

# **Language games and immigrant otherness: crossing boundaries between speech and silences**

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[E]ach time I come into contact with the situation, where individuals speak to me, they not only speak to me through different language games, but also command from me an obligation by virtue of the fact that they address me (Todd, 2007, pp. 596-597).

For foreigners like me, our reception of the language of the other is much better than our expression of it. So who dares to judge how much we understand when we are silent or refuse to write (Rhedding-Jones, 2002, p. 100).

## **Introduction**

This paper is an analysis of the representational and revelatory impact, and inhibitions associated with speech, and the alternative (perhaps escapist) possibility of silence, in relation to immigrant teachers' otherness. The analysis aims to provoke epistemological and ontological reconceptualisations of the commitments, articulation and interpretations of speech in intercultural encounters. The paper responds to dominant expectations in the educational and critical multicultural discourse related to speech and dialogic engagements, by interrogating them through a philosophical and critical feminist theoretical framework.

In her work *Strangers to ourselves*, Kristeva (1991) proposes that through confrontations with foreigners we expose ourselves, as we become invited surreptitiously through them into the inaccessible muteness of irregular, insecure encounters. She illustrates how meetings with foreigners become a communion of need and desire, a banquet of hunger, nourishment and fulfilment, a foreigner's utopia. By forgetting differences for the moment, stepping out of time, she claims that a brief, intoxicated togetherness occurs, even though all parties know it is temporary and frail. The vulnerability of exposing oneself through speech, as a subject in constant, un-static formation, emerges throughout this analysis as such a fearful act that it could lead, rather than to dialogue, to a lack of involvement. Kristeva's abstract illustrations of togetherness through speech and silence are central to the problematisation of this paper. I argue that it may be through silence, instead of through speech, that the complex stories of immigrant otherness emerge.

## **The Crossings**

Boundary crossing and aspirations for living equitably with difference permeate 21<sup>st</sup> century educational strata, and intercultural dialogue is widely promoted as a key supportive strategy by which this can be achieved (Besley & Peters, 2012). This analysis scrutinizes the promotion of speech and dialogue and some implications for immigrant teachers in the globalised, neoliberal educational milieu. It highlights representational and revelatory impacts and inhibitions

associated with speech itself, and alludes to possibilities for alternative encounters in reaction to immigrant teachers' otherness. Philosophical and feminist perspectives support the examination and problematisation of dominant conceptualisations of the use of language as a bridge across differences. While ethical and moral implications of encounters arise as further complications, they emphasise the complexity and unpredictability of resisting, crossing, and even transgressing, linguistic boundaries.

Language grounds and characterises immigrant subjects and their otherness. It is "at once the carrier of national and familial traditions and emblem of cultural and personal identity" (Bammer, 1994, p. xvi), taught, lived by and passed on from one generation to the next, in a perspective embraced by indigenous philosophies (Ritchie, 2008; Townsend-Cross, 2004), and cross- and multicultural theory (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Walsh, 2007). Wittgenstein's play on the use of language as a game, representing both the real and the imaginary, and revealing both similarities and differences (Black, 1979), alerts us to the impossibility of assuming that language could reliably represent another. Kristeva's (1991) foreigners' experiences of instability and subjection affirm this fear, and they foreground this analysis. Kristeva proposes that, through confrontations with foreigners, we expose the "secret manner in which we face the world" (p. 4), as we become invited surreptitiously through him into the "inaccessible, irritating" (p. 4) muteness of the irregular, insecure encounter. Speech and silences in these encounters open possibilities and traps, simultaneously and frighteningly elusive, inviting, dangerous and prosperous. They expose the foreigner not only in others, but also, through our involvement in the encounter, within ourselves.

