

Narrative as Motivator in Foreign Language Acquisition

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Abstract

This paper argues that, by allowing recognizable patterns of human action to emerge through the intimidating foreignness of a linguistic medium, narrative deserves a privileged place in language education. To overcome the inhibiting effect of strangeness, and thus facilitate the adoption of a foreign language by new users, it helps if the listeners embark upon a regression toward the narrative origins of their familiarity with the world as articulated in their mother tongue. Harking back to the early childhood comfort of being held conjointly by a story-telling nurse and a linguistic substitute of the amniotic liquid, narrative acts as indispensable companion of our estrangement in general—linguistic, or otherwise. The argument brings into play the Greek notion of *paideia*, in which disciplined training and childish amusement converge, in an effort to accommodate the conclusion that the intellectual version of self-growth—including acquisition of foreign languages—benefits massively from the good old nurturing of narrative, its time-revered nurse.

Keywords: demotivation, linguistic estrangement, narration, passive resistance, involuntary memory, *paideia*

1. Introduction

Aristotle wondered when a fleeing army in disarray stops and holds its ground against an enemy in pursuit of it. Confronted with unusual sounds, intonations, graphic signs, syntactic structures, not to mention codified uses of silence, oftentimes students of a foreign language lose heart to the point of retreating helter-skelter to the familiar lap of their mother tongue. To those who think that such a panic effect appears disproportionate to the reality of the challenge, it is useful to remind that a foreign language forms a cohesive, organized

system—a “disciplined,” well-functioning cohort of alien signs—not only as support of one’s expansion into otherness, but also as stressor. The intimidating effect of this organized ensemble should not be underestimated.

Needless to point out that, developmentally speaking, seeking the protection of an already known linguistic medium remains a questionable, albeit only too understandable reflex gesture. For, although indeed offering comfort, one’s mother tongue does so at the expense of self-growth—understood here most generally, as capacity to risk for the sake of learning new games and to get a corresponding gratification from playing them passably well. Undoubtedly, monolingualism also offers possibilities of self-growth, but within a range that remains forever limited to the options available in its single system of signs. Hence, the existential question subtending the present discussion: what are the risks accompanying one’s exposure to a foreign language?

It is not excessive to claim that a foreign language tempts one toward a much deeper, more intimate estrangement than one’s mother tongue could ever create even at its most poetic. We are the language games we play and games are defined by their rules; only multilingual speakers can appreciate the superior freedom different languages offer to express the subtle nuances of what translation crudely conflates into a “same” thing. But with more freedom comes more anxiety. Although the saying goes that translation betrays the original meaning (*traditore traduttore*), it is equally, if not more, proper to acknowledge that, *in listening to one’s own heart in one language only, one drastically reduces the infinitely nuanced plurivocity of its expression through the poverty of linguistic means one is actually able to mobilize.*

In monolingualism, the monolog taking place within the subject represents merely a reduced, truncated version of a more original multilingualism that desire, this *alien* guest within ourselves, needs for expressing itself accurately. Put differently, upon acquiring foreign languages, the expression of new desires gets acknowledged by the subject; another way of looking at the world comes with another set of appetites, as different things start to look desirable through the new

linguistic lens. This alone suffices to raise suspicions about the innocence of foreign language acquisition. A host of foreign inner voices joins the ones that make use of the speaker's native tongue, with the consequence that an upward vertigo—a Babel tower of sorts—probes the mind that has been linguistically enabled beyond the glass ceiling of monolingualism.

Besides, against this murmuring background of increasing complexity, in foreign language acquisition specific anxieties crop up in the mind of students: from embarrassment at being perceived as clumsy by others to the painful self-discovery of one's own limitations, each of which, in its turn, further diversifies into shaky mastery over one's social image, various body parts involved in phonation, abstract grammatical mechanisms, or fluency in adjusting one's speech performance to the feedback received. "Many Japanese are so embarrassed by the inevitable mistakes that a non-native speaker makes that they prefer not to try at all," concludes *The Economist* before signaling the resolve of Shinzo Abe's government to turn things around and approach this foreign language game in more methodical, disciplined ways (2016). How martial a language acquisition campaign intrinsically is might in the end depend upon the levels of anxiety it triggers in the learner.

This paper focuses on the demotivating power foreign languages tend to have; it suggests that the time for a relevant change of attitude is optimally bided through narration, whereby the epos—transformation brought into words—permeates and softens the listener's manifold resistance. If a passively resisting student with basic listening skills lends his/her ear to stories in the intimidating foreign language, the reward promises to be a significant increase in his/her courage to deal with that linguistic version of the unfamiliar. Gradually, an internalization of the narrative voice has good chances to take place: from the "it says" of the story to the "I say" of monolog. This is because narrative traffics in existential positions and temporality, being capable of reaching deeply into the basic temporal structures of the receiving subjectivity and of eroding the latter's position—in this case, resistance.

The important underlying assumption of my overall argument is that, in the foreign language the listener cannot

readily cathect with, he/she already has some basic listening skills to be further expanded without much cooperation from their possessor. Conversely, it is unlikely that, exposed to narratives in a language completely beyond one's ken, the linguistic transfer of skills can actually take place; in this case, all productions in the ignored foreign language run the risk of being relegated to background noise.

