

Beyond Signification: A Playful Encounter with Words for Early Childhood Education

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Introduction: The Performativity of Language

Language has a performative power; it acts to order our world and our interactions with it. In this sense, for Deleuze & Guattari (1980/1987), all language is made up of “order-words” (p. 88). That is, in its habitual and conventional use, language goes further than signification to enact what Deleuze and Guattari describe as stratification, an active shaping of bodies and things in line with an assumed order. The order-word both gives an order and establishes order; it determines relations between things and presupposes a network of statements that may be made about these things. With the order-word, language becomes a tool for the progressive standardisation of thought and action.

This paper attempts to provoke ways of working with language to enhance creative capacity rather than reinforce the reproduction of expected modes of thought and action. The paper begins with a consideration of the materiality and performativity of language, and argues that language is most often put to the purpose of reproducing normative constructions of the world which are unimaginative and which tend to restrict bodies into certain positions within these constructions. Case study data from a previously published article (Peters & Davis, 2011) is reproduced here as an example of the ways in which language orders particular positions, relations, and conceptualisations in an early childhood setting. The paper concludes by suggesting ways in which language might instead function within a creative extension of possibility in early childhood education and specifically engages in a reimagining of the potential present in the example given.

Seen as a system of order-words, language is not a neutral representational device but a performative force. Language is “a leaping from order-word to order-word, punctuated by action” (Roy, 2008, p. 162-3) with every statement serving to perform or provoke an act. Language is not a tool for representing and communicating about a reality that remains separate. It is not a representative realm that sits alongside the real without affect upon it. Language is imbricated in the real and affective within it. Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) consider language a semiotic machine, a regime of signs, a determining agent which creates stratified formalisations, both within the language system itself (ways of reading and writing) and within the content of things. In language a “collective assemblage of enunciation” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 97) is created – a pre-established system of permitted language use that determines what can be said and what can be done with language. Language is constituted of “a host of categories, classifications, binary oppositions, associations, codes, concepts, logical relations and so on, whereby the world is given a certain coherence and organisation” (Bogue, 2007, p. 20). This means that language encourages us to view and understand the world in certain ways (and not in others).

It is through the order-word that language has a materiality that affects the body (Murriss, 2016). The order-word maintains positions and attitudes, and compels or obliges the succession of certain actions and thoughts, keeping all bodies and events “on track [so that] thoughts, minds and bodies ... unify purpose and behaviour” (Krejsler, 2016, p. 1476) in line with expected and desired expressions. Thinking most of the time involves “going in circles where we rarely see anything new [where] thought functions in a steady pattern of recognition and representation” (Olsson, 2009, p. 82). In this kind of thought and action is the mere recycling of orders which revolve and revolve without transformation, without creativity.

To illustrate, a conversation is reproduced below from data gathered within a parent-led early childhood educational setting in Aotearoa New Zealand. This data was collected to examine

appropriate teaching responses to children's development of theorising, but it provides an interesting example with which to consider the power of language to shape thought, knowledge, and action in particular directions within educational settings. The conversation produces a plethora of order-words that serve to mould the interaction, to delineate the potential relations between child and other matter including the significance of these relations, and that also determine what can be produced as knowledge.

A dead bee was discovered in the grass. Four-year-old Phoebe (P) and Practitioner-Researcher 3 (PR3) had been discussing the bee and Phoebe's ideas about how honey is made by a honey machine inside the hive. The following sections of transcript have been extracted from an audio-recording of about 20 minutes of conversation between Phoebe and the PR, which involved Phoebe drawing as well as talking to explain her ideas:

- PR3:** 'Would you like to explain how your machine works, Phoebe?'
- P:** 'The machine makes the pollen then it makes it into honey. The holes are the honey. I want to do another drawing.'
(Phoebe drew more)
- P:** 'This [her drawing] is what the outside of the honey house looks like.'
- PR3:** 'How do the bees get into it?'
(P began to draw a door)
- P:** 'It goes through the door.'
(P did not want to hold the bee, so the PR used the bee in conjunction with the drawings to reiterate P's explanation of the bee going through the door and to the machine)
- PR3** 'So when the bee gets into the machine can you tell us how the honey gets made?'
- P** 'Honey drops the honey into the pollen ... then use its tongue to turn the machine on then it turns the pollen into honey.'
- PR3** 'That's really interesting. So once the bee drops the stuff into the machine, what happens to it next?'
- P** 'It drops the honey into the machine. It drips it from its tongue. He carries it in his legs then he puts it on his tongue.'
(P showed the PR on the drawing the part of the machine it goes into)
- PR3** 'Can you tell me how it gets turned into honey?'
- P** 'The honey turns it and makes it moosh and turns it into honey. Like I stir my ice cream into ah ah ice cream moosh. When I stir it I moosh it up.'
(J, another adult, joined them)
- J** 'Yes! How many bees live in the hive?'
- P** 'Ah, maybe two.'
- J** 'Two bees?'
- P** 'Yeah [emphatically]. One is the Dad, one is the Mum.'
- J** 'How many babies do they have.'
(P was thoughtful for a while then slowly raised three fingers)
- PR3** 'So there are five bees in there if you count the babies.'
- P** 'One, two, three' [she raises one finger at a time].
- (Peters & Davis, 2011, p.12-13).