### **Escape to silence**

Inviting or frightening, Kristeva's (1991) foreigners' speech and engagement in dialogue rests on their command of language. As a nobody from nowhere, she sees their language as lacking social identity, status and influence, and as eventually ensnared either in a massive void, or becoming what Kristeva calls baroque. Whilst natives may appear to listen to it, the foreigners' language is more often a form of low level amusement, than taken seriously. With little effort made or support given, they become the laughing stock of the natives (Kilito, 1994) and their speech collapses into the peaceful release of silence, a trap which Kristeva calls the void. They may attempt to make up for not being heard, instead revealing their utter lack, by misplacing and overexerting their linguistic efforts. Already excluded from the social reality by their otherness, such excessive efforts can result in their language becoming overly formal and sophisticated (or baroque). Even when they speak the new language grammatically well, the foreigners' exaggerated baroque speech remains separate from themselves, arising from an internal emptiness, confined within their mother tongue and fear of failure, never freed completely. Eventually they find they have "[n]othing to say, nothingness, no one on the horizon" (Kristeva, 1991, p. 16). Struggling with another language threatens their shifting identity, holding their language as "[a]n impervious fullness: cold diamond, secret treasury, carefully protected, out of reach" leading to a point where "nothing needs to be said, nothing can be said" (p. 16). A tide of despondency sweeps over the fullness of their identity, locked within their language, for now, at least, emptied into silence.

Swaying between holding on to their mother tongue and familiar traditions of speaking and dialogue, and the new language customs, Kristeva's (1991) foreigners recognise their own alienation. Lost from the grip of that private, internal connection with home, they perfect their new style and hope to fit in. Will they, the linguistic others, ever become as fully belonging as those who are native to the language? Or is there invariably a point of anesthesia from too much effort in doing so, resulting in meaningless confusion, of sort of, but not quite, belonging in the new language, but now also no longer really belonging in the same native way in their home language (Kilito, 1994; Kristeva, 1991)? Their awkwardness has an exotic charm, however peculiar it feels to them. Freed now from the reins of their mother tongue, they plunge fearlessly into the foreign new language, daringly capable, using words they never used before, audacious, even obscene, freshly unleashed from prior inhibitions. Or they fall into a linguistic no-man's-land, in-between making an effort, being more or less understood and accepted for the linguistic differences that continue to show up every time they speak, and the state where there seems to be no point, where no natives even care to understand, and the preferred realm between their two languages once again becomes silence.

My argument is driven by an overarching concern with immigrant teachers' linguistic differences, as confrontations with such extremely intimate struggles, that the vulnerability of physically engaging in dialogue can lead them to adopt, like Kristeva's (1991) foreigners, an easier, escapist and subversive path of silence. The early childhood curriculum in Aotearoa/New Zealand promotes speaking and communication as important connective strategies. It suggests, for example, that "[f]requent communication among all adults who work with children is essential" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 47), and broader Ministry of Education guidelines for teaching and learning in multicultural settings suggest that when teachers use "language with care it is then possible to avoid alienating or losing the attention and good will of all students" (Ho, Holmes, & Cooper, 2004, p. 83). Both reflect the importance of language and communication for the "management of cultural diversity" (Besley & Peters, 2011, p. 2), promoted in the wider multicultural and intercultural discourse. A tension arises when speech is problematised from a range of perspectives, so that it becomes seen not only as a dialogic, communicative, ostensibly connecting, tool, but, on a revelatory level, as a representation, and possible alienation, of a person's selfhood and identity (Besley, 2007; MacEinri, 1994; Wise, 2000). Immigrant teachers struggling with reconstructing themselves as new language users are immersed in this tension, as they attempt simultaneously to maintain some intimate connection with their inherited self and their home language.

The strong promotion of dialogue as a tool for dealing with the 'problem' of diversity complicates understandings of the nature and impacts of speech and engagements in dialogue (Besley & Peters, 2011; Chan, 2009, 2011; May & Sleeter, 2010). The complications arising in the debate surrounding the promoted intercultural practices, entangled with the raw sensitivities of linguistic foreignness, unsettle this reverence of dialogue as a cure for diversity. This paper attempts to explicate conceptualisations of speech and dialogue, and some of the difficult spaces in between the physical act of immigrant teachers' articulated speech and others' understanding of their speech, and the easier realm of silence to which unrecognised problematic and uncertain spaces can lead (Rhedding-Jones, 2001; Todd, 2011).