2. The ontology of spite

The reality of foreign language learning shows that some useful associations get established not so much despite as *because of* the emotional resistance built in the process. An epic battle against what may be perceived as invasion of the subject by foreign ways of being has good chances of becoming memorable, *hence workable and reliable*, precisely thanks to the resistive mobilization it triggers. Like all significant stressors, the trying foreignness of a language can't be easily forgotten, thus doubling as efficacious mnemonic device.

The problem signaled by *The Economist* is patent especially in Japan, Korea and Taiwan, but by no means limited to them. A key point when trying to understand it is that one remembers not only what one wants, with this involuntary memory ending up as precious ally of an educational system faced with high levels of passive resistance. Analogously, one is not touched and affected only by what one chooses; experience shows that we hear more than we listen for, just as we happen to get moved when we would rather not. A fundamental asymmetry, or disparity, appears to favor giving over and above rejecting; Heidegger calls this *finitude*.

In this sense, the good news for education is that some unacknowledged learning takes place irrespective of how willing or unwilling one is to receive it—a simple, yet far-reaching observation that also shapes the basic strategy of advertising. The choice of rejecting something comes only upon, and always remains subordinated to, one's already *learning about it*; foreign languages are no exception to this rule.

Ontologically, the human being cannot help being open to whatever comes from beyond the limits of its control; sufficiently present in one's environment, messages in a foreign

language that encounters substantial passive resistance end up being understood at a certain level, especially if placed at significant decisional crossroads of everyday practice. For instance, the written words *entrance* and *exit* eventually get paired with their respective meanings upon being sighted often enough where they belong, no matter how demotivated one might be regarding the learning of English. They blend in the overall practical, equipmental intelligibility of one's environment. Obviously, this is a worst-case educational scenario, in which not even a minimal cooperation on the part of the student can be taken for granted.

Starting from this minimal learning as prerequisite for opposing something—an acquisition granted by our mere being in the world, it should be stressed—foreign language teaching can shift its focus toward expanding the implicit, unacknowledged linguistic progress without much help from the learner. Few, if any, people were explicitly taught how to negotiate a flight of stairs, and yet most of us ended up doing it well; before being anything else, a foreign language is such a sequence of unfamiliar gestures one can be 'architecturally' conduced to acquire. Again, when it comes to motivation, it is useful to remember that, fundamentally, humans are always already being moved before deciding whether or not to heed the prompt: we are pushed this or that way by tendencies that can only be given in to, or countered, but not stilled in their impersonal givenness.

So it moves all around one—in the external world as much as 'within' the subject—and narratives, while on the one hand being *about* this movement, on the other hand enact the movement itself, i.e., have effectiveness, traction—to be precise, at-traction. They literally pull one along this or that direction of environmental motion by the ears. What stories narrate—transformative action, intervention in the world, more or less effective movement—reaches the listener in the way of a surreptitious erosion of his/her standpoint. With various fortunes and before anything else, the linguistic medium of the stories engulfs the listener—a very real touch, regardless of how realistic the contents of the stories may be. *The whole of a foreign language lurks in the few words of it the listener already*

understands; on the narrow, frail bridge they form between the familiar and the unfamiliar, an entire foreign army of signs can silently sneak into the resistive fortress.

Notorious for trespassing tightly closed boundaries, the octopus might deserve some linguistic attention in the context of passive resistance. For, not unlike this expansive cephalopod, a language can pull its whole “body” through a very narrow passageway it finds using a most precarious grip—a handful of known words or phrases, as already mentioned. Now, when it comes to the passageway itself, the human ear is helplessly just that—a gaping opening without natural capacity to close itself. No doubt, it is highly desirable that students consciously lend an ear to the foreign language of their choice; but even if they do not, *their ear is there to take in all the outcasts of a faltering interest prior to rejecting them*. This is tantamount to claiming that the human ear has always already been lent to the world, with which it has a tenacious ontological bond: the unwritten “contract” subtending this lending act remains solidly non-negotiable.

3. The primacy of listening

One might readily concede that, of all four linguistic skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing—listening stands out as the most passive, and as such the least exposing for the student. Little wonder, then, that it represents the point of minimal resistance within a learner of anything, and of foreign languages in particular. Barthes specifically designates it as the level where language is at its most universal: “. . . the universality of a language—in the present state of society—is a fact of audition, and by no means of speech performance [*élocution*]” (1953, 63).

What he means by this is that a spoken or written enunciation singles out the performer, reveals his/her shortcomings, unlike listening, which grants one a relationship with language as universal as anonymousness itself. Through language production one’s possibly embarrassing nakedness transpires, whereas in silent listening one remains safely clad in secrecy. A linguistic system of signs gives itself to its listeners more equally and indiscriminately than any performative act ever

does, as the latter remains indelibly marked by the producer's individuality. Whether listened to by an expert or by a beginner, the linguistic system of signs offers itself with the same impersonal and impartial objectivity, permeating all ears equally.

Universality (Lat. *unus + versus*) suggests that a given language turns toward everyone in the world the same unbiased comprehensibility, all the differences of reception coming from the existential position of the users with respect to it. Indifferent to personality, the system of signs per se favors no one in terms of access to it, notwithstanding that obvious variations appear in the way each specific individual receives this gift. When it comes to fairness, that of any language can be said to rival the divine one; Danish, Hungarian, or Basque are just as open to potential users as Chinese, Spanish, or English.

