

The Madness of the Mother Tongue

Through a reading of Jacques Derrida's *Monolingualism of the Other: Or, the Prosthesis of Origin*, this text explores the maddening paradoxes of identity, translation, the mother tongue, and the coloniality of language and culture. How to speak of oneself and one's experience when one has no 'proper' language in which to do so – when one's testimony must always be an act of translation? When translation – both literally and in an expanded sense – is simultaneously both possible and impossible? When one's relationship to one's 'own' language (the so-called mother tongue) is both cause and symptom of a 'disorder of identity'? And when the desire for the mastery of language and self-representation involves the risk of precisely the (colonial) expropriation or usurpation that is being testified to?

In an extended footnote to his 1996 short yet immense book, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, Jacques Derrida cites a 1964 conversation between Hannah Arendt and Günter Gaus in which Arendt professes her ineradicable attachment to a unique mother tongue: German. When asked whether she survived exile in America, her teaching, and her publications in Anglo-American, 'even in the bitterest of times' (the

time of Nazism), she replied, without hesitation: 'Always'. She always, Derrida writes, 'kept this unfailing attachment and this absolute familiarity', as if implying that 'the language called maternal is *always* there, *the* "always there" [...] but also that there is perhaps no experience of the "always" or the "same" [...] except where there is, if not language, at least some trace which allows itself to be represented by language'.^[1] And hence an unfailing fidelity to language. Arendt continues:

Always, I was telling myself: What is to be done? It is not really the German language, after all, that has gone mad. And in the second place, nothing can replace the mother tongue.^[2]

For Derrida, what Arendt does not see, or does not want to see, is the abyss opening up under or between these two apparently simple and spontaneous sentences that seemingly follow each other so naturally. Taking leave from this, my concern here, read through *Monolingualism*, will be the relationship between madness and language; or, more specifically, between madness and the mother tongue. And, as I am coming to, translation – both between given languages (as if languages were ever discrete and countable) and in an expanded sense, as the (unlocatable) source of a certain 'disorder of identity [*trouble d'identité*]'.^[3] A disorder, moreover, that must be testified to.

Monolingualism of the Other is Derrida's attempt to testify to such a disorder, and an exemplary one at that: to testify to his childhood experience of growing up in colonial Algeria as a Franco-Maghrebian Jew and his ongoing relation to and experience of 'his' language (French), as the only language through which such a testimony might be proffered. The text is an elaborate (infuriating,

even) performance of the impossibility of such a testimony. The maddening frenzy enacted across the pages is due to this being at once a lament (how to speak of oneself when one's testimony 'fails' and one has no 'proper' language in order to narrate oneself?) *and* an affirmation that, paradoxically, such a failure is in fact necessary in order to stave off a further capture by precisely the colonial expropriation or usurpation that is being testified to or against.

Stepping back momentarily, this 'disorder of identity' is the subject of an important 2014 article by Couze Venn, who grapples with an impasse reached in discussions around identity, difference, and 'mixedness' (be this 'racial' or otherwise) and searches for alternative analytical frameworks through which to formulate a new politics. Such frameworks are premised upon a necessity to 'unthink' and reject the category of mixedness, and with this to refuse the capture of both mixedness and identity more broadly.^[4] For Venn, the 'monolingualism of the other' as described by Derrida is 'a discourse that both inscribes the norms of normative identity and erases or invalidates competing "languages of life"', as I will elaborate upon below.^[5] In what follows I suggest remaining a while within the contradictions of *Monolingualism* in order to bring to the fore the question of such 'disorders of identity' through the politics of language as this pertains to relation and reference; more specifically, through the maddening laws of the mother tongue and translation.