## Speech as a political action

Speech and engagements in dialogue always occur within and cross boundaries between a complicated web of already existing relationships. The effects and disclosures aroused by speech then necessarily form within the context of and in relation to these existing, but possibly unfamiliar, social and political relationships. The unknown nature of such relationships is exacerbated when they involve multiple cultural selves, with fluidly interconnected, often falsely categorised, boundaries and links (Peters, 2012). Whether they are teachers or abstract philosophical foreigners, immigrant subjects are not only linguistically and personally, but politically historicised in complex ways (Kristeva, 1991; Malcomson & Kristeva, 1993; Mohanty, 2003). Speech thus becomes not only an interpersonal but also a political action, impacting in unpredictable ways on the *polis*, as the group of individuals within which it resonates, in a wider or more intimate sense (Arendt, 1958).

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, immigrant teachers' new settings, embedded in the neoliberal, or what Bauman (2009) calls the liquid modern, political climate of erratic, unpredictable change, are punctuated by "shifting values and signs" (MacEinri, 1994, p. 2). These teachers are themselves in between being the self who is very other, learning about a new culture and environment, and the settling self, making meaning of the values and signs in their new environment (Besley, 2007). In this politically unstable, personally ambivalent state, they may not only have insufficient insight into the existing dynamics to understand their place within or their impact on the environment, but they may not even be in a position to begin this process (MacEinri, 1994; Rhedding-Jones, 2001; Silva, 2009). Releasing ties from the social and cultural climate they left behind may involve long term, unpredictable shifts, during which there is no comfortable sliding into another *polis*. Moreover, the students in the educational setting, often immigrant others themselves, may be equally uncomfortable with risking exposure, of themselves or their linguistic lack, through speech (Kilito, 1994; Kristeva, 1991). Conceivably, then, the stories of immigrant others, teachers and their students, may be only tentatively shared in the existing educational milieu, and what is disclosed risks remaining uncritically superficial and unrepresentative, rather than meaningful, revealing and engaging.

To consider speech as a political action means also considering existing concerns or prejudices ruminating within the *polis* through which speech acts will be interpreted (Arendt, 2005). In Aotearoa/New Zealand, adults in educational settings are expected, for example, not only to communicate frequently with each other, but to connect children with the languages and symbols of their own and others' cultures by developing awareness of the "richness of communication" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 97). Which richness is meant here? Can it be assumed that the linguistic environment and communication in educational settings is rich? And what does that mean, when communication is rich? Little explanation is given in the curriculum guidelines, of a construct that appears to be infinitely more complex than just rich (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; MacEinri, 1994; Rhedding-Jones, 2002; Todd, 2004).

Immigrant teachers, often still unacquainted with their own foreignness, are guided to engage in (children's and others') language within their educational environment (Ministry of Education, 1996; Ho, et al, 2004). The value of such a premature, potentially highly vulnerable, disclosure of their still forming selfhood is highly questionable. Following Arendt (1958), it is the actual act of

speaking that exposes the uniqueness of an individual, rather than the content of the speech. The speaker is located, consciously or unconsciously, within a particularly contextualised and political space, or *polis*. She bares herself and something of her story in her articulation of speech, however what is actually revealed is dependent on its interpretation by the listener, in the encounter with the speaker, and within the wider social and political space. Hence, the story told is not determined by the speaker (through her choice of words, for example), but revealed only by the listener, making sense of the story, filtered through the on-going evolution of the *polis*.