The practical consequence of this for foreign language learning is that listening doesn't expose the listener to others' judgments, whereas spoken or written linguistic performances inevitably do—a valuable, if unsurprising, find for learners intensely preoccupied by problems of self-image and position among peers. The most welcoming because universally inclusive linguistic community is that of listeners; with linguistic performance, the primitive commune uniting an audience, to use a Marxist mytheme, starts to reveal differences in terms of skills possessed, and therefore a potential for hierarchization, or even segregation. Before being thoroughly understood, in the audible register language already promises itself as mythical realm of equality through anonymousness, where no listener gets diminished or rejected; and its promises like to be listened to, just as money is said to enjoy being counted.

Notice that this promised land of vibrating air reaches out to the listener rather than wait to be reached at the end of an arduous journey: by projecting language at a distance, it makes the impersonal system of signs seem forthcoming and solicitous, almost humanely touching.

If the universality of a language is a fact of audition, it makes sense to lure a resistive, most demotivated and defensive subjectivity outside its gated walls using an *auditive* Trojan Horse. Reading introduces an additional opacity specific to

graphic signs, the mastery of which may require specific additional efforts, depending on the script used by the learner's mother tongue. Compared to reading, which is mediated by this pre-requisite knowledge of graphic signs, listening benefits from the advantage that the human ear remains open even in a state of utter passiveness. Moreover, biologically the sound of human voice has the power to elicit attention from humans more than other categories of sounds. In an auditive medium a language is at its highest level of accessibility, whereas a graphic medium of signs has to be made permeable through preliminary efforts of familiarization. At least as far as the economy of language acquisition is concerned, listening appears to require the least effort and commitment, which recommends it for difficult beginnings.

When the main problem is motivation, one can safely claim that, structurally speaking, the human being is more movable in the auditive register than in the visual one, as the ear remains naturally exposed to otherness, whereas the eye can be turned away or closed at will. This is perhaps not the last reason why the mythical Sirens—the epitome of temptation and irresistibility to movement beyond one's limits—also favored the audible over and above the visual expression. At least from a distance, we are at our weakest and most vulnerable—here with the sense of touchable, sensitive, movable—in the medium of sounds.

This is not a trivial point in an engagement where teaching cannot afford to lose and the student's attention cannot be counted on.

4. Motivation: the unmoved mover

The movement at work in motivation is not initiated by the subject but rather comes as response to a more original appeal from beyond the boundaries of subjectivity—from the world “out there.” When motivation gets detected in a subject, the latter appears to be claimed by an ampler dynamism surpassing the limits of subjectivity. It makes no sense to talk about motivation in isolation from, and independently of, the motivating representation formed in the mind of the subject, or the sources of its interpretation.

From this phenomenological perspective, the subject's response appears as only half of a larger circle, which includes the more original appeal (Chrétien 1992). In the case of a foreign language, the student's response—a patent lack thereof remaining just another kind of response, strictly speaking—comes in the wake of a call launched both in and by a system of signs unfamiliar to the addressee.

What exactly does it mean to say that the learner feels no motivation to enter a new linguistic game? An absence of motivation does not breach the above-mentioned circularity; in fact, in it the response to the foreign call takes the form of a block, or demonstrative passiveness—a *sign of absence*, a blank, which is not tantamount to an absolute absence of response. There is always communication with the ultimate background of all actions, the only difference being in the kind of response one gives; after all, displaying boredom, disinterest, lack of involvement, fatigue with the soliciting call remain pretty self-evident messages. “The call is too foreign to me; I'm stuck in its translation” can be the subject's expedient way of procrastinating the response.

It is this most primitive language of self-evident messages—the six basic human emotions displayed—that also appears to be the most foreign, insofar as its transparency opposes the greatest resistance to an objectifying understanding. What goes *without saying* remains hardest to translate into sayable messages; more foreign than any foreign language is the simplistic lingo in which demotivation mutters its deafness to the call. To be precise, deafness gets induced by, and as such remains co-original with, the muttering which screens out the call. The excessively foreign language of self-evident, foregone conclusions blocks the call of the merely foreign language—that is, used by humans elsewhere. According to this view, *the most foreign discloses itself within the most familiar*, which means within the rapport one has with oneself.

As shown in the previous section, any language calls universally, all azimuths, indiscriminately, albeit the individual responses it receives differ greatly among themselves. Whether picked or not, its call resounds equally in all directions, the pull it conveys potentially affecting all subjects exposed to it. We

have seen in this a direct consequence of the fact that, as an impersonal system of signs, language cannot found anything like personal favoritism. Hence, *demotivated* need not mean more than responding with a block to the pulling force the call does exert. And the more irresistible the appeal sounds, the more inertial—i.e. resistive to movement—the summoned subjectivity turns. In a slippery world, where no entity is absolutely secure in its position, only a spike in inertia appears capable of resisting one's being swept away by the call: one suddenly becomes self-centered, obsessively repetitive and irresponsible, in order to prevent getting swayed. Qualifying the call as one of *change* verges on redundancy.

