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Derrida and the school: language loss and language learning in Ireland

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ABSTRACT
With specific reference to the teaching of Irish and English in Ireland, I am concerned in this paper with the experiences of language dispossession and language pedagogy. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's key concepts of 'hospitality' and 'monolingualism', I argue that in Ireland the first of these experiences cannot be separated from the second. Taking into consideration its colonial past as well as the changing linguistic profile of its present, Ireland is at once 'host' and 'hostage' to the English language and this deconstructing identity has important ramifications for the country's systematic teaching of English as well as Irish. The primary philosophical text guiding my discussion is Derrida's 'Monolingualism of the Other'

KEYWORDS
Jacques Derrida; language teaching; language learning; postcolonialism; Ireland

Introduction

Experiencing from the seventeenth century a radical language shift from the Irish to the English vernacular, contemporary Ireland speaks English as its majority and Irish as one of its minority languages. Moreover, contemporary Ireland has in recent years welcomed a multitude of non-English speakers to its primary and secondary schools. I am concerned in this paper with this historical experience of language dispossession and this contemporary experience of language learning. More specifically, in contemporary Ireland's still-changing landscape of movement and multilingualism, I am arguing that the first of these experiences raises important philosophical questions for the second. What does it mean to *have* a language? What does it mean to *lose* a language? And what is the significance of a linguistically colonised country attempting to school a range of multilinguistic learners?

In exploration of these questions, I turn to the work of Jacques Derrida. Through his conceptual excavations of 'monolingualism', 'translation' and 'hospitality', Derrida has consistently problematized any straightforward identifications

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between language, selfhood and nation. In place of idealizing language as the fixed font of personal or national identity, Derrida has been moved to highlight that particular alienation or discomfort that characterizes our everyday experience of our mother tongue (in a postcolonial context or otherwise). He resists any easy assumptions that native language might gift assurance or certainty and he allows the possibilities that native language might threaten loneliness or despair. In these subtle reversals and re-imaginings, I find Derrida's work particularly pertinent for the Irish case – for a cultural discourse, in particular, tempted to foreground a romantic nationalism figuring the inseparability of language, of belonging and of 'home'.

In this paper's first section I offer a brief sketch of Derrida on language and hospitality. Here I highlight the postcolonial dimension of the philosopher's work and its potential relevance for contemporary Ireland. If Derrida writes in *Monolingualism of the Other* of language traces, marks and scars – of a language 'that fails lastingly to reach home' (Derrida 1998, 69) – I argue that the echoes with Irish literary discourse here are clear. Brian Friel and Declan Kiberd are not alone in documenting the English language in Ireland as tracing a complex history of trauma and exile. My second section delves deeper into the philosophical concepts, utilizing the work of Lovisa Bergdahl and Naoko Saito to unpack the educational relevance of Derrida's thought. I suggest in this context that Derrida's exploration of native language is highly significant but also highly radical – more radical, in fact, than comparable work by his American counterpart Stanley Cavell. It is central to my overall discussion that this Derridean account usefully challenges sentimental models of romantic nationalism long appealed to in the Irish case.

In sum, I am concerned in the ensuing discussion both with abstract concepts of hospitality and mono/multilingualism *and* with concrete realities of Irish language education. It is my overarching argument that Derrida's work offers an enabling reference point for the complexities of the Irish case. I turn firstly to Derrida's late work on identity and the school.

I

In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida writes of language as an experience of possession and as an experience of loss; such experiences, moreover, are 'still and especially lived through the school' (Derrida 1998, 41). Born in Algeria in 1930, Derrida was part of a Jewish minority educated and acculturated through the colonial imposition of French. As prevailing public policies marginalized Algeria's minority languages (among them Arabic, Berber and Hebrew) a system of monolingualism and monoculturalism was effectively imposed. For Derrida's generation these impositions were at once violent and subtle, uncompromising and unofficial.

> [T]his limit was never set down, enacted either as an act of law – an official decree, a sentence – or like a physical, natural or organic barrier […] We had the choice, the formal right, to learn or not learn Arabic or Berber. Or Hebrew. It was not illegal, or a crime […]

> The interdict worked therefore through other ways. More subtle, peaceful, silent, and liberal ways […] In the manner of permitting and giving, for, in principle, everything was given, or at any rate permitted. (Derrida 1998, 32)

In other words, while local languages were never formally removed from school curricula the marginilisation of these languages was nonetheless effected through more informal and seemingly accidental means. Outside of the home, school-going children were not exposed to or encouraged to speak in Arabic, Hebrew or Berber, and these languages receded gradually from public and educational discourse. Thus, as an Algerian Jew educated in non-Algerian practices – as an Algerian Jew deeply alienated from and yet deeply attracted to the culturally dominant language of French – Derrida experienced first-hand the complex power relations of language and pedagogy.