Immigrant teachers' genealogies, as with Kristeva's (1991) turmoiled foreigners, uniquely affect the pre-existing web of relationships within which they are situated and the individuals or groups within that web (Malcomson & Kristeva, 1993; Mohanty, 2003). What is revealed by their speech arises from the myriad intentions and conflicting wills within this relational and political milieu and of the individuals who hear and reinterpret it, regardless of the intention of the speaker (Arendt, 1958). When speech itself is such an unpredictable and at the same time revelatory act, it is more complex than a superficial expression of an individuals' otherness. Faced with these multiple uncertainties in their new settings, immigrant teachers may recoil from such revelation and vulnerability, and follow Kristeva's foreigners into a realm of non-exposure and silence.

Immigrants' speech is not only a vulnerable, unpredictable engagement with the moment, but also with its consequences, reaching far beyond the engagement (Bauman, 2009; Black, 1979; Todd, 2004). Dependent as speech acts are on the speaker and the listener, and the actual engagement in the speech encounter, they are bound not only to the experience of the encounter, but also to suffer as a result of its interpretation. What the speaker reveals of herself, as re-articulated through the voice of her listeners, is complicated by the reciprocal influence not only of the wider social and political *polis*, but of the listeners' own unpredictable genealogies (Mohanty, 2003; Todd, 2011). Whilst the ministerial guidelines clearly intend to support immigrant children and families with generalised aspirations to affirm their languages and cultures, immigrant teachers' struggles with their own otherness are obscured within general expectations to effortlessly achieve the desired richness of a harmonious, culturally diverse educational environment. The riskiness of engaging in speech, given not only the extent to which it reveals the intimate self of the speaker, but also the unpredictability of how it is eventually interpreted by the listener, has serious implications for dialogic engagements across differences and for the intentions of intercultural education (Besley & Peters, 2012; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; May & Sleeter, 2010). Guidelines asking teachers to avoid alienating their students or losing their attention by using language with care (Ho et al., 2004), thus place the immigrant teachers, who are themselves grappling with their own otherness, between a very large 'rock and a hard place', in terms of the risks involved in engaging in speech at all. The impact of such guidelines cross the boundary between sharing allowable, inoffensive, acceptable or endearing differences within an educational setting, to the point where they become so threatening, that speech becomes an impossibility.

### **A revelatory awakening**

The reification of dialogue as a bridging of differences in multicultural, globalised teaching environments involving, for example, trying to 'get inside another' to understand what she is saying, with the view that it fosters "mutual understanding and respect" (United Nations

Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2010), is not unchallenged. Murphy (2012) claims that “[d]ialogue is a warm and fuzzy concept that hides a multitude of problems” (p. 66), and that it is unsuited as a tool to achieve the respectful and harmonious relationships and understanding for which it is often promoted. The implications of Arendt’s political and revelatory insights into the nature of speech, and the ‘warm and fuzzy’ challenge to dialogue, can be further problematised through a range of philosophical lenses to analyse its effectiveness as a bridging task. Some tensions arise in this problematisation, as it begs a reconsideration of the complexity of any given educational milieu, and of how, given such complexity, it could be possible to talk through the impasse between deep historical, political and personal conceptions of rights, traditions and cultural divisions. Murphy (2012) suggests that underlying, often hidden, and too-difficult-to-reveal differences subvert desired, apparently harmonious engagements in dialogue.

Speaking and engaging in dialogue implicate individuals not only on a physical, but also on a delicately emotional level. That dialogue involves affective, intimately emotional commitments is demonstrated, for example, in a Socratic conceptualisation of dialogue: as a love of language, and as a love of searching for the truth (Besley & Peters, 2011; Keller, 2012). Dialogue is also variously seen as entailing a purposeful and deep commitment of concern, trust, respect, appreciation, affection and hope for another. Besley and Peters (2011) outline a range of possible conditions for dialogue, such as, that dialogic partners put aside their assumptions, that they consider each other as mutual and equal partners in their dialogic truth-finding, and that the partners are committed to the focus of the dialogue. From this perspective, dialogue has been hailed as “a process of awakening” (Bohm, as cited in Besley & Peters, 2011, p. 6), and as leading to a new consciousness of the other and of the relationship with the other. This view affirms Arendt’s point that the meaning of speech emerges not in the words spoken, but in its interpretation by and engagement with the listener. In this sense, acts of dialogue also play out Foucault’s struggles with the question of “[w]ho are we” (Foucault, 1982, p. 781), and can be seen as a revelatory awakening. Immigrant teachers who are struggling with supporting their students to keep their languages alive and dynamic, for example, must first learn for themselves what it is to maintain such a relationship to themselves and to their own use of speech in their home language and their new language (MacEinri, 1994; Walsh, 2007). An internal awakening may thus be more important, in the first instance, than a forced, open revelation to others.