Again, what is it about the call of a foreign language that turns off some of its receivers? Great efforts are made at all levels of the educational system to produce the desired opening of the subject by implication, indirectly—i.e. starting from the social effects multilingualism is touted to bring along. 'It is a key that opens many doors,' or 'it is a passport granting admission into new socialscapes' are all too familiar lines, the truth and merit of which remain uncontested here. Granted the sufficient presence of such guiding signs in one's learning environment, and granted also the receptivity of the student to some calls, although not the specific one from the foreign language in case—briefly, granted the absence of depression, which drowns *all* calls from the world—why does a promising system of signs and the games it enables one to play still leave significant numbers of students unmoved?

In his semiological approach, Valsiner explains the resistance to explicit prompts in terms of other, deeper-level undetected signs of the opposite sense (blockers), that supposedly sabotage the functioning of the first set (2007, 53-72). Notwithstanding the interest of such an assumption, which sets afoot an army of specialists professing to detect the counter-signs hidden in one's social environment, the present paper favors a different, Sartrean approach, according to which it is the immeasurable freedom one gets called to that inhibits the response. Put differently, one's motivation is not sabotaged by the presence of a counter-sign, but rather by the open-ended character of the reference movement itself—the unbearable, excessive freedom resounding in the call.

What if, in the call of a foreign language, the ultimate foreignness lying beyond any individual human existence—its radical Other—can actually be detected by the fine hearing of demotivated students? A paralyzing level of anxiety, which by definition cannot be ascribed to anything present, and as such cannot be ascribed to a signifier blocking the culturally promoted movement, could mark the eruption into the present of one's future impossibility of being (death). Anxiety does not let itself be pinpointed to any specific signifier, it does not crop up around any present thing, but can be said to permeate one's familiar world through the interstices gaping between entities present intra-worldly.

5. Foreign, all too foreign

This idea is magisterially illustrated by Kafka's well-known short-story "The den," in which a badger-like animal living underground and putting the final touches on its new-built subterranean warren suddenly perceives a faint whistling sound impossible to ascribe beyond doubt to any known source. What initially had promised to be the worldly guarantor of its peace—the den—unexpectedly turns into the field of an imminent battle with an approaching intruder, the noise of which keeps growing. Needless to spell out that the unidentifiable threat responsible for the creature's anxiety is a thinly veiled metaphor for death, and that, within the greatest freedom from fear granted by the animal's home, an undefinable stressor insidiously creeps. The very existence of this enemy appears hard to ascertain, stuck as it necessarily remains on the hazy horizon between objective reality and hallucination.

What matters most in the present context is that the whistling sound, albeit not linguistically articulated, evokes the intimidating voice of foreignness itself—same as the one resounding in the background of any foreign language. For the foreignness of anything present harks back to the great unknown lying beyond the limits of human existence. The sound in case cannot really be called a signifier blocking the movement toward the completion of the den; rather, it suggests a crack within any signified—one that fatefully opens all meaning to an unfathomable beyond.

Mutatis mutandis, within any representation that motivates the subject there lurks a constitutive fault, through which the greatest freedom awaiting a living being beyond its limits voices its irresistible call. This is to say that, when demotivated, we try to resist the irresistible—the movement toward the ultimate limit of our possibilities and the impact with the impossible.

Does a baby's cry, in its foreignness, voice the same Other of any language? Is a baby, in his/her utter fragility, in touch with that inexpugnable intruder that drills through our flesh in exactly a lifetime? Be that as it may, the earliest anxiety a baby expresses when crying finds a workable match in the nurse's storytelling voice. It may whistle "out there" in a Kafkian sense, and most unsettlingly at that, but the shrill sound the implacable intruder makes can also be somewhat drowned in a loving, familiar human voice that carries a meaningful story. The battle of songs between Orpheus and the Sirens mentioned by Apollonius of Rhodes in his *Voyage of Argo* (IV, 895-921) and fleshed out in Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* not only begins with the acquisition of one's mother tongue but is also resumed anew with the learning of every foreign language. The foreignness of the foreign cannot be beaten back once and for all.

Yet, one may wonder, is this talk about a battle of songs more than an educated baloney having little, if anything, to do with demotivation? To be sure, it is less than a thesis—a *hypothesis*—but as such on the same par with the talk about a hidden counter-sign supposedly boycotting the functioning of a culturally promoted system of prompts. To say that there is, at some level, a concealed counter-sign blocking the reference movement that other signs prompt the mind to perform appears no different from claiming that there is, within the signified, a gaping opening that inhibits the movement toward the excessive, terminal freedom it promises. The only disagreement between these two theories concerns the ontological status of the blocker—a present signifier vs. a gaping absence that no sign can signify.

Perhaps meaning was invented precisely to cover the meaningless, shrill sound breaking into human existence

through the crack in any “ultimate” motivating image, or finality worth pursuing. Like the backdrop of a stage, the meaning one’s culture of origin bestows upon the surroundings screens out their intrinsic meaninglessness. But, when learning a foreign language, an extreme, unbearable foreignness threatens to creep back in, carried by the unfamiliar sounds, voice inflections, graphic signs, syntax, and silence usages; first and foremost, the student who braves this torrent of foreignness needs courage to beat back into place the most unsettling background resounding in it.