In *Monolingualism*, intriguingly, Derrida develops the idea of 'hospitality' to probe these power relations on a linguistic and conceptual level. 'Hospitality' and 'hostility' share the Latin root, 'hostis', and this already-deconstructing etymology is a primary touchstone for Derrida in the text of *Monolingualism*. 'Hospitality' of course is a convention of exchange where a host offers to a guest sustenance or sanctuary but the economies of this exchange exist always in rupture and in peril. It is the very essence of the hospitable gesture that the host relinquishes her host status, 'giving up' her home to the guest or the stranger that is visiting. The host holds no guarantee that the guest won't react with ingratitude or with violence; similarly, the guest holds no guarantee that her welcome won't be retracted or removed at any time. Hospitality, then, is of necessity a difficult undertaking as for both parties it always involves challenge and it always incites risk. As Derrida is only too aware, this difficulty of hospitality is most keenly felt in cases where a dominant culture is called to respond to a culture designated 'other' or 'foreign'.

Announced in the repeated formulation 'Yes, I only have one language, yet it is not mine' (Derrida 1998, 2) what is in question throughout Derrida's late work is the postcolonial subject and their deeply troubled relationship with the everyday language that they speak and write. The movement of *Monolingualism* is from dwelling to desertion and from possession to loss. And as this movement reverses and reproduces, translating guest to host and student to teacher, we might rehearse its particular relevance for the contemporary Irish case. Ireland is a multicultural country with a colonial past and has experienced most dominantly under English rule in the seventeenth century a fundamental linguistic shift from Irish to English. Memorably dramatized in Brian Friel's play *Translations,* the audible and visible violence of English is marked on Irish place names, Irish road signs and Irish topography. Friel performs further, of course, the English classroom in Ireland; significant to his dramatic setting of rural Donegal in the 1830's is the replacement of the Irish hedge school with the English National School (Friel 1980). As argued by Declan Kiberd, the National Schools have always had 'an ambiguous reputation' in Ireland; 'they are regularly cited by nationalist historians as having played a major part in the decline of the Irish language' (Kiberd 1997, 164).

Given the colonial polarisation of England and Ireland, it seems that Ireland is problematically positioned to welcome its learners into *either* the English *or* the Irish language. On both a personal and a philosophical level, Derrida is deeply attuned to these traumas of language and nationhood and his *Monolingualism of the Other* is an enabling reference point for any theorizing of the postcolonial experience. In particular, Derrida's deconstructive pairing of host and guest fits especially well in the contemporary Irish case. Thinking of economic and migratory patterns only in the last twenty years, Irish people have been at once dominant and vulnerable; they have been both immigrants and emigrants; they have been highly hospitable and highly suspicious. As we witness in this particular case the dismantling of fixed categories that is the very essence of Derridean deconstruction, we are led to the paradoxical point that Ireland, with all its desire for stability, is at one and the same time host (to non-English speakers) and hostage (to the English language).

Though usefully elastic and evocative, exactly how far we can proceed with these Derridean categories is of course in question. There are important historical discontinuities between the teaching of French in Algeria and the teaching of English in Ireland. Moreover, there are important philosophical limits to any working framework yoking together pedagogy and postcolonialism. Indeed, in any way constructing Ireland as 'post', as a contemporary country always looking backwards and across the Irish Sea to justify its national identity disorders and its painful losses of language occludes the important extent to which Ireland is 'pre', a contemporary country looking forwards and transatlantically and wishing to take its place on the global and largely Anglobal economic stage. At least on one primary understanding of education, which figures the school as training for the workplace, there are of course salient practical reasons for choosing to teach and to learn English before Irish. It is Ireland and not England that has mobilized these reasons for cultural and financial gain. Moreover, though recognising the postcolonial as the once-dominant mode of Irish Studies, contemporary scholars are increasingly critical of the insensitive and potentially insulting comparisons that this mode encourages. Using postcolonialism as a lens for Irishness, the worry goes, encourages misguided parallels between the experiences of white Irish and the experiences of non-white oppressed others (Eagan 2006; Negra 1996). Such parallels have the unfortunate effect, writes Sinéad Moynihan, 'of offering white subjects the opportunity to lay claim to a history of colonial and racial oppression while retaining the privilege of whiteness. In such scenarios Irishness emerges as a benign, non-threatening form of whiteness' (Moynihan 2013, 15).