As a process of revelation of certain truths, dialogue can be played out as a game of truth, reflecting Foucault’s notion of language as a game (Peters, 2007), or Wittgenstein’s language-games (Black, 1979), which neither deceive nor reveal the truths they hold. Rather, they depend on the on-going constitution of the self in relation to and alongside not only the word games themselves, but the contextualised meanings made of them by the communicating parties involved. Todd (2007) adds a further twist when she refers to speaking and listening as a “language game of justice” (p. 597). In this game, the obligation commanded of the listener, to which she refers in the opening quote of this paper, is to listen to the other with openness, reflexivity and without judgement. Keller (2012) adds that the commitment in truth-finding dialogue involves transcending the connection achieved through the dialogue, to an encounter not only with the other, but, as also suggested by Kristeva (1991), with the other in ourselves. A strong commitment to a level of truth-finding encounters, he suggests, could avert a certain

blindness arising, for example, from relying on predetermined certainties and assumptions. It is time, Keller (2012) claims, “at least in some meagre ways” to “climb out of the cave” (p. 120) of such certainties, transcending egocentric, monologic, foreigner-detesting (Kristeva, 1991) self-aggrandizement, to face the ethical responsibility of confronting alterity and difference.

Buber’s philosophy expands on the conception of dialogue as an ethical and affective experience involving a love and realisation of the other, in not only a commitment to the other, but an interdependence through this “care and love toward the other” culminating in a “symbolic intercourse” of othernesses (Semetski, 2012, p. 126). Freire’s (1970) perspective on the use of dialogue draws together some of these philosophies of dialogue, as he claims that it is the entire committed engagement in dialogue that transforms the meaning created by the dialogue. Immigrant teachers who act on and speak within their new environment can be seen then, as constantly transforming themselves and their realities through their dialogic encounters. Freire interlinks the meaning made by the act of speech with the content, claiming that any truth, or meaning, emerges at the same time through the words and the act of engaging in dialogue. The brief insights and commitments examined to this point all reflect an epistemological orientation towards a verbal articulations as being fundamental to communicative engagements. This coincides with ministerial guidelines and with the dominant multicultural and intercultural orientation to speech and language. A further reinterpretation of these perspectives reinforces the neoliberal, liquid modern concern that attempting to understand another through speech and dialogue can ever only be a temporary and forever incomplete and impossible expectation. The dominant orientation overlooks the possibility of silence, rather than speech, as an alternative revelatory awakening act.

### **Who dares to judge?**

How much can the immigrant teacher, articulating herself, and the listener interpreting her, rely on what is said as divulging any particular truth? Immigrant teachers’ self-formation and their crossing of linguistic boundaries in their new educational contexts complicate and are complicated by their expression of themselves. Rhedding-Jones (2002) suggests in the opening quote, that foreigners may understand much more of a new language than what they are prepared or able to articulate. Who then, within this educational milieu, can judge immigrants’ use of language, or their refusal to engage? Kristeva (1991) suggests focusing on recognising, but not judging, others on the basis of their foreignness (or by implication, their foreign use of language), and that the importance of their difference “disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners” (p. 1). This section of the analysis refocuses on the boundary between teachers’ commitment to speech, and the risk and fear involved in such a commitment.