To return to *Monolingualism*: having grown up in the colonial milieu of 1940s Algeria, Derrida experienced a certain prohibited access to any non-French 'native' language of his country of birth (i.e., Arabic or Berber). Arabic was swiftly disappearing as the official, everyday, administrative language: its study was restricted to the school where – together with Berber or Hebrew – although the right to study

it was granted, this was not actively encouraged. The percentage of students who opted for it was almost zero. Thus, the much sought-after effect of 'the growing uselessness and organised marginalisation of those languages' was attained, with their weakening 'calculated by a colonial policy that pretended to treat Algeria as a group of three French departments'.^[6] Living on the edge of an Arab neighbourhood – 'at one of those hidden frontiers, at once invisible and almost impassable'^[7] – Arabic was, for Derrida, 'a strange kind of alien language as the language of the other' but, unfamiliarly and disconcertingly, the language of 'the other as the nearest neighbor'.^[8]

And yet this interdict was double, for at the same time there also existed a prohibition with regard to French, 'in a different, apparently roundabout, and perverted manner'.^[9] The French language was equally forbidden, but in a manner that, for Derrida, would be all the more difficult to show.^[10] As he recalls, for the pupils of the French school in Algeria, whether of Algerian origin, 'French Nationals', 'French citizens of Algeria', or, like Derrida, 'born in that environment of the Jewish people of Algeria who were at once or successively the one and the other', French was a language 'supposed to be maternal, but one whose source, norms, rules, and law were situated elsewhere' – France, the Metropole, the 'Capital-City-Mother-Fatherland'^[11] – and whose source was 'strange, fantastic, and phantom-like [*fantomal*]', 'a place of fantasy [...] at an ungraspable distance'.^[12] French was in fact the substitute for a mother tongue as the language of the other – of the master – and therefore, for Derrida, never 'my' 'mother tongue':^[13] "My mother tongue" is what they say, what they speak; as for me, I cite and question them'.^[14]

Besides being a lament against the aporia of substitutability that Derrida grapples with throughout his writings, this text demonstrates

that Derrida's own, idiosyncratic relationship to 'his' language is in fact exemplary of the relationship experienced by all (and as such 'almost originary', insofar as it would be a mourning for what one never had), regardless of one's background or linguistic competence. This is true even for the coloniser, who would at least *seem* to master the language and culture he occupies, or the polyglot, or those blessed with assured citizenship or seemingly pacified identity. Therefore, the question becomes how he (or indeed anyone) is to testify to this experience, or what we might call this 'topology of the self': the maddening processes of situating oneself, always in relation or reference (the *re-férance* of *différance*) to some other. A disorder of identity that '[drives] the genealogical fantasy to despair':^[15] how to testify to this when one must testify in terms that go beyond the alleged uncommonness of one's own situation, when any testimony implies that 'What holds for me, irreplaceably, also applies to all. Substitution is already in progress; it has already taken effect?'^[16]

Let us return to Arendt's two assertions: (1) a language cannot go mad; (2) the mother tongue is unique and irreplaceable. As Derrida writes, by asserting that it was not the German language that had gone mad, Arendt visibly seeks to reassure herself, as if to say, '*commonsensically*, that a language in itself can neither be reasonable nor delirious: a language cannot become insane; [...] it cannot be committed to a psychiatric institution'.^[17] As if the madness would consist, precisely, in claiming the opposite. Or as if to claim the opposite would be to seek an alibi for the subjects of the language. Rather, following Arendt's logic, it would be the human subjects, the Germans, who had lost their minds. The German subjects who have no power over this language that is older than they and, again in Derrida's words, 'will survive them and will continue to be spoken by Germans who will no longer be Nazis, even by non-Germans. Hence

the *logical* result, the same *commonsense* which links the second sentence to the first, namely, that the mother tongue cannot be replaced'.^[18] To be clear, Derrida's aim here is not to excuse the subjects of a given language (we can think here of the current use of xenophobic hate speech in both Europe and the US), but rather to sketch out the maddening complexities of linguistic competence – not to mention linguistic, (mono-) cultural, and colonial 'homo-hegemony'^[19] – that underlie manifold debates around identity politics and the terrors of the politics of exclusion.

Let us look to a proposition that can be read as Derrida's testimony to his experience of 'his own' language (his mother tongue), and hence of his so-called identity or *ipseity*. Throughout *Monolingualism*, as if to infuriate the *rational* reader, Derrida repeats variations of the following, which we might name a maxim or decree:

I have only one language; it is not mine.^[20]

This is Derrida's speculative, impossible testimony to his idiosyncratic Judeo-Franco-Maghrebian experience. To which an, apparently *reasonable*, voice retorts that Derrida is speaking the impossible and that he is not 'a serious philosopher' – as if diagnosing a madness or delirium –, accusations that this reading attempts to dispel, arguing instead that the affirmation of a *certain* madness and untranslatability is both unavoidable and, crucially, necessary.^[21]