With every new language learned, the mythical battle of songs pitching measure against the immeasurable resumes anew, just as the learner regresses toward an infantile helplessness when engulfed by the alien environment of sounds and signs. For, before actually mastering it, the measures of a foreign language remain just a matter of faith: the other’s measures can be so different from one’s own as to put into question the very feasibility of a linguistic transfer. Measures are a matter of feel, as ultimately everything is measured with one’s own standard, i.e., against one’s already acquired skills and familiar limits thereof. After all, one is the limits one believes to have. How systematic, then, is this alien system of signs called a foreign language if I cannot actually feel its systematicity as such—if its elements remain beyond my effective organizing powers? Their inertia, understood as resistance to being ordered, begets the learner’s equally inertial response, in the form of a balking at the movement of appropriating the new system.

In this sense, and following a familiar Socratic simile, a foreign language teacher can be likened to a midwife supposed to assist with the delivery of a linguistic performance bound together by an unfamiliar organization and internal coherence. No wonder, then, that this alien production acquires an inhibiting character verging on the monstrous—what from within me comes out as quite other than me. Can one easily bear to witness such a delivery of otherness from one’s own “loins,” so to say? If not, it becomes understandable why *the successful production of a linguistic performance in a foreign language might actually be more inhibiting than its failed*

version: the mistakes one makes function as signature marking the linguistic production as the speaker's own, thus reducing its stressful alien character.

A correct performance in a foreign language presents the inconvenience of being too alien by comparison with a flawed one; who knows what other alien productions, and especially *how alien*, might further come out of my poorly charted inner landscapes? As a student of foreign ways of being, what if I discover that, in fact, it is so easy and attractive to adopt foreign measures that, once set in motion, the estrangement will become rather unstoppable? For, if any genuine beginning is difficult, nothing guarantees that a genuine end will come more easily.

By playing on the learner's imagination, a narrative offers an efficacious buffer between the familiar and the unfamiliar: relative familiarity with the content can bridge the gap opening at the level of form, and vice-versa. Absorption in the world of the story (in its semiotic field) can alleviate anxieties about the alien medium of its delivery. Medium and what is mediated seem able to relay each other to a certain extent. At the same time, though, storytelling is nothing but a way of exposing the listener to the foreign values inherent in the story; idyllic as it may look when girded by the shiny halo of childhood recollections, its innocence remains treacherous, as deep down it functions as a trap set by foreignness.

6. As the story goes ...

... so does the audience. Narrative has the intrinsic capacity to dislodge us from our inertial self-identifications, tempting our subjectivity with an array of possible new roles to cast ourselves into.¹ This is just another rendition of the important 20th-century philosophical insight that, as medium of thinking, language and the narrative movements within it determine the subject's self-understanding.

But one needs to press the question further into this process of self-constitution, namely, in the direction of skill-acquisition: does it make sense to conceive of the subject as genuine *initiator* of the language acquisition process at will, or is rather the performative dimension of subjectivity itself some

kind of precipitate, indeed, a sediment of the narrative movements traversing various linguistic media? Better still: is our very capacity to acquire itself acquired, or does it fall, pie-like, from an almighty *linguistic sky*?

Straddling the divide between nature and culture, self-growth might be essentially a narrative that realizes itself upon being listened to, a crude version of bildungsroman, in which the drive to skill acquisition literally gets under the listener's skin after passing through the ears. At the level of *Homo sapiens*, narratives can be regarded as advertising campaigns of evolution, i.e., as intrinsically prescriptive messages that one cannot help receiving subliminally. This means that we inevitably become what we listen for in what we listen to; like a trellis, the narratives wrapping us support our development prior to being supported by it.

Granted some biological growth takes place even in the absence of language, as the famous Lucy case proves, the self's full-fledged expansion into new realms of ability depends on giving in to the implicit temptation that narratives articulate. Human existence appears essentially "sticky," insofar as it adheres to representations carried from the past into the future by the epos articulated in one's community of origin; Sartre's novel *The Nausea* provides a most eloquent description thereof.² We expand our limits insofar as we let ourselves be moved by various stories of human becoming, or to the extent to which we effectively get seduced by the exemplary action of this or that, narratively evoked personage. To grow is to grow precisely toward a narratively featured new role.

Now, when it comes to the content of narratives in general, Ortega y Gasset pointed out that it is "very difficult today to invent an adventure that can interest our superior sensibility" (cited by Blanchot 1959, 174). The number of possible basic scenarios that narratives recount appears relatively limited, different versions thereof allowing for an intuitive recognition and anticipation of a few fundamental patterns diversity envelops. The complications affecting the minimalistic "such-and-such got born, lived, and died" can be considered matters of details, *the main outlines being familiar to listeners across cultures and linguistic divides by virtue of belonging to*

the same living world. Rustling leafage of an ideated tree, in their diversity narratives implicitly refer to a common trunk and central branches of intersubjective possibilities, on which the understanding of another's story always hinges.³

Most significant in the present context is that, when recognized, this family kinship possessed by narratives in all languages tends to alleviate the anxiety created by linguistic estrangement. The language of a story may, indeed, be intimidatingly foreign, but what helps the listener more easily cope with this foreignness is the relatively commonsensical core of the story content—that part of it which goes without saying, and as such shapes the listener's expectations. Insofar as it can be traced back to universal possibilities of human experience by virtue of the kinship mentioned, the listener's familiarity with the content of a story told in a foreign language reduces the stressful linguistic foreignness. Older than the world, narrative counterbalances the blocking novelty of the medium carrying it.

