance to Academic Language and Learning (ALL) work – how in Irigaray’s philosophy the language of Western discourse, the language we use every day in universities and in the use of which we instruct our students, is complicit with the dominance of the masculine (patriarchy, phallogentrism). This language works against the potential emergence of a culture based on two rather than one, a culture Irigaray says would operate according to a different logic. Finally, I want to look at Irigaray’s own recent discussions of teaching, and suggest some ways that ALL practitioners – despite being, seemingly, instruments of the ‘devil’ of patriarchal oppression – can welcome and give space to the feminine/other in their practice.

## **2. *This sex which is not one***

To give something of the flavour of Irigaray’s work, I want to begin with a brief analysis of the article I’ve already referred to, “This Sex Which Is Not One” (Irigaray, 1985b). The essay appears in a book of the same name which was originally published in French in 1977. The title is a pun: within Western discourse, it suggests, the female sex is not a sex, and it is not singular. In both these senses, then, it is not “one”. It is not a sex, Irigaray claims, because in the logic of Western discourse, there is only one subject, and that subject, which is supposedly universal, is male. The female sex is not a positive subjectivity in its own right but the absence of maleness – its opposite, its negative. Woman is “the complement to man, his inverse, his scraps, his need, his other” (Irigaray, 1996, p. 63). The basis of post-structuralist thought is the idea that language (and thus meaning) is structured around binaries, one term of which is valued over the other: light-darkness, hard-soft, form-matter, presence-absence, man-woman. Irigaray argues that the positive values in these binaries are the hallmarks of subjectivity – which is modelled on the masculine form and on masculine ideals. The negative values are the opposite of subjectivity. Together, these negative values comprise the non-subject, the “other” of the subject: woman. For Irigaray, it is evident that to become a subject – to speak meaningfully within Western discourse – one must embrace masculine values and eschew so-called feminine ones. One must become a man, in effect, even if one is biologically female (see, e.g., Irigaray, 1985b, p. 149). Irigaray’s contention is that women have their own relationship to culture and nature, to language, to themselves and to others (see, e.g., Irigaray, 1996, p. 62) – just as men do. But in the current order, this relationship is largely unrepresented. It is foreign not only to Western culture generally but to women themselves, who cannot elaborate their difference within a discourse dedicated to the masculine. We are all of us “trapped in the economy or the horizon of a single subject” (Irigaray, 1996, p. 63).

Irigaray’s early work, in particular, is aimed at trying to break out of that economy or horizon. Her argument is that we cannot imagine what a different subjectivity might look like, let alone

represent it, from within our current discursive system (Irigaray, 1985a, 1985b). We have to dismantle that system – to get around it, somehow – in order to begin to glimpse possibilities that are genuinely new, and not emerging from (and returning to) the same old binaries, the same old form, the same old logic. This is why, in “This Sex”, she proposes the “two lips” of the female sex organ – in contradistinction to the “one” of the phallus, which she argues underlies Western discourse – as the basis of a new approach to language, based on a very different logic. With the “two lips”, she wants to evoke a mode of being that overcomes binaries – or at least gestures towards a space beyond them. This mode of being, she claims, is multiple: both one *and* two, rather than either one *or* two. Thus it is both interior and exterior – not one or the other; and it is in continuous relationship with itself, rather than being either relational or separate. The masculine economy is one of use- and exchange-value, based on property, she writes (Irigaray, 1985b, pp. 31-32). But in order to have property, you must be able to tell one thing from another – you must have objects, in other words, that can be clearly differentiated from one another. So she proposes a feminine economy in which subjects move continuously in and out of relationship with one another, making it impossible to tell one from another. Such subjectivity, Irigaray goes on, is a “mystery” in the phallic economy (Irigaray, 1985b, p. 26) – unknown and unknowable. It can only be recovered by focusing on the margins of discourse – the words of the hysteric, the ecstasies (e.g. religious mystics), the supposedly insane (Irigaray, 1985a, 1985b). It is only in discourses considered illogical, unreasonable, indecipherable by Western culture that we can glimpse the possibilities of a being that is not constructed by that culture, that is entirely other than the single subject of patriarchal discourse (see, e.g., Irigaray, 1985a, pp. 191-202). This doesn’t mean that women themselves are in any way crazy, or illogical, or unreasonable. It means that if we stay within the logic of Western discourse, we will only ever be able to produce one kind of subject.