In the specific context of Irish language and education, I would hold to the postcolonial framework at least as it is explored if not exploded in the work of Derrida. I would still contend that Derrida's concepts of hospitality and monolingualism are philosophically important when reflecting on contemporary Irish Education. Yes, in certain ways Irish Studies has moved beyond tired categories of colony and post-colony and tired invocations of the Irish/English power struggle.

Nevertheless, closed debates on privilege and power are pried open once again in Ireland's educational encounter with new languages of the State. Still allowing for developing cultural imaginaries of the transatlantic or the global, or developing educational emphases on the civic and the cosmopolitan, it remains the case that contemporary Ireland has taught and is teaching a colonial language in the deeply ambivalent condition of post-coloniality. On this understanding, contemporary Ireland remains in a deeply ambivalent position to welcome and to educate.

Pushing further on this ambivalent position, it is worth noting that the Republic of Ireland counts English and Irish as its two official languages. English is spoken as a first language by the majority of the population. Irish, officially the first and national language and officially taking interpretive precedence in any constitutional dispute, is spoken daily by roughly 3% of the population. Since the foundation of the State in 1922 the Irish education system has understandably mobilized a number of attempts to revitalise its first and national language. As documented by Ó Laoire and Cummins, these attempts reached their highest pitch in the 1960s when concentrated efforts to revitalize the Irish language formed part of a broader programme of cultural nationalism. In Cummins' account:

> […] different proclamations of national identity were broadcast loudly throughout the country and vied for allegiance. […] advocates for the inseparability of language and national identity summed up their message in the slogan *gan teanga gan tír* (literally 'without a language, without a country'). (Cummins 2011, 52)

Notwithstanding this state-sponsored and culturally-weighted programme, however, the methods and approaches for teaching Irish at primary and secondary school level have been roundly and repeatedly criticized as pedagogically ineffective at best and pedagogically pernicious at worst (Cronin 2005; Cummins 2011). Troubling questions continue to be raised about the standard of Irish spoken by the general educated public. Indeed, if for the majority of students in the Republic of Ireland the Irish language forms a core and compulsory aspect of a thirteen-year primary and secondary school curriculum, only 10% of the population are considered to be fluent or reasonably good speakers. It is Polish that is the second most widely spoken language in Ireland, with an estimated 150,000 speakers in a population of four and a half million.

This complex linguistic landscape is veined further by the radical demographic shifts that have marked contemporary Ireland from the mid-1990s to the present day. Previously a country of net outward migration, Ireland's swift economic growth and unprecedented demand for labour attracted significant numbers of migrants, both workers and asylum seekers, from inside and outside the European Union. Most markedly after the 2004 EU enlargement, Ireland experienced a sea change in its ethnic and linguistic make-up. A formerly homogenous demographic – predominantly white, settled, Gaelic and Catholic – gave way to one of the fastest-changing societies in the Western world. In ensuing contexts of multiculturalism and developing ethno-economic tension, at least one scholar of Irish Studies

was prompted to ask 'what happens when other people's diasporas converge on the homeland of a diasporic people?' (Garner 2006, 159)

One important constitutional marker here is the 2004 referendum on Irish citizenship. Effected with some controversy, the results of this referendum transferred Irish citizenship from *jus soli* (where citizenship is defined by birth on Irish soil) to *jus sanguinis* (where citizenship is defined by blood ties). This prompts at the very least a remembrance of Derrida and his cluster of fraught questions in *Monolingualism*:

> Did we not agree to speak here of the language called maternal, about birth as it relates to soil, birth as it relates to blood, and birth as it relates to language, which means something entirely other? And about the relationships between birth, language, culture, nationality, and citizenship? (Derrida 1998, 13)

That Derrida himself lost and regained identity in the context of the Second World War and the temporary withdrawal of French citizenship from the Jews of Algeria is a central reason for his own characterization of the citizen as '*precarious, recent, threatened*, and more artificial than ever' (Derrida 1998, 15).