As far as foreign language acquisition is concerned, although the object of study is foreign—a system of signs, to be precise—the messages it conveys as medium of communication can enhance or reduce this foreignness. Moreover, the *practical modality* of conveying meaning—i.e. through storytelling, dialog, reading, writing, singing along, absent-minded drill, analysis of abstract grammatical mechanisms at work, or other—also affects the emotional coloring of the student's encounter with the foreign language studied. In this respect, narrative stands out as arguably the developmentally oldest ordering structure of experience, and one that had its anxiety-reducing virtues tested against the pre-linguistic terrors of babyhood.⁴ All the “why ... ?” questions a normal child asks early in his/her development are attempts to piece together the puzzle of the world, to gain access to the syntagmatic dimension of the perceived events, to articulate a workable narrative of reality.

So the strangeness of the new language can itself become engulfed in a two-pronged familiarity of both use and content. Military strategists call this *the pincer maneuver*; in principle, it is capable of giving the upper hand to the fleeing army of language learners who previously broke ranks in panic.⁵ If one takes flight from the foreign language *as*

object of study into the foreign language *as medium of passive immersion*, one's power relation with it might in fact change dramatically. Here Deleuze's adage "*all perception is hallucinatory, as perception does not have an object*" (1988, 125, emphasis in the original) acquires its full relevance: if ultimately perception does not have an object, the perceived foreignness of a foreign language can itself be placed among hallucinatory phenomena pertaining to fear of the unknown. Thematizing an unfamiliar medium of communication into an object of study also conjures up its demons (objectifies them); conversely, immersing oneself in it as simply another region of the all-encompassing communication continuum might have the virtue of "dissolving," together with the image of the object itself, the fright it inspires.

It was when the diffuse musicality of the boundless marine medium became song *of the Sirens*—when it got ascribed a source, a specific representation, and an objective process of production—that madness struck the ancient sailors, claiming them in the depths of alienation. In their case madness took on the precise form of trying to join a would-be origin of the ubiquitous call.

The wise Ulysses' response, though, was to remain open to it without the possibility of following the erratic chant toward its treacherous, illusory source."Let the medium remain medium, don't pin it down to any objective representation because such a gesture is inescapably *arbitrary*" was the gist of the managerial measures he took on the ship's deck. Well-versed in handling monstrosity and erring, indirectly the paradigmatic wanderer of western traditions offers us an effective ruse to handle the excessive foreignness resounding in foreign languages: listen without immediately responding, remain exposed but not too reactive. The safety he found in the mast of his ship can be internalized in the form of stern discipline—a measure perhaps instinctively replicated in the stiff passive resistance some students oppose to the heuristic objectifications of another language.

To cope with the irresistible call of strangeness, the small social body aboard Ulysses' ship underwent a noteworthy segregation along the fuzzy divide between perception and

action: the one who heard the call could not respond to it, and the ones able to respond could not hear it. Without this artificial interruption within the reflex arc—the stamp of culture on nature—which essentially defers the beginning of any new action inspired by the obscure powers of the unfathomable, exposure to foreignness threatens to be fateful. For the alien invites to alienation—how controllably remains yet to be seen, hence essentially uncertain. “Thou shalt not react *immediately* to the inspiring foreign call” is the commandment that saved Ulysses’ expedition; as if this suspicious-sounding appeal of otherness needed to be first taken out of context in order to get deprived of its *excessive* power, and thus somewhat tamed before getting an actual response.

Passive listeners, too, might be waiting for the opportune moment to give in to the temptations of a foreign language that otherwise threatens to carry them away just like the mythical song of the Sirens. Within the inner maze of the self, the call is supposed to turn around until its raw otherness wears down to more approachable, manageable levels.

7. Paideia: enveloping in order to develop

At this point, a look at the Greek term *paideia*—roughly equivalent to the English *education*, *culture*, or *disciplined upbringing*—strikes one as particularly apt to reveal the two-way movement of fearing and overcoming fear, of defensive retreat during which a new bold expansion is hatched. At the loving breast of the nurse, who for Plato sets effectively in motion the educational process (*Laws* II 653 b; *Rep.* IV 425 a), the infant gets the relevant cultural order inculcated by means of a soft firmness, if the oxymoron be permitted.⁶ Although Winnicott’s concept of *holding* emphasizes a reassuring softness over and above firmness, it remains impossible to know exactly the effect of an embrace on an infantile psyche, i.e. whether its softness is indeed more or less appreciated than its formative firmness. Because firmness has the invaluable virtue of keeping at bay an excessive freedom possibly perceived as predatory and re-experienced as such later, upon exposure to a foreign language. On the one hand, the nurse dispels the various fears

the world inspires, while on the other she forms a social rampart resisting an undue withdrawal of the infant within his/her private world. Contact with the nurse turns out to be regenerating; it grants the anxious infant a new beginning by inflecting the movement of retreat into one of renewed self-assertion.