According to Irigaray, the single-subject model of discourse is based on the repression and/or exclusion of all that is outside it – what she calls the “truly other”. Such repressions and exclusions are not sustainable. “History cannot do without the existence of two human subjects, man and woman, if it is to get away from master-slave relationships,” she writes in *I love to you* (Irigaray, 1996, p. 62; and see also Irigaray, 2008a, p. 126). Elsewhere (Irigaray, 2008a) she talks about how the future of democracy in an age of globalisation, the possibility of peace in a multicultural era, and the environmental health of the planet all hinge on the “real, cultured and ethical relation” between two subjects, each with its own relation to itself (pp. 126, 132). “The relation between man and woman as two different human beings, each one belonging to a nature and culture of their own, is yet to come”, she explains in a recent interview (Irigaray & Grosz, 2008, p. 136). “Such a future of the relations between man and woman, men and women, as two different beings and Beings, could change the becoming of humanity itself, and even the conception of what humanity as such is”, she goes on (p. 136). Her early work is aimed at identifying and making visible the repression of the feminine, and at deploying various strategies to make discourse follow a different logic and avow a different truth. Her later work looks at ways of bringing to birth this ‘culture of two’ by, among other things, transformations in language, education in sexual difference, the development of laws specific to each sex, and self-transformation through Eastern spiritual practices.

### **3. The provocations of the feminine**

This is only a very rudimentary outline of Irigaray’s thought, but it should provide some context for my discussion of the ways in which Irigaray’s ideas are challenging and provocative for ALL practitioners. I hope it is evident that Irigaray is mounting an attack on the discourses that dominate Western culture and the way they function to exclude and repress all that is not “the same”. Academic discourses, which many ALL practitioners teach, are an instance of these phallogocentric discourses. Overwhelmingly, academic discourses are based on values Irigaray identifies as masculine. As others have pointed out (see, e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldeberger, & Tarule, 1986; Code, 1991), such discourses elevate the abstract over the concrete, the ideal over the real. They separate mind and body. They value objectivity over relationality. They are linear and sequential. They are univocal rather than plurivocal. They are competitive, putting forward rival views and arguing for the dominance of one and the subjection (if not demolition) of the

others. Irigaray argues that such qualities overwhelmingly reflect the logic and preferences of male subjects. By these lights, what she calls “a woman’s voice” is chaotic and incoherent: “‘she’ sets off in all directions leaving ‘him’ unable to discern the coherence of any meaning. Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand” (Irigaray, 1985b, p. 29).

Irigaray’s description – somewhat truncated here – of a woman’s voice has parallels with my experience as an ALL adviser of working-class students. These students are largely but not exclusively female, usually mature-aged, and often the first in their families to go to university. Their bafflement at the conventions of academic writing continually reminds me how artificial it is – how it is a discourse whose requirements are not natural but cultural. As Bordieu, Passeron, and de Saint Martin (1994) put it, the “language of ideas” used in academia in the West goes “hand in hand with values which dominate the whole of our experience and, in particular, with a vision of society and of culture” (p. 8). Far from being universal and absolute, this vision “consecrate[s] cultural privilege” (p. 8). Many ALL practitioners have described the ways in which the purportedly neutral discourse of academic writing is in fact deeply embedded in cultural and linguistic norms which embody specific class, race and gender values (see, e.g., Binkley & Smith, 2006; Elbow, 1991; Greville, 1998; Young, 2004). The result is that students from so-called non-traditional backgrounds have to work much harder than their ‘traditional’ colleagues to be ‘at home’ with this discourse. It seems clear that Irigaray’s words about the position of the feminine within dominant Western discourses find a parallel in the position of non-traditional students within academia. Very often, in their first attempts at academic writing such students do indeed “set off in all directions”, leaving their ALL advisor “unable to discern the coherence of any meaning”. In my own practice, it is evident to me – as to other ALL practitioners (see for example, Greville, 1998) – that this is because the cultural values and assumptions implicit in the linguistic and formal conventions of academic writing are profoundly alien to them. Such students, it seems to me, occupy the space of Irigaray’s feminine. For them, meaning itself is complex, multiple and circular. If they rush off in every direction at once, it is not because they are not thoughtful or knowledgeable. It is because this is what knowledge is like for them: it exists at many different points at once, it is contradictory and multiple and many-layered, and it changes according to circumstances. Yet as the person responsible for inducting these students into academic discourse, I cannot honour their lived experience of the complexity and multiplicity of knowledge – or only in the most cursory way. My response to their efforts is to try my best to impose coherence, to apply those ‘ready-made grids’ of which Irigaray speaks and chop off the unsightly bulges. My standpoint is, as Irigaray puts it, that of ‘reason’, and from that standpoint, the essays I see can, indeed, seem ‘mad’. What Irigaray suggests, however, is that there is another standpoint from which to approach such texts. If we could find it, we would hear something entirely different – something that would astonish, delight or perhaps appal, something that would, in Irigaray’s terms, change the world.