But returning to Steve Garner's (2006) question ('What happens when other people's diasporas converge on the homeland of a diasporic people'?), provisional answers had already been ventured when Ireland's socio-economic and migratory fortunes changed drastically yet again. Following global and internal economic collapse in 2008, by 2012 Ireland was recording the highest levels of outward migration in Europe. A generation of skilled and unskilled workers left the country unsure of when they might return. Troubling in turn the stability of *this* boom to bust narrative, the latest available figures (March 2017) speak tentatively to returning consumer confidence, gradual employment recovery and decelerating emigration. Indeed, in his 2015 St. Patrick's Day address, Taoiseach Enda Kenny had stated confidently that by 2018 'everyone would be at home and in a job' (Hosford 2015). At the time of writing it's not entirely clear whether the Taoiseach's comments proved remarkably prescient or remarkably patronising. But all of these complexities and considerations aside, migration patterns roughly in the decade from 1996 to 2006 have secured for Ireland an enduring pedagogical legacy. Characterized by wide-ranging diversities of language, ethnicity and culture, and contentious public debate re citizenship and nationhood, the Irish education system from the mid nineteen-nineties to the present has found itself consistently in change, in challenge and in renewal.

One central challenge for this contemporary education system is the teaching of English as an additional language, and sometimes the teaching of Irish as an additional language, to newcomer students at primary-school level. In his assessment of these teaching practices, Muiris Ó'Laoire has drawn attention to what he terms, interestingly, the 'monolingual habitus' of the Irish classroom. 'The reality for many multilingual learners', Ó'Laoire expands, 'is that their languages are all too often silenced, unheard in the classroom or worse still envisaged as impeding the development of the language of schooling and of learning in general' (Ó Laoire and Hélot 2011). To frame Ó'Laoire's point in other words, it has been characteristic

of the Irish classroom to embrace a pedagogical policy of 'one learner/one language'. Irish students from linguistically diverse backgrounds are not encouraged to speak and write their home language as an aid to further language learning or as an expression of developing self-identity and developing self-esteem. Rather, these students have their home language considered more typically in terms of a difficulty or a burden.

Foregrounding once more Ireland's twin linguistic legacies of British colonial rule and mass inward migration, it is arguable that the monolingual habitus identified by Ó'Laoire relates in interesting and important ways to Ireland's preoccupation with linguistic purity. Significant to any argument here is the understanding of this preoccupation as a kind of postcolonial hangover. Recalling that the majority of Irish people teach and learn their native language in a pedagogical circumstance of bilingual imbalance – if English is formerly imperial and globally dominant Irish exists in a condition of marginalization and minority – it is perhaps understandable that developing in tandem with this sociolinguistic situation is a state-sponsored educational programme prioritizing the written over the spoken word. In the twentieth century in Ireland, concern that the everyday speaking of English would interfere with the educational acquisition of Irish lead to a national language policy motivated at least in part by caution, by conservatism and by fear.

Declan Kiberd in his seminal work *Inventing Ireland* has argued that schools in the post-colony are typically characterized by 'rote-learning of the old, familiar texts' (Kiberd 1997, 553). Relatedly, in his reflections on Irish/English bilinguality, translation scholar Michael Cronin has drawn attention to the intriguing term, 'béarlachas'. With a deeply derogatory inflection, 'béarlachas' denotes Irish words, phrases or grammatical constructions that originate in the English language. In the Irish classroom in the twentieth century 'béarlachas' was to emerge as the cardinal sin of language learning and teaching. Writes Cronin:

> Concerns with the learning of the language in a situation of asymmetrical bilingualism with English, a powerfully dominant language in the public sphere, meant that béarlachas in the form of linguistic contamination from English was to be zealously avoided […] The focus on written expression and grammar was cultivated as a privileged means of boundary maintenance. (Cronin 2005, 13)

Of course 'contamination', whether deliberate or accidental, is a roundly negative term, connoting spatial expansion and occupation as well as impurity, industrialisation and disease. Any invocation of the term in a postcolonial cultural context can never be entirely innocent. This much is evident in *Monolingualism* when Derrida writes of his own desire for boundary maintenance and his own preoccupation with the purity of his French language. In *his* educational experience this desire translated to a deliberate and wilful loss of the French-Algerian accent and a deliberate and wilful gain of French literature and pronunciation. Writes Derrida, and here we have direct echoes of Cronin on contamination, 'this hyperbolic taste for the purity of language is something [that] I also *contracted* at school'. […] 'The accent indicates a hand-to-hand combat with language in general: it says more

than accentuation. Its symptomatology *invades* writing. That is unjust, but it is so' (Derrida 1998, 46).

