

Branislav Dimitrijević

Some Consequences of Sounds

ZDJELAR... Yes, three consonants in a row, plus an L and an R rolling behind to add to the trouble. Some names are like that. Difficult to pronounce for a foreign speaker. Even it happened to be widespread among dislocated people in the past to change their names if not compatible with the dominating sound patterns used in their new living environment. For Katarina Zdjelar this really may not be needed today, yet the use of personal names in different linguistic surroundings is still a major indicator of the condition of dislocation.

In the video *There is no is* (2006), one Japanese girl is recorded making a considerable effort to pronounce “Zdjelar” correctly. She fails many times. But some improvement may be noticed. However, the voice of her “teacher”, heard in “off”, is increasingly showing up signs of impatience because of the inadequate learning progress. Ultimately, we are getting aware that it is the position, shape, and movement of *articulators* (speech organs), such as the lips, tongue and vocal cords in the larynx, which condition someone’s ability to pronounce “Zdjelar” to sound correctly for the artist in her role of an impatient teacher. It is the use of language – and by this I do not want to invoke here a *wittgensteinian* detection of meaning of words in their contextual use in language – which shapes someone’s body: someone’s mother tongue conditions the physical properties for making speech sounds, or phones. A certain body (i.e. its tongue, lips, vocal cords, and their relations to teeth, gums, saliva...) is calibrated to a certain range of “phones”. Phones-outsiders are in fact real strangers.

In the Japanese language, the consonant clusters do not exist. So, what phonology identifies as *onset* in “Zdjelar”, and that is *Zd*, cannot be approached by a Japanese speaker without tactically adding a vowel in front to create another acceptable onset: “iz”. “There is no *iz!*”, warns the teacher’s voice didactically. Phonological *nucleus* that follows allows a speaker to make a sound, but the phonological *coda* at the end finishes with an uneasy “lar”, again utterly puzzling for a Japanese native speaker.

But, what’s the fuss? We are different; we look different, sound different... Even, we say that we want to be different. Our differences come to become our politics... The spoken-language is property of the singular body of the speaker. However, it is also what determines social encounters.

What is your name? This is what we ask and what we are asked in order to establish principal communication. But this is also a condition of displacement, a condition in which both Zdjelar and her examined friend are situated in. The process of situating oneself (with)in a displacement is exactly what *There Is No Is* as well as other works by Zdjelar bring to the fore. The focus is on the question how a “foreigner” dwells in manifested customs of regulated systems of communication and learning, rather than on loss churned out by this dislocation. Language-learning is here particularly instructive as a codified method of cultural integration, not involving only a symbolic “rite of passage” of an uprooted individual, but also very material and corporeal effects shaping this “speaking body”.

Otherwise, we take it very uncomfortably if our name is not committed to memory of the *other*. We despise formal group introductions when we know our name will be lost among the many if there is no other motivation for the *other* to remember: the motivation which is beyond our name and its sound. Katarina Zdjelar, with her impossible surname, and the Japanese person trying to pronounce it, are both caught in the process of confusing the subject for the object and vice

versa. In Lacan's words, "language is as much there to found us in the Other as to drastically prevent us from understanding him".¹

In the act of speaking, in a specific utterance, both the speaker and the addressee are transformed. The speaker (S), trying to utter the name of its addressee (A), is transforming this utterance, its sound, into an object belonging to S, whilst A is losing her own grip on this "founding speech" which otherwise envelops her and constitutes her. But what is most felt as strange here are pauses, moments of silence, moments giving birth to a certain uttering which fails again and again.

Learning how to "fine-tune" the body for pronouncing a foreign name may just open up the space for exploration of the ideology of language.² In the video *A Girl, The Sun and an Airplane Airplane* (2007) a number of speakers are brought to a studio (conventionally an "aseptic" space of "pure sound") where they utter sequences of mostly unrelated words spoken in Russian. The video is made in Albania, and the invited speakers are asked to try to recall words of a language that was, as obligatory, once learned in schools: once when Soviet type of communist ideology conditioned communication patterns. The transformation of ideological structures conditioned the loss of this acquired linguistic system. This process is irretrievable, and the piece records this gradual disappearance, this exorcism of Russian words from contemporary Albanian social relations.

Ideology conditions memory and the acquired language patterns are deeply embedded in the body of the subject of ideology who now becomes a *subject-who-remembers*. The speakers interrupt this process of the loss of language which is a symptom of the loss of ideology: or is it vice versa? The speakers *perform* this rather as an expulsion of the unwanted surplus of ideology, its remainder, leftover, its residue...