Little wonder that, from Plato's masculine position, this remarkable reversal fringes on magic: "In fact they [the mothers], so to say, put a spell on their babies just as the priestess does on the distracted in the Dionysiac treatment." (*Laws* VII 790 e) It is a sedative, calming, anxiolytic spell that works essentially through bodily mediated seduction. (Gurley 1999, 352) And what the mother, or nurse initiates—which one precisely depends on the social status of the baby—represents a task later to be assumed by the pedagogue. These three close assistants with the baby's social growth have in common the privileged position of responsive witnesses to the development of the latter's signifying body (Vilatte 1991, 18). The acquisition of one's mother tongue is usually steeped in pleasure-giving, anxiety-relieving bodily interactions—no trivial matter at a stage where, mired in babbling, speech production gets systematically rescued by means of benevolent and patient guesswork. The birth of speech in an infant is through and through a rebirth; although playful and affectionate, this inculcation of law and order through signs has the most serious outcome imaginable.

However, not Plato but perhaps the Aristophanes of 'The Clouds' best captures this gratifying form of intimacy typical of nursing and from which language is more or less arduously wrestled:

STREPSIADES. I brought you up, you shameless wretch, your
lispings I understood.
If you cried *bry* I brought you drink, if *mam* I brought you food.
Before you'd finish saying *cac* I'd rush out to the yard. (1962, 138)

The key point here is that the anxiety-relieving nursing goes together not only with the telling of stories but also with a solicitous *reading into* the earliest not-quite-speech productions of the infant. Their flawed outcome does not remain the last word on the issue but gets enveloped in a non-identical

repetition that rights by echoing them. Offering comfort to a distressed baby and putting understandable language into his/her mouth are often moments of the same appropriating gesture whereby culture reduces the foreignness responsible for the baby's cry; it is too often forgotten that one always enters one's mother tongue as a clumsy foreigner. Practically, the nurse behaves *as if* she understood the babbling without much ado, as interpretative correctness is not the main issue at this formative stage. The picking up of one's inner monolog owes everything to this largely imaginary dialog that initially shapes and reinforces it.⁷ The baby's self-growth appears dialogically entwined with a narrative of his/her growth conveyed by the proximally present meaningful adults. To guess the meaning of an infant's babbling is to project an optimistic, idealized image of linguistic ability on him/her; it all comes down to offering the fledgling speech production a well-structured, coherent linguistic "trellis" on which to unfold.

This is what narrative does while comforting the listener: it offers security in the form of reassurance upon gently screening out an excessive freedom in the listener. Analogously, in the case of beginner foreign speakers, from among a flurry of barely intelligible speech productions, the foreign language teacher extracts the meaningful whole tolerantly and playfully—almost through a stroke of magic, one could say with Plato. It is Fink, though, who stressed the role of play in maintaining human experience attuned to its unitary background: "Human play is a particularly remarkable mode in which existence relates to everything there is and in which it lets itself get permeated and animated by the whole." (1960, 228) Before being actual communication, linguistic exchanges in an insufficiently mastered foreign language unavoidably come close to a jocular guesswork—a kind of oral X-and-O game, where the anticipation of syntagmatic structures is at stake. In fact, judging by the indetermination it brings into play, it can be called, with Valsiner, a *hypergame*.⁸

For this latter-day "nurse," who happens to be the foreign language teacher, the main question is: how long will it take the listener to interrupt the storytelling in a bold, self-asserting gesture? Everyone is eager to see this happen as soon as possible, but an incubation time is necessary for a foreigner to

grow confident enough to break the silence of a purely passive listening *in the language of the story*. Story-telling might not be the most productive of teaching methods, but it certainly is the least intrusive one; for more defensive natures, it tends to be the path of the *least* resistance to self-growth. As basic dialectics has it, the less one pushes from outside, the less resistance builds up inside. To speak like Winnicott, the teacher's patient and understanding holding of a student listener within the embrace of the semiotic field at work in a foreign language narrative has all the more chances to convey maternal care the less explicit imperatives it carries. When self-confidence is a problem, the most trustable because least demanding version of encounter with a foreign language appears to be listening to stories; sooner or later, the unconditional welcome it offers to all will get appreciated for all that it is worth.

In the notion of *paideia*, the ideas of disciplined training and childish amusement converge, both circumscribed by the affectionate playful embrace of the nurse. Similarly, the foreign language of the narration pervades, supports and empowers the listener's monolog: the vague murmur he/she hears within him/herself gets molded after the linguistic patterns carried by the narrative. In passive listening, the actual guesswork of the nurse gets transposed on a virtual level: it becomes the interplay of expectation with perception, in which the former does the 'babbling' in mind, while the latter provides audible correctives.

The passive listener's silence need not be taken as an absolute absence of linguistic response; the fact that the reply remains just virtual does not necessarily make it less educable or valuable. In the wake of the story, "it babbles" in the listener's mind—an echo-like effect of the foreign language that continues to seek a full-fledged bodily actualization even after being denied it. And, with its inevitable repetitions and recapitulations, the narrative reinforces this virtual speech performance at its incipient stage. Even when the listener, embarrassed, self-censors the actualization of this childish "babbling," it sounds more foreign than native in his/her head: the foreign language is beginning to speak (in) the speaker, to form his/her gestures of response.