Any articulation of the self is always incomplete, just as the construction of the self is ongoing (Foucault, 1982; Schneider, 2012). If the act of speech is seen as an act of self-exposure, it can be deduced that what is revealed of the self through the act of speaking is also always incomplete or unfinished. What value can be placed, then, on what is disclosed by any speech act, when the self being revealed is simultaneously continuing to develop, and is, therefore, revealed only in part? Todd (2004) reaffirms that engaging in speech itself creates uncertainty, as the speaker articulating the story can only determine the content, but not what will be revealed, or deceived, by the story she tells. The uncertainty arising from possibly revealing something

previously unknown even to the speaker herself, may, as already suggested, lead to immigrant teachers' reluctance to engage in dialogue at all. The fear resulting from expectations to reveal what may be unknown aspects of the self can be imagined as risking complete nakedness, and could not only prevent any engagement in speech or dialogue, but it could inhibit any commitment at all to the relationship (Todd, 2004). As a result, ministerial requirements for speech and dialogue may result not only in superficially safe, non-threatening (and non-revealing), but even non-existent conversations, that are, either way, non-significant and meaningless.

If committing to speech means that immigrant teachers must surrender themselves to interpretation by others, any insights into their personal genealogies become, at best, unpredictable (Mohanty, 2003). When the vulnerability and unpredictability of engaging in speech becomes so fearful that it is abandoned, immigrant teachers risk being misunderstood and inaccurately characterised. Kristeva's (1991) illustrations show the exposure and judgement resulting from the foreigners' attempts, or refusal, to play the local language games of truth. Limiting, generalised categories, representing superficial, unspecific considerations of otherness, are an assault on the integrity and identity of immigrant teachers (Mohanty, 2003; Todd, 2004). Such shallow recognition of the complexities of cultural otherness suggests an empty approach to difference and diversity, and an irresponsible failure to recognise or respond to the obligations inherent in ethical, responsible communication.

### **Intoxicating togetherness**

Immigrant teachers' insecurities may raise them to the heights of need and desire, to a banquet of hunger, or conversely drive them to an inaccessible muteness, perpetuating the frailty of their encounters with others in their new educational milieu. Speech and dialogue concern not merely the immigrant teacher's constitution and disclosure of herself through her speech, but a far more complex interplay with self-formation, genealogy, revelation and volatile, risky interpretations. The discussion in this analysis suggests that what is revealed or disclosed of the speaker's self and of her political, historical or localised genealogies, emerges from the overall act of the engagement itself. This analysis highlights an epistemological orientation, which, in the dominant discourse refers to speech and the crucial role of the listener and interpreter of the story. It emphasises that, if individual subjects are formed through engagements with the relational webs within which they are situated, then immigrant teachers' internal, often still undefined, otherness will also be interpreted within and by that context (Foucault, 1982; Mohanty, 2003; Schneider, 2012). The vulnerability of exposing oneself through speech, as a subject in constant, un-static formation, has been exposed as an act involving a high degree of fear of the unknown, most dramatically about the self, the unknown foreigner within (Kristeva, 1991). Confronted by this fear of exposure, immigrant teachers may transgress dominant expectations to communicate rather through silence, forging new opportunities for revelation, and reshaping orientations to immigrant speech and dialogue.

Immigrant teachers' otherness is shaped by and contributes to the hegemonic, dominant educational discourse and practices. Communicative encounters through speech are promoted as fostering intercultural togetherness, however, as Peters (2012) reminds us, conversation "is not a free floating ahistorical and acultural vehicle for talk or civility", but rather "an evolving

institution grounded in time and place, open to change with no guarantees for its future viability” (p. 46). In this sense silence may, at least in some formative way, be a vehicle for genuine, bridging encounters, whereby the complex political, historicised and cultural struggles of individual others become exposed through, rather than despite of, the context. Perhaps it is precisely the subversive counter-discourse required for immigrant teachers to traverse, or transgress, the volatile terrain of risky boundaries and differences. And maybe such boundary crossings will forge new personally committed language games of justice, towards not only intoxicating but meaningful togetherness.

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