Following this, Derrida risks two further propositions, again seemingly impossible and nonsensical, contradictory both in themselves and between themselves:

1. *We only ever speak one language – or rather one idiom only.*

2. *We never speak only one language – or rather there is no pure idiom.*^[22]

Such is the law of translation: of the ‘untranslatable’ as the poetic economy of the idiom.^[23] Admittedly, this is a translation ‘other than the one spoken about by convention, common sense, and certain doctrinaires of translation’.^[24] In other words, an experience of translation that, while pertaining to the transfer between ‘tongues’ conventionally spoken about, would also dictate one’s experience of self, one’s ability to speak and say ‘I’. For, this situation into which one is thrown is one of an ‘originary’ multiplicity of languages, an *a priori* relation of translation in which there are no self-same ‘origin’ or ‘source’ languages but only ‘target’ languages, albeit targets that are never quite arrived at. Sources that are always already internally divided; movements of transfer that cannot but be susceptible to *destinerrance* – the necessarily always-open possibility of going astray, erring, and errancy. Between these two laws (‘We only ever speak ...’/ ‘We never speak only ...’) there is antinomy, contraction, paradox – or a word for which Derrida confesses his fondness: the impossible, *aporia*. (Translation, we read, ‘is another name for the impossible’).^[25] Antinomy as hyperbole – as that which is bound up with exemplarity and a thinking of limits: the limits of the thinkable.

Further to this, we are offered two more hyperboles that, for Derrida, are fundamentally the same and always translate each other: that (1) in a sense, nothing is untranslatable; but (2) in another sense, everything is untranslatable. In order for the desired ‘originary’ or ‘source’ language (i.e., the maternal tongue) to exist and to resist being incorporated into the generality of other languages or marks – to resist disappearing as *a body of language* – it would have to be an absolute, indivisible singularity or pure idiom: ‘one language’. But as such it

would be untranslatable and hence unreadable or indecipherable – inadmissible.^[26] It would die immediately.^[27] Hence language can never be only one. Iterability and reappropriation must always take place.^[28] And, hence, uncertainty. Returning to madness, this antinomy is not only the very law of what is called translation; ‘[i]t would also be the law itself as translation’:

A law which is a little mad, I am willing to grant you that. [...] I have always suspected the law, as well as language, of being mad, of being, at any rate, the unique place and first condition of madness.^[29]

In its structure of iterability or re-mark-ability, language is *law*, insofar as law is constantly re-applied, citational. And, as the law of substitutability or the prohibition of appropriation (or indeed of ‘the proper’ as property), it is *madness*. Inappropriable and unmasterable, this language will only ever give rise to the appropriative madness of jealousy without appropriation:

Language speaks this jealousy; it is nothing but jealousy unleashed. It takes its revenge at the heart of the law. The law that, moreover, language is itself, apart from also being mad. Mad about itself. Raving mad.^[30]

Looking further afield, and to conclude, let us stress the *necessary* possibility of madness and a generalised performative, fiduciary ‘testimoniality’ – an uncapturable form of relation that cannot be reduced to the purely rational or evidentiary. For Derrida, absolute uniqueness renders one as crazy as absolute replaceability.^[31] As crazy, or in fact *more* crazy – a different kind of delirium. For, this absolute uniqueness and non-violability is a fantasy of

(Western) metaphysics and the belief in the inviolable transcendental, not to mention the self-sameness of ‘identity’, ‘as we so foolishly say nowadays’.^[32] And it is precisely through his singular experience of this disorder of identity that this madness is revealed to Derrida.