In front of us are speakers old enough to remember the drastic Stalinism of Hoxha's regime. They disclose not only their own level of involvement with the language but also their involvement with the ideological structure which is manifested, or rather "spoken out" through and by the Soviet-Russian language. In this 10 minutes video, most of them remember the basics which were advanced in a principle ideological mantra: "I love Russian people." "Albanian people." "People!" "Leningrad." "Stalingrad." "Working Class." Or, the basics from any language course but appropriately ideologically "flavoured": "Mother works in the factory!" "Comrades are speaking." (Followed by: Я не понимаю! "I don't understand!") Needless to say, Как тебя зовут? ("What is your name?") is also frequently mentioned/remembered. But as well are the words with "poetic" connotation like Солнце (Sun) or Любовь (Love).

Let us make a comparison between this piece and the video *Natural Mystic* (2002) by the Albanian artist Anri Sala. The setting is quite similar: it is a sound-studio where a person seated in front of a microphone is filmed with a static camera. The protagonist is a young man from Belgrade who flawlessly imitates, solely with his own vocal cords and mouth skills, the sound of the flying missile (a "Tomahawk") which was a common audio-background during the NATO bombing campaign over Serbia in 1999. In Sala's piece the uttered sound is a way of coding memory, a mode of structuring memory of a traumatic event. Sala's protagonist almost cynically acts out this collective trauma, whilst Zdjelar's protagonists act out their road to oblivion through unassumingly recovering a half-repressed content. Whilst Sala's video is about laying out the imprint of memory, Zdjelar's piece is about the leftovers from the ongoing process of post-communist amnesia. Both are about how sounds are patterned to encode certain *occasions of experience*.³

¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book II, 1954-55* (translation: J. Forrester), Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 244.

² Most notably in her most recent video *The Perfect Sound* (2008) in which she investigates a relatively recent phenomenon of 'accent removal' to extract the 'foreignness' within a subject's accent.

³ The notion of the "occasions of experience" is borrowed from the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. In his most influential work, *Process and Reality*, the "process metaphysics" he elaborated proposes that the fundamental elements of the universe are *occasions of experience*. According to this notion, what people commonly think of as concrete *objects* are

Zdjelar's work may seem clearly demarcated and well structured in its intention, but her videos are nonetheless outcomes of complicated and erratic processes of direct negotiation. Every negotiation is easier if it involves empathy. This may be sensed in the previously discussed work. Yet it is difficult for me to build a same impression for a group of well-off and seemingly "depressed" middle-class citizens of the Lofoten peninsula in the north-west of Norway, who gather regularly to sing. I guess they do it in order to "recharge" their comfortable yet monotonous existence, and this impression gets even more peculiar when they sing the famous, late 1960s song by The Beatles', *Revolution*. As it is evident in Zdjelar's video entitled *Everything Is Gonna Be* (2008), there isn't much enthusiasm with singing this song: it seems badly rehearsed and, apart from the chorus line, most of the members of the choir just simulate singing without acquiring the lyrics. The overall impression is very ambivalent.

For me this is indeed the most ambivalent of all Zdjelar's works. There is a sense of sympathy for anyone trying to sing a popular song, and, even more, if one is making mistakes or faking to know the lyrics we find this amateurish position endearing as opposed to some professional remaking of "evergreens". On the other hand, we feel a considerable "alienation" of the singers; they are somehow bound not to meet our compassion as they do represent a comfortable class defining the Western affluence. Yet it is the very song they sing which is an anthem of ambivalence. Of political ambivalence.

Among many interpretations of this song, one line of thinking is considered most credible. Let me quote a blogger whose interpretation of *Revolution* is top rated on a web site where lyrics of popular songs are discussed: "[The Beatles] are talking about the protesters becoming too radical and almost as bad as the government. A lot of people asked them to contribute to causes to protest the war, but protests were becoming very extreme, hence "but when you want money for people with minds that hate" you'll have to wait. Also they spoke of protesters wanting to change the world with a revolution but they started being destructive and it's not about Mao in the physical sense, but more of an example of how extreme they were becoming: that they weren't going to have followers if they were so radical. Basically it's about closed minded radicals opposing closed minded government."⁴

Here we come to the essential dilemma marking the political conflicts then and now. We may again "want a revolution" and we "want to change the world" but not with "minds that hate". But, hold on; is revolution really possible without hatred? Isn't our current political sphere actually dominated by "revolutionaries" who implore revolutionary destruction never to happen and who might sing along together with their neo-liberal opponents: *Everything is gonna be alright, alright...* Everything has been so much alright that this song was already used for a Nike ad in the mid-90s.