The authors go on to note that also this exchange involves "a range of question [sic] such as 'What happens to the honey after they've made the honey?', 'How do they put them into the jars?' 'Why do they [bee keepers] wear a hat?'" (Peters & Davis, 2011, p.12-3).

A child's drawing of a house for a bee is used to reproduce a network of facts about bees, as well as traditional teaching exchanges. Rautio (2014) notes that in education, child-matter relations are often interpreted by adults as instrumental activities related to child development or socialisation,

activities “the significance of which is predetermined and known or knowable by adults” (p. 471). In this example, counting is seen to be important, and matter (in the drawing of bees) takes a subservient role as something to be counted. But also, because this is an educational setting, education functions as order-word and obliges the practitioner to be educational,” in other words, to structure conversation and action to best facilitate learning in the child. This presupposes question-asking on the part of the adult and answering on the part of the child. With the second practitioner (J), this involves a direct, educationally instructional approach (how many bees?), while the first practitioner (PR3) follows the order-words in the child’s language, but also with a view to educationally extend thought. The order-word enacts all kinds of implicit obligations and preset directions: it stratifies the interaction. The child introduces the notion of a house for the bee in her drawing: now order-word “house” obligates passage. House presupposes doors, entrances and exits, so, the practitioner asks, how will the bee get in? If there is a machine (order-word) for making honey, there is presupposed a process; the practitioner asks, what will happen next? The order-word begins and sustains chains of signifiers that are presupposed and somewhat predetermined.

The presuppositions of the order-word, and its associated chains of representations, are not immutable, despite their often-uncontested nature. Language, and indeed all kinds of representations, are constantly re-negotiated, adapted and transformed, as intra-acting practices (Ringrose & Renold, 2016) which emerge in performance, rather than preformed, stabilised entities that interact. This means that there is an opportunity to creatively rework representations in an intraactive process of inventing and producing knowledge (Hultman & Lenz-Taguchi, 2010), rather than falling into line in the acceptance of the order of given representations and routine exchanges as demonstrated in the bee-theory example. If language need not function as a repository of knowledge truths, instead it might enact “a process of scattering thought; scrambling terms, concepts and practices; forging linkages; becoming a form of action” (Grosz, 2001, p. 58)? A more empowering conceptualisation of language, something that moves language beyond order-word, and that allows language a creative role, beyond conformity and into generation, is required. This is explored in the next section.

Re-performing Language

To undermine the use of language as signifying representation, Deleuze & Guattari (1980/ 1987) offer an alternative semiotics, a-signifying, impersonal and intensive, to deal with objects and phenomena “without the interference of perception or a stable category of experience” (Cole, 2012, p. 3). They argue that meaning is created in the deployment of signs, as a surface or “position effect” (Deleuze, 1969/1990, p. 70). The word “chair” gains meaning not through systems of denotation referring to an external reality and relations of resemblance nor in manifesting the logical essence of chair (Sauvagnargues, 2016). Instead it is a product of the play of phonemes and syntagms that are themselves a-signifying and that offer possibilities for different actualisations (Sauvagnargues, 2016). Instead of a symbolic plane of language operating at a different level of reality, both describing and imposing description on that reality, for Deleuze & Guattari (1980/1987) between words and things exists a new domain of potentialities, not unstructured but certainly not structuring.

Viewed this way, language can be placed into the variation of numerous connections so that order-words become pass-words. Unlike order-words, which function within systems of denotation and serve as stoppages in the creation of “organized, stratified compositions”, pass-words are “words that are components of passage” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/87, p. 128), words that enable passage and movement. Instead of discerning resemblances between things, the task is to produce “a system of differential intervals between terms that have no signification in and of themselves, and which only acquire their sense through this play of positions” (Sauvagnargues, 2016, p. 14).

Language is stretched in new directions, creating atypical expressions from potential and that are part, perhaps, of language’s own becoming. In this way the atypical expression hints at the futurity of language. Deleuze & Guattari (1980/1987) suggest that the atypical expression is an example of

the deformation or deterritorialization of language, and this is required to enable practices of expression that consort with the virtual for an emerging-something-new. “It takes stretching and twisting: pain” (Massumi, 2002, p. xxiii); it is not easy.

Putting language into play, (re)inventing concepts and disrupting conventional meanings can disturb the order-word and agitate the stratification of representation. Putting language into play is to consider words as verbs (Amatucci, 2013) rather than signifying nouns; processes, not objects but perhaps a “passage *between* objects” (Benozzo, Bell, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2013, p. 310).