Returning to Cronin and his comments on béarlachas: if this emphasis on linguistic contamination is partly tongue-in-cheek it betrays nonetheless a prevailing uneasiness with Anglobalisation and its casualties. As performed by Derrida in *Monolingualism*, any scholar of language can never write in innocence of linguistic dominance or power; minority languages exist always in vulnerability and to a certain degree minority languages exist always under threat. It is interesting to note, however, that with specific reference to bilingualism Cronin has explored in more positive terms the historical empowerment of writers and artists in Ireland. In the introduction to his important book, *Translating Ireland,* Cronin invokes not contamination but creativity. Intervening productively in the English/Irish language debate, here Cronin references 'the leakage, the internal translation between the island's two languages, the one ghosting the other' (Cronin 1996, 3).

It is true that writers and speakers of English in Ireland speak their own appropriated version of the Queen's English. So-called 'Hiberno-English' differs from county to county across the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland but in all cases it is characterized by heavy idiomaticism and substantial grammatical reversal. In direct opposition to worries re 'béarlachas', however, Hiberno-English does not occasion the same cultural or pedagogical anxiety. And I would submit that this is an important asymmetry unshaded in Cronin's work. In the colloquial as well as the cultural frame, slippages from Irish to English are foregrounded and celebrated as key markers of cultural character. If from English to Irish there is pedagogical concern re contamination or boundary maintenance, from Irish to English linguistic slippage is rife –and deliberately so.

As Hiberno-English celebrates increasingly its cultural and creative potency, the modernist fracture of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett is taken up in the contemporary experimentation of Sara Baume, Mike McCormack, Donal Ryan and Eimear McBride. McBride, in particular, has foregrounded the importance of multilingualism in her ongoing cultivation of a radical and uncompromising voice. 'I find English a pretty blunt tool most of the time', she says in recent interview, 'but studying other languages at school – Irish, German, French – […] offered plenty of ideas about alternative options to straightforward, grammatical writing' (McBride 2014). Ryan, similarly, has played with the possibilities of grammar and idiom. With casts of characters that disconnect from 'home' and from each other, his novels (*The Spinning Heart, The Thing About December* and most recently, *All We Shall Know*) unsettle the cosy colloquialisms of his native North Tipperary. For Ryan as much as McBride, Hiberno-English rarely offers a secure home for its characters or readers. Rather, Hiberno-English opens a space for risk and possibility; it invites a continuous questioning of shared words and their connective power.

II

In recognition of the multiple languages and learners that now constitute the Irish primary school classroom, Jim Cummins has joined with Muiris Ó'Laoire in calling for an 'inspirational pedagogy' building on the Deweyan image of the student as producer of culture rather than the Platonic image of the student as recipient of information. In other words, the 'monolingual habitus' of the Irish classroom is to be replaced by a plurilingual pedagogy respecting all languages as spoken and all students as teachers. Further in line with Cummins' and Ó'Laoire's progressivism, the habitus envisaged here moves away from rote learning and grammatical purity and moves toward verbal activity, cognitive flexibility and experiential practice. In the context of language learning in Ireland, and mindful particularly of this system's ingrained and postcolonial preoccupation with boundary maintenance, this call for an 'inspirational pedagogy' (Cummins 2011, 63) is surely welcome.

And yet, this call might be complicated further by highlighting again the philosophical intricacies of language and pedagogy. As excavated by Derrida in *Monolingualism of the Other*, in the postcolonial condition language education is necessarily steeped in complex reversals of power and privilege. There has been and will be a violence to these educational practices; in the terms of Derrida's epilogue, the acquisition of language is 'a serious traffic accident about which I never cease thinking' (Derrida 1998, 70). Moreover, it is important to flag at this point that Derrida's complex vision of language and attachment is extended beyond the postcolonial experience. Certainly he is clear about the violence of monolingual practices in the Algerian-French classroom. Nevertheless, he insists at the same time on alienation and attraction as the twin experiences of *all* language users. Presented in the context of his personal reflections on language socialization and education this extrapolation to the general case is surprising as it is radical.