Therefore it seems appropriate to see this song performed at an occasion of one very polite social get-together. However, there is this unease that haunts this group. It may be just the very word "revolution". (Although this word, curiously, appears only once in the song, at its beginning!) How should middle class feel about this word today? Where is its current context, its "use in language"? Does creating an "ideal community" still posit a universal goal of a revolution? But what if this ideal community is just a dream that "expresses a desire for selves that are transparent to one another, relationships of mutual identification, social closeness and comfort", as posited by feminist social theorists⁵, for instance? The choir singing *Revolution* even suggest

actually successions of occasions of experience. Occasions of experience arise or coalesce in *becoming*, rather than being simply dialectically determined from prior posited determinates.

⁴ <http://www.lyricinterpretations.com/lookat.php/bands/beatles/c5805589dced149>

⁵ For a discussion see: Iris Marion Young, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference", in Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Routledge, 1990, pp. 300-323.

such a vision of community: a community at the end of a process of non-revolutionary progressivisms. (And Nordic communities get us prominently as close as possible to this “ideal”.)

Micro-communities, as opposed to macro-communities desired by “total ideologies”, seem to present a new ideal of a community based not on social wholeness but on difference. The ideal of an operative macro-community was shared both by social conservatives and by communists; now the ideal of the micro-community is shared both by liberals and anarchists or other radical activists. We have here a new couple of supposed opposites. The micro-community of the Lofoten amateur-choir we may find endearing in their seriousness and their ability to find a non-conflicting way to establish a micro-community. We appreciate their modesty, their failures and their effort which is not motivated by dominant values of success and competition but takes into consideration a structurally unwanted surplus of inadequacy, insecurity and ineffectiveness.

This is what makes this community not to be fully in compliance with a liberal ideal of building a community by primarily respecting individual rights and interests of its members. However, this community is unforeseeable outside of this liberal ideal, the ideal which presumes subjects who are present to themselves and subjects who can understand one another as they understand themselves. Their modesty and their charming inadequacy are conditioned by accumulated liberal-capitalist economic and political achievements, on exploitation of resources and labour, and on competitive discipline. Yet, by knowing this our potential for criticality is not particularly boosted as we may only stress the obvious: criticism of capitalism which has become yet another norm. *Everything Is Gonna Be* is not about reinforcing either dichotomies or norms; it is about learning to live with them without making our ultimate YES or NO. We enter into “a process of acknowledging that the other is not a solid, clear-cut entity but a mixture of conflicting needs and fears like ourselves.”⁶

Whereas here singing is a communal affair, in Zdjelar’s most recent video *Shoum* (2009), singing is an individual act of, as she put it, “translating one’s experience of listening into uttering”. This video focuses on an “infantile” practice of learning without understanding. A middle age person (a subtlety of Zdjelar’s approach is in her ability to hide the identity of her protagonist but simultaneously to show his age by revealing occasionally fragments of his face) from Belgrade is filmed in the process of decoding the lyrics of, supposedly, his favourite musical hit from his youth in the 1980s: the song “Shout” by the British new wave/new romantic pop band Tears for Fears.⁷ He does not speak any English, so he transfers what he hears into his own “vocabulary”, based on his capacity to vocally interpret and reproduce what is heard. In order to grasp and memorize the lyrics, he writes down what he comprehends as English language. Errors and deformations of the lyrics create an amusing “new language” so instead of “shout, shout, let it aloud, these are the things I can do without ...” he puts down “šaum, šaum, lejdi o lav, pizat d pizat dju ju raund...”⁸ and continues in such manner until the whole song is transcribed. At the end, he sings his version of the lyrics according to what he put on paper.

The intended meaning of the song, its cultural context and its specificity are lost to make space for a “private language”. According to Wittgenstein, a private language is not a language, as the language is first of all a binding social phenomenon which is “translatable”. Private language *in principle* can only be understood by one person and it must be unlearnable. Yet it must appear that the speaker is able to make sense of it. One of the crucial and controversial paradoxes stated in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* is that “no course of action could be determined by a rule, because any course of action can be made out to accord with the rule.”⁹

⁶ Mika Hannula, “The Blind leading the Naked: The Politics of Small Gestures”, *Art, City and Politics in an Expanding World – Writings from the 9th International Istanbul Biennial*, Istanbul, 2005, p. 189.