For the early childhood teacher, such practices entail being oriented always in the present and attuned to the formation of relations and connections across objects and bodies. No longer is perception limited by what representation expects, assumes, and recognises. Instead de Freitas (2016) suggests perception develops a virtuality. Rather than merely perceive and identify an object, the early childhood teacher might try to see it as an event, full of “potentiality, relationality, mobility, occurrence, and the future” (de Freitas, 2016, p. 194). The teacher might immerse herself in affect and sensation (Leander & Boldt, 2013), seeking something “emergent, relational and ethical, opening towards intensities” (Gannon, 2016, p. 128). This an immanent practice which “can only work itself out, following the momentum of its own unrolling process” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 89). There cannot be any sense of an intentional structuring on the teacher’s part, but what remains important are the initial conditions which precipitate and contribute to the unfolding of teaching and learning, to be explored and put into relation. This is important if early childhood teachers wish to break themselves, and children, free from the constraining limits of language and linguistic concepts in order to see the world anew and to enable new perspectives and creations in thought and in life. The next section explores how this might be done. I bring words and semantics in play with each other in order to explore how language can move away from signification and more rigid determinations of what can be thought, and instead support creative new becomings of thought, actions and words.

Re-performing Bee: A Playful Encounter

Instead of the fixity of representationalism and recognition that curtail the potentiality of bee and drawing and child and teacher, that position bee and drawing as resources for the human act of educating, is it possible to open up an interval where all these bodies might explore their potentiality, enhancing affect? Opening up an interval between elements serves to halt the steady progression of order-word linked to order-word linked to order-word that seeks to perpetuate the world as is, rather than what it could be; opening up invites an experimentation with alternative connections. The interval is a space inbetween becomings (inbetween the becomings of one body or inbetween two different bodies), which place them into contact; the membranes between this assemblage and that, “which carry potentials and regenerate polarities” (Deleuze, 1969/1990, p. 103).

Yet this is not to “apply” Deleuze’s concepts to the bee event, not to trace over a different set of concepts which equally tame and frame the bee. Putting Deleuze in contact with this event enables something new to emerge. This is not to use bee as order-word, even as pass-word. Instead this is to open an interval where the bee event, Phoebe, the adults, the paper and pencils and other children and objects, the entire cacophony of the early childhood setting, much of which goes unrecorded in research (Somerville, 2015), might connect for mutual affect and a reciprocal becoming.

To do so, it is necessary to imagine a gap or interval of indeterminacy in which all parts shed off their fixed forms, dissipating form to become a fine mist of actualised and virtual components, and where boundaries between parts become permeable, so that components may pass through from one form-mist to another. This is abstraction, breaking up, dissolving, deterritorializing - then merging, connecting, forming links, reterritorializing. Perhaps, too, a “practice of estrangement” (Lenz-Taguchi, 2016, p. 45) is needed to move beyond habitual order-word. In the entanglement of a multitude of simultaneous transformations and becomings, there might arise “transversal flashes and disruptions” (Ringrose, 2015, p. 406) that enable the familiar to be seen anew. What would it

have meant for P, J, and PR to form different assemblages with the bee and P's drawing? With inspiration of Deleuzian philosophy-becoming-pedagogy, I attempt to engage bee and the drawing in a gap of indeterminacy.

What components have we here?

Bee is fur and hair, legs and pollen, sacs and wings, sting and antennae, flight and buzz.

Paper is flat, smooth, inscribable. Pencil is friction, mark, trail.

Uncoupling, recoupling.

What if bee were to reassemble, hair on top of eyes, legs attached to wings? Could bee become monstrous? Could paper transform bee, pieces stuck to his body, fragments enveloping him? Could paper dress bee up? Could pencil trail bee, or create a path for bee, trace a bee passage? Can bee slide across paper, with what pollen trails?

Exchanging, elongating, elevating.

Bee, see, me, we. We see bee see me. Rearrange. Eeb. Em. Ew. What to do with E? A sprint of eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee around a playground. Does that buzz for you? Can you make E buzz?

Sacs exchanged for saddlebags, bee a buzzing locomotive, or a soft saddle to ride upon. And who will ride him?

Is it bee order-word or bee re-ordered? Could order-words buzz rather than articulate? What friction might they create? What disruption, what potentiality in nonsense?

Is this helping us to see bee differently yet, that is, to see bee outside of the logic of science and classification and honey production?

The play is expansive, connections upon connections upon connections. Not confined to words, images, emotions and sounds too are productive. In this generative confusion, we seek just the tiniest sliver or flash of potential, a tiny crack through which components squeeze and then take off on new, previously-unimagined trajectories, embodying different forms along the way. Beyond the regulated discourse mandated by the order-word, we might stumble across "an indeterminate in-between-ness of sensations, feelings, thoughts, gestures, and things that cannot be forced into any category; we find excruciatingly small gaps in which we may insert an impossible question, an aporia through which to escape to new becomings" (Roy, 2003, p. 130).

Conclusion

When life in early childhood settings is thought about and discussed in terms of predetermined ideas about how children are supposed to behave, use objects, speak, be and become in early childhood settings, language then becomes a tool or system that mediates and regulates becomings. This paper has explored the use of language for the progressive standardisation of thought and action in becomings, while also considering how language might be re-performed with a view to enhance creative capacity rather than the reproduction of knowledge facts. The strategies put forward here seek to encourage readers to explore playful connections between the words they use in teaching and learning in early childhood education, which are expansive of the possibilities of expression afforded the bodies of early childhood settings.

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