Enveloped by the story—which means, according to Deleuze, held in its soft power—the listener is underway to developing an inner monolog *in the language of the narrative*. The story is literally putting foreign words in the listener’s mind, if not quite in the mouth yet. As mentioned toward the end of the previous section, this song of otherness does get taken in, even though the actual response to it does not come on the spot. What is more, once taken in, the song starts to roam the listener’s mnemonic labyrinth, forcing new passages through it, blocking older ones, getting altered through the various gorges it permeates, while at the same time also reshaping those. It is history at work through stories—history recanting itself along new conduits after being temporarily choked.⁹ If, as Heidegger believes, language is our dwelling, a *foreign* language offers first and foremost a virtual raw space to be more or less arduously carved and shaped through bodily engagement. Softness and firmness combined belong to its very nature. This resonant cavity allows one to experience otherness in a manageable fashion, i.e., according to measures that, although foreign, remain within human range.

8. Conclusion

We have seen that emotional resistance does not have the last word in language acquisition and that hearing is something one cannot help doing in the absence of special technical aids. This open channel of sensory perception keeps us attuned to ampler movements taking place in the context, from which one’s motivation derives. The Sartrean suggestion that this very openness, when perceived as excessive, triggers a block allowed us to understand passive resistance as primarily an attempt to counter the alienating call resounding in the foreignness of a foreign language.

With its absence of demands, hence of additional stressors, a passive listening to stories in a foreign language appeared to stand out among possible pedagogical approaches principally because of the promise of indiscriminate, universal acceptance it makes. Eventually, what gained ground was the view that, within a listener sufficiently exposed to narratives in a foreign language, the inner monolog need not remain faithful

to the listener's mother tongue but tends to be affected by the foreign linguistic medium approximately as a nurse reads into a baby's babbling. In the form of narrative, a foreign language nurses its listeners by primarily restoring their faltering courage.

While not recommendable in terms of educational efficiency, passive listening works better than other non-violent methods in cases of extreme demotivation, where a weak self cannot be otherwise enlisted to assist with its own growth. It is more of a last resort before the teacher him/herself gets drawn into the whirlwind of exasperation, surrendering to a defeatist resignation. For it is not rare that individual despair aspires to expand to a generalized panic, within the context of which the issue of personal responsibility can only difficultly get raised.

Of course, it is never easy to determine beyond doubt who is really desperate and who is not; as Kirkegaard points out, the one who despairs most of the time does not quite experience deep despair but merely produces noticeable signs thereof. It is not within a teacher's power to test the genuineness of a student's passive resistance and gauge how much of it is due to real and how much to simulated impairment. But, regardless of the authenticity of the symptoms displayed, and while delegating the power to pass a competent verdict to other professionals, a sure benefit for the would-be victims of utter discouragement comes from exposure to narratives in the foreign language studied.

Not only those suffering from extreme demotivation but every student of foreign languages can make progress by listening to stories in the new linguistic medium to be conquered. It is a method that, tenacious in its softness, just like a nurse, makes concessions to that least reasonable, least controllable, most spoiled and most indulging part of a learner. In the end, it is up to each particular student to decide how maturely or immaturely to go about acquiring a foreign language. The good news is that progress can only be relented or hastened, but not completely arrested, as long as the ear takes in foreign stories. The rest is just the impersonal epic of a foreign language conquering social space—its march to catch up with the ubiquity of today's advertising.

NOTES

¹ Not only narrative but art in general “has a limitless power of converting the human soul,” according to Jaeger, and this insofar as “it alone possesses the two essentials of education—universal significance and immediate appeal.” (1946, 36)

² Valsiner prefers to talk about “the affective bonding of human beings to their everyday life arrangements” (2007, 169).

³ “The myth is like an organism which undergoes incessant transformation and renovation,” writes Jaeger (1947, 66).

⁴ In *The Laws*, Plato actually mentions the rhythm and melody of choric arts as harbingers of order in human life (II 654 a). This may have been the case for Ancient Greece; but, given that choric art is not present in early childhood across the whole spectrum of cultures, it can be safely assumed that often enough rhythm and melody come to us *through language* prior to music and dance.

⁵ Envelopment as essentially an exercise of power has here all its Deleuzian connotations.

⁶ An internalized version of the nurse, the spirit of law and order “. . . waits upon them in all things and fosters their growth, and *restores and sets up again* whatever was overthrown in the other [lawless] type of state.” (*Rep.* IV 425 a, emphasis mine)

⁷ Echoing Vygotsky, Valsiner also points out that “it is in our imagination, in continuity with play, where we build up our future development.” (2007, 69)

⁸ According to Valsiner, “hypergames are games where the partners do not know the list of strategies of the other players (as those lists may change), not their goal orientations (and their changes) in the course of the game.” (2007, 328)

⁹ T. S. Eliot masterfully expresses this in his poem *Gerontion*: “Think now/History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors/And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,/Guides us by vanities. Think now/She gives when our attention is distracted/And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions/That the giving famishes the craving.” To speak like Eliot, the soft power of the “supple confusions” in one’s inner monolog are made possible, and thus the monolog is enabled, through narratives in a foreign language.

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