⁷ Tears for Fears were followers of American psychologist Arthur Janov’s school of Primal Therapy. This song was inspired by his primal therapy treatment, which worked by getting people to confront their fears by shouting and screaming. The name of the group came from Janov’s book *Prisoners Of Pain*.

⁸ If „transcribed“ back to English this may sound like: „Shoum, shoum, lady o’love, peas at the peas at do you ’round“.

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Blackwell Publishing, London 2001, §201.

This paradox is very important for the “private language” controversy, as the rule according to which we speak a certain language can be constructed and not given, so in this sense a private language can be constructed according to a rule which is made up in this process. As Wittgenstein concludes, “what this shows is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call “obeying the rule” and “going against it” in actual cases”.¹⁰

The private translation of the *Shout* lyrics is not based on any interpretation. Everything what we may learn about this song gets lost in this “translation”. Everything which is to be found in both domains crucial for any textual analysis: *intention* as well as *interpretation*. However, during the video we do not only witness an attempt to reproduce the original text in meaningless sounds/words, but also a formation of rules according to which a final version of the conversion is made up. This is when we as viewers tend to fill some gaps, i.e. tend to speculate upon the logic of the conversion. “Let it aloud” becomes “lady o’love” and then “lady o’live” and finally “lady o’ram”. “And what is *ram*?”, the protagonist asks himself as if everything else is made up according to a sense (or *rule*) but this word somehow sticks out as if not fixed yet. Or, we may get interested in how the line “You shouldn’t have to jump for joy” becomes first “You shouldn’t have to shoot and show” and finally something like “You shouldn’t have to shoot and joke”. However, it is the “gestalt” principles which direct our “form-forming” capabilities according to holistic and self-organizing tendencies. The “gestalt” principles of *emergence* (recognizing the whole but not the particular parts which constitute the whole), *reification* (the whole of the experienced sensation/information is substituting missing elements in the sensory stimulus) and *multistability* (the tendency of ambiguous perceptual experiences to pop back and forth unstably between two or more alternative interpretations) are operational in both the capability of the protagonist to constitute the rule for his system of transcribing and our own capability to translate it back into standard English. There is no communication breakdown, the language as the “binding social phenomenon” shapes our motivation not to give up a potential of “translatability”.

However, the voice itself carries cultural, social, ideological and other distinctions and differentiations. By speaking a language (regardless of this being your mother tongue or a foreign language) our “distinction” is usually identified by our accent. If a “private language” cannot enter a sphere of social communication, speaking with an accent adds more to a communication precisely because the individuality of each accent brings more clues about the speaker which can be mediated. The accents have been indicators first of all of class differences and regional differences. Accents have been recognized in relation to some ideal master-language identified with the educated elite. In recent years the *officiality* of a master-language is undermined as the differences in accents have come to signify the officially proclaimed “multiculturality” or “tolerance” in a certain society: BBC news presenters now do not all speak any more “Queen’s English” but they speak with Hindu, Urdu, Scottish or Irish accents. Yet, all these accents are accents of the old empire, so this phenomenon although ideally a sign of social tolerance is in fact a re-confirmation of a cultural unity of the colonial scope of the British Empire. Accents outside of the Commonwealth are still more foreign and less integrated in the English language.

Accents reveal us in the ears of the Other, they make our identity instantly transparent, they pop up before us. A desire to tame our accents may therefore arise from different yet interlaced reasons: a pragmatic need to be integrated in a master-culture and a psychological need to hide ourselves from being instantly identified in accord with cultural stereotypes. Katarina Zdjelar discovered the recent phenomenon of “accent removal” courses which exist in the UK. For her video *Perfect Sound* (2008) she filmed one session in such a school in Birmingham: a teacher trying to explain to his student techniques of the proper English accent. These techniques in Zdjelar’s video are presented as some strange mantra, or a ritual in which mouths are affectedly twisted, sounds are strange and abstract like in some piece of experimental music, and hands are engaged in a bizarre pantomime the meaning of which we cannot detect. There is a sense in which this work is therefore summing up the practice of Katarina Zdjelar: it is in the same time an

¹⁰ Ibid, §87.

engaging “sound piece” and a resourceful critical essay. The filmed event may seem enigmatic and even “spiritual” whilst our awareness that we witness an accent removal session turns back this trance-like abstraction to the realm of criticism of cultural and identity politics. What is *perfection* and for whom it must be achieved?