A number of ALL practitioners have suggested ways to create a space within academe for the discourses of non-traditional students, many of which involve simply being explicit about what we are doing: inducting students into a specific set of discourses, rather than teaching them the ‘right’ way to think and write. Greville (1998), for instance, suggests that in working with indigenous students, ALL advisors seek “the reflexivity to say to students (to paraphrase Brian Gray) ‘whitefellas write things in this way because...’” (p. 62), while in the US, Young (2004) proposes the classroom use of both “white English vernacular” and “black English vernacular” with African-American students to establish that both linguistic codes are “equal in terms of social prestige” (p. 706). As Young (2004) points out, however, the problem of inequality is “much larger than the classroom can solve” (p. 708). In my own context, where the issue is more commonly class than race, I see students losing touch with their own hard-won knowledge when they are forced to “translate” it into unfamiliar terms. They struggle to connect their knowledge to the form they have been given for expressing it; they do not know how to speak their truth in a way that can be heard by the academy. Too often, in my experience, students decide that the task is impossible – and more than that, worthless. They conclude that academic

work is a game, with no relevance to them. Their role is simply to learn the rules and follow them. Some are quite successful at this. But though they get the grades they need, they never make the discourse their own. They never see that they can use these academic forms to talk about what they know, what they have experienced, what they think. They give up on the idea that there is a place for their thoughts and experience within academia, only too ready to believe that the university – as they always suspected – has nothing to do with real life.

For those who do get it, and are assimilated by academic discourse, there are many gains – but something is also lost. They are empowered, certainly. They pass their courses, have their knowledge legitimated, and, in all likelihood, get more money and respect in their workplaces. More importantly, they are able to join in the debates about their profession, to speak their truths in an acceptable form, and thus to make their voices heard. But what use is that if along the way, they learn that their own discourses – the ones they lived in before they came to university – do not matter, their own knowledge does not count? Surely the cost of higher education should not be, as Jetten, Iyer, Tsvirikos, and Young (2008) conclude, the student's own identity? Irigaray's work suggests that in a culture that allowed both the masculine and the feminine to speak, non-traditional students could conceivably find ways to articulate their knowledge that were not already pre-determined. They could discover new forms of communication that honoured the multiplicity and complexity of their experience. In doing so, they would vastly enrich society as a whole by opening up the possibility for something new – for another discourse, another subjectivity, something other than the same old patriarchal "one".

In my reading of Irigaray, it seems clear that both women and men can occupy the position of the feminine within discourse – but Irigaray does also argue that girls and women use language very differently from boys and men. This is a vexed question in feminist theory, and one that has challenging implications for ALL advisors. Irigaray has conducted linguistic research which she says shows that girls and women use language primarily to establish and maintain relationships between subjects, while boys and men use language to establish relations of domination between a subject and various objects (see, e.g., Irigaray, 1993, 1996, 2002). Since scientific and academic discourses in the West are founded on subject-object distinctions, this means that women are likely to find themselves alienated by such discourses. Irigaray's work makes me wonder what women's writing in academe – or men's, for that matter – might look like if it were liberated from the phallogentric mould. What new truths, what new methods, might reveal themselves? Irigaray's bedrock proposition is that women and men are profoundly and irrevocably different, that their different physiological gender creates "a psychic and cultural identity peculiar to each sex" (Irigaray, 2008a, p. 75). As a result, they have a different relationship to language, a different "passage" from nature to culture, and different ways of relating to others. They have different ways of being – which are, she holds, equally valid, and must be recognised. As we have seen, however, she stops short of saying what women's ways of being might look like. It is too soon to tell, she insists. For women to speak within a discourse specific to them would require "operations as yet nonexistent, whose complexity and subtlety can only be guessed at without prejudicing the results" (Irigaray, 1985a, p. 139). For now, she suggests, the only way to find out what a feminine way of being might be is to listen.