More generally, to return to the postulation at the outset about the risk of a doubling of the structure of coloniality against which one might seek to testify, this dream of oneness – of the existence of identifiable ‘source’ and ‘target’ languages, for instance – must be considered in light of Derrida’s enigmatic claim that ‘[a]ll culture is originarily colonial’. Indeed, ‘[e]very culture institutes itself through the unilateral imposition of some “politics” of language. Mastery begins, as we know, through the power of naming, of imposing, and legitimating appellations’.^[33] To say this, let us be clear, is without by any means to ‘[dissolve] that always relative specificity, however cruel, of situations of linguistic oppression or colonial expropriation’.^[34] Derrida’s point is that the various historical phenomena that are ‘colonialism’ and ‘colonisation’ are but ‘high points [...], one traumatism over another, an increasing buildup of violence, the jealous rage of an essential *coloniality* and *culture*, as shown by the two names. A coloniality of culture’.^[35] Contrary to appearances, he writes, ‘the master is nothing. And he does not have exclusive possession of anything’.^[36] Because he does not possess, naturally, ‘his’ language, he must draw recourse from ‘an unnatural process of politico-phantasmatic constructions’ – through cultural usurpation, ‘which means always essentially colonial’, and appropriation, he must make others (i.e., the colonised) share his belief ‘through the use of force and cunning’.^[37] Hence the maddening postulation that any process of liberation, emancipation or revolution premised upon absolute appropriation or reappropriation of the maternal tongue – of the possibility of pure translation – can only ever be an illusion or trick.^[38] ‘The monolingualism

imposed by the other operates [...] through a sovereignty whose essence is always colonial, which tends, repressively and irrepressibly, to reduce language to the One, that is, to the hegemony of the homogenous’.^[39]

And hence, to return to translation, the chance and threat is the *possibility* of madness as the law of substitutability (the possibility of a surrogate mother tongue, so to speak). This is a necessary pervertibility without which testimony, translation, language, experience, and the responsible relation to the other (including the future) would be foreclosed. A necessary phantasmagoria or hauntology: *différance*.

This contribution to the Journal was supported by the editorial advice of Stefan Nowotny.

Cite this piece as:

‘The Madness of the Mother Tongue’. The Contemporary Journal 1 (February 10, 2020). [\[https://thecontemporaryjournal.org/strands/on-translations/the-madness-of-the-mother-tongue\]](https://thecontemporaryjournal.org/strands/on-translations/the-madness-of-the-mother-tongue).

[1]

Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 85.

[2]

Hannah Arendt, ‘Qu’est-ce qui reste?: Reste la langue maternelle’ in *La tradition cachée: Le Juif comme paria*, trans. Sylvie Courtine-Denamy (Paris: C. Bourgois, 1987), 240. Cited in Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 85–86.

[3]

Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 14.

[4]

Couze Venn, ‘“Race” and the disorders of identity:

Rethinking difference, the relation to the other and a politics of the commons', *Subjectivity* 7, no. 1 (2014): 37–55.

[5]

Ibid., 42. See also Couze Venn, 'Translation: Politics and Ethics', in 'Problematizing Global Knowledge', special issue, *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, nos. 2–3 (2006): 82–84.

[6]

Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 38–39.

[7]

Ibid., 37.

[8]

Ibid., 37.

[9]

Ibid., 31.

[10]

Ibid., 41.

[11]

Ibid., 41.

[12]

Ibid., 42.

[13]

Ibid., 34, 42.

[14]

Ibid., 34.

[15]

Ibid., 18.

[16]

Ibid., 19–20.

[17]

Ibid., 86. Emphasis added.

[18]

Ibid., 87. Emphasis added.

[19]

Ibid., 30, 40, 64.

[20]

Ibid., 1. Quotation marks in the original. See also 2, 5, 21, 27 for variations.

[21]

Ibid., 2–4.

[22]

Ibid., 8. Italics in the original. For variations on this maxim, see 7, 8, 10, and 27.

[23]

Ibid., 56.

[24]

Ibid., 10.

[25]

Ibid., 57.

[26]

Ibid., 66.

[27]

Jacques Derrida, 'Living On: Border Lines', trans. James Hulbert, in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, eds Harold Bloom et al. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), 75–176, and 102.

[28]

Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 66.

[29]

Ibid., 10.

[30]

Ibid., 24.

[31]

Ibid., 89.

[32]

Ibid., 10.

[33]

Ibid., 39.

[34]

Ibid., 23. See also 39.

[35]

Ibid., 24. The Latin term *colonia* is from *colere*, 'to cultivate' or 'inhabit'. The Latin *cultura* refers to agriculture and the transformation of nature and, 'starting with Cicero, the cultivation of the mind and the education of the individual'. See the general entry for 'CULTURE' and Robert Young's box entry for '*Colonia* and *imperium*' in: Barbara Cassin, ed., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 191, 1056–58.

[36]

Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 23.

[37]

Ibid.

[38]

Ibid., 24.

[39]

Ibid., 39–40.