We might flesh out this radical position as follows. When Derrida speaks of 'the monolingual' he speaks for the postcolonial subject but he speaks also for those language users for whom colonialism has never been the historical experience and for whom the acquisition of the mother tongue was devoid of historical drama. Thus, there is a simultaneous insistence in his writing on the postcolonial experience of 'a terror inside languages (inside languages there is a terror, soft, discreet, or glaring; that is our subject)' *and* on the universal experience of 'an essential alienation in language – which is always of the other – and, by the same token, in all culture' (Derrida 1998, 23, 58). In other words, for Derrida we are all and always in the difficult position of negotiating languages that come from outside. We are all and always doing our best to translate and to make sense. The postcolonial subject is neither unusual nor special for being tasked with this negotiation.

When it comes to linguistic alienation, it is striking indeed that Derrida does not make a special case for the postcolonial subject. Rather, he insists repeatedly that monolingualism is the painful and perennial experience of all language users. To experience monolingualism, Derrida submits, is to experience a language that is

not your own, one that 'comes from the other, remains with the other, and returns to the other' (Derrida 1998, 40), and yet to experience monolingualism is to have no other language and no other way of thinking. In Derrida's summation,

> The monolingual […] is deprived of *all* language […] he is in a way *aphasic* […] he is thrown into absolute translation, a translation without a pole, without a reference, without an originary language, and without a source language (*langue de depart*) […]. (Derrida 1998, 61)

Derrida expands with reference to his own attachment to French: 'This language is the only language that this monolingual speaks, and is destined to speak forever and ever [and it] is not his' […] 'it is distant, heterogenous, uninhabitable, deserted' (Derrida 1998, 57, 58). Thus, for Derrida, *all* users of language are alienated from their mother tongue. All users of language experience distance from or discomfort with their everyday words, and language is far from a prized possession bringing us closer to each other or to any particular place.

In her article, 'Lost in Translation: On the Untranslatable and its Ethical Implications for Religious Pluralism', Lovisa Bergdahl has further unpacked this position. Writes Bergdahl of Derrida:

> Following his thinking, no one is ever fully at home, not even in his or her own language or 'name'. It might even be appropriate to say that we are all in a constant state of translation, meaning that we all find ourselves in language just as we find ourselves in a country, a certain family and indeed in a religion. However, none of this (language, family, land, religion) 'belongs' to us in any possessive sense of the term. (Bergdahl 2009, 36)

Thus, for Bergdahl, the significance of Derrida on language – and the subsequent relevance of his work for education – is the philosopher's problematizing of unity. Derrida troubles entrenched assumptions re language and identity (among them the recurring and damaging idea that 'the natural born are thoroughly "at home" with their language and culture' [Bergdahl 2009, 36]) and in so doing he dissipates the 'unhelpful mystique' consistently getting in the way of mutual translation and learning processes. Identity is not that simple, Derrida argues. It is never straightforwardly the case that the self finds its identity in language. In place of such mystique or obfuscation, what is offered in Derrida's work is a nuanced recognition of the difficulty not only between languages but within language itself. For Bergdahl, it is precisely this recognition that goes to the heart of Derridean ethics. In the philosopher's analysis, it is in all forms of communication and translation that we enact a deeply difficult and moral task: 'a risky encounter with the otherness within oneself, as well as an acknowledgment of the sacredness of the Other' (Bergdahl 2009, 35).

Among contemporary philosophers, Derrida is not alone in his problematization of native language and identity nor in his suggestion that alterity or otherness reside within the self. The American philosopher, Stanley Cavell, has similarly critiqued such foundationalist assumptions. For Cavell, our agreed-upon words do not always allow satisfactory expression or desired connection with those closest to us. Our agreed-upon words do not lead to any safe haven of understanding. Rather, to use Cavell's repeated term, language is *disappointing*. Of our inner life, it

can reveal both too much and too little. As he elaborates in his essay 'Recounting Gains, Showing Losses', 'you always tell more and tell less than you know' (Cavell 1989, 83). Interestingly, is in this very recognition of our expressions' fragility and disappointment that we are roused to linguistic and bodily responsiveness. As Cavell in *Cities of Words* outlines how we are ordinarily accountable: 'I am responsible for ensuring that my words, legible as anyone else's, are not counterfeits of themselves, that they are backed by my meaning, here and now' (Cavell 2004, 202).