In a recent essay entitled "Listening, Thinking, Teaching", she brings together her ideas about the primacy of sexual difference and its transformative potential with her ideas about education (Irigaray, 2008b). She proposes a relationship she calls "horizontal" rather than the traditional vertical relation between teacher and student. Both teacher and student, she writes, need to listen to one another. In particular, they need to listen to "the way in which the other envisions and constructs their truth" (Irigaray, 2008b, p. 232). "Thus the question is not only one of listening to words, but also to the linguistic and cultural context in which they take place", she explains, "to the world that they compose and construct" (p. 232). Such a mode of listening undoes hierarchies, topples the old "pyramid of values" and allows different worlds to "intertwine". She stresses that there must be nothing appropriative in this listening. Neither teacher nor student must seek to master the other, to control or dominate the other, or to re-construct the other. "Listening-to is a way of opening ourselves to the other and of welcoming this other, its truth and its world as different from us, from ours", she writes (p. 232).

This does not mean losing our own truth, however. Irigaray's whole idea is that two truths, two subjectivities, two ways of being can – must – achieve a peaceful and creative co-existence, with neither one denigrating, suppressing or obliterating the other. It also doesn't mean that the teacher has no authority. The student must respect the teacher's experience and knowledge, she writes, just as the teacher must respect the student's. If anything, the teacher takes the lead through – paradoxically – her silent attention. "Teaching cannot amount to imposing on the other our knowledge, our competence, including through a paternalistic or maternalistic generosity", Irigaray writes (Irigaray, 2008b, p. 234). "Teaching not only consists in speaking, but in being capable of remaining silent too, of withdrawing in order to let the other be, become and discover his or her path, his or her language" (p. 234). I like her acknowledgement, here, that imposing "our knowledge, our competence" may be a generous impulse: that it may spring primarily from the desire to help. Nevertheless, she is adamant that it does not help. In true constructivist style, her argument is that the teacher needs to allow the student to "discover" their path, their knowledge and their language for themselves. What matters in this model of teaching and learning is not to communicate and perpetuate one's own truth but to "[preserve] the singularity of each one, the two being in relation, and the horizontal relationship between their subjectivities" (p. 233). The teacher need not become (like) the student, and the student need not become (like) the teacher. By listening to our students, we model for them "the fact that the truth of each one crosses the path of the other, and that the matter then is both one of opening to the other, of listening to his or her truth, and of being faithful to one's own path, one's own truth" (p. 234).

For Irigaray, this horizontal relationship – the ideal relationship between the sexes – is a blueprint not only for relations between teacher and student but among individuals in a multicultural world. "A dialogue has to be held between an 'I' and a 'you' who are different and must remain different", she writes (Irigaray, 2008b, p. 236). "[T]hen the exchange between them aims to light the way of each one and to prepare a possible coexistence between two worlds, two cultures, two truths, two places or spaces, two times" (p. 236). In a sense, the ALL practitioner could be seen to inhabit precisely this "between" space. For our students, we are the point of intersection between the world of academia and their own world. Too often, our aim is to conduct the student safely from one world to the other. What Irigaray's work suggests is that rather than seek to subsume the student's world, we should strive to allow "a possible coexistence" between the two worlds. This is, for me, a serious provocation. Irigaray is urging us to be rigorous in our own truths but not to impose them on others. Does this mean being prepared to find a truthfulness in illogic, in unreason, in the chaos that often results from going "in all directions at once"?

Elsewhere, Irigaray writes of the energy that arises from the connectedness of mind and body, speech and action (Irigaray, 2008a, p. 240; and cf. Worton, 2008, p. 243). I have experienced this for myself, and see it in my students. Being able to find yourself in your work – including, or perhaps especially, academic work – is the key to inspired learning and teaching. It seems possible that for some students, the only way to do this, to avoid the 'splitting off' that occurs when they enter into academic language, is to find a new language – one not based on a logic that, according to Irigaray, is fundamentally masculine. Perhaps it can be achieved by authorising their own discourses, their own attempts to find a new logic within which to express not only what they know but what they are. But do I – can I? – believe that new forms of thought can be found in the discourses (unruly, undisciplined, other) of my students? For Irigaray (2008b), "the most important thing we have to learn and teach is: how to communicate in difference without destroying our own values, without destroying the other or ourselves" (p. 238). Translated into terms specific to the ALL practitioner, we have to discover how to communicate the values of the academy to our students without destroying the values of their own worlds. How do we allow them their own knowledge and world view while introducing them to our own? How do we offer what we have without imposing it, and absorb what they have without appropriating it? If we could do this, we would be well on the way to enriching our culture as well as our universities, our students and ourselves with the voice, the being and the presence of the truly other.

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