Undoubtedly, Cavell shares with Derrida a strong sense of language's inherited nature – a strong sense that language is always already there and always in certain ways circumscribed or undermined. Given that such instability resides at the very heart of meaning, it is incumbent upon us as inheritors of language to go beyond any straightforward divisions between inside and outside, between native and foreign, and between 'us' and 'them'. As with Derrida, we can see in this context an ethical dimension to Cavell's work on language; Cavell recognises that a full appreciation of other selves (or other languages or other cultures) involves a prior appreciation of one's own alterity. Naoko Saito frames this point particularly well:

> Going beyond the dichotomy between the native and the foreign, and destabilizing the illusion of home ground, this Cavellian approach shows that understanding foreign cultures involves already a relation to other cultures within one's native culture. […] Cavell's views regarding language and the self envision […] cultivating an eye to the other, the stranger, who is already here within oneself – alterity as the human condition of translation and immigrancy. (Saito 2009, 132)

Saito is right to underline the ethical dimension of Cavell on translation, and she is right to foreground the philosopher's importance in recognising alterity within the human condition. Cavell, argues Saito, offers to theorists of education 'a radical language' that will 'release us from the quest for secure ground as the presupposition of understanding other cultures' (Saito 2009, 134). Pushing further on Saito's discussion, I would submit that Derrida's theorising on monolingualism and education is offered in even more radical and illuminating terms. I would argue in this context that Cavell recognises with Derrida the fatefulness of language, the fact that we are always quoting and never fully original in our everyday expression. Equally, however, and this is where a distance begins to open up, Cavell wishes to recognise the *faithfulness* of language – that language is something humans hold in common, something whose admittedly contingent and shaky nature still captures exactly how and why we engage with the world. For Derrida, this faithfulness of language is not something that we can depend upon. Rather, our conditions of alterity and rivenness are fully inescapable and there is no guarantee of understanding. *Pace* Cavell, then, there is in Derrida's lexicon scant mention of 'redemption' or 'return'. There is little promise that we might through our own expressive effort rediscover 'the ordinary', that in acknowledgment of otherness we might 'build neighbourhood within the native' (Saito 2009, 136).

Unsettling cultural or philosophical promise that language roots identity, Derrida's complex monolingualism challenges as it illuminates. We are never and

never were 'at home' in our native languages, Derrida suggests, and this realisation of homelessness is arrived at through particular attention to the postcolonial case. In Ireland, of course, sentimental models of romantic nationalism have long been mobilized for cultural and educational gain. In the text of *Translations* (and later, in *Dancing at Lughnasa*), Friel celebrates an autochtonic Irishness while dismissing outright any comparable richness to English identity. The early Heaney, similarly, works an earthy and muscular idiom, figuring 'Vowels ploughed into other: opened ground' (Heaney 1998, 156) and an indissoluble link between word and soil. It is striking that such celebration of Irish and Hiberno-English is noticeably foregone by contemporary writers on the literary scene. Ryan, to take a key case in point, works hard with Hiberno-English dialect and rhythm but these workings are rarely offered in culturally celebratory mode. Rather, there is in Ryan's prose, as there is in the prose of McBride, a felt anxiety re Hiberno-English and its capabilities. Presented in Ryan's and McBride's work are characters much more likely to alienate than to communicate, characters increasingly estranged from each other and from themselves.

We might bear in mind these literary developments as we return one final time to the Irish classroom. If we are to take on board Derrida's conceptualization of language – if we are to witness linguistic alienation as the particular experience of the postcolonial subject and the universal experience of all subjects – we cannot take for granted any easy efficacy of plurilingual practice. We cannot straightforwardly assume, following Cummins and Ó'Laoire, that pedagogy might provide an innocent let alone an 'inspirational' route through multilinguistic challenge. Made salient in Derrida's poststructuralist account is the insight that Ireland can only teach languages in the sense that Ireland cannot teach languages or, in less provocative terms, that Ireland can only teach languages via the strange deconstructive logic that all languages of the self 'come from and return to the other' (Derrida 1998, 40), that the attachment to the mother tongue is characterised first and foremost by terror and alienation. Aspiring to the peculiar justice of the deconstructive what we might bear witness to here is the deep difficulty of the linguistic and the educational moment. Language learning is emancipatory, without doubt, but this same emancipative process forces personal and very painful questions of identity, of relationship, of history, and of home.

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