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Towards a migratory film aesthetic – The interviewer's bodily discomfort as aesthetic key moment.

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The following paper has developed out of my work as postdoctoral researcher on a research project called '*Researching Multilingually at the Borders of Language, the Body, Law and the State*', a project that is – broadly speaking - concerned with the various ethical, methodological and aesthetic implications that result from researching in multilingual contexts, especially when bodies and languages are politically, psychologically and pedagogically 'under pressure'.

My first job as postdoc located in what is called the *Creative Arts and Translating Cultures Hub* of the *Researching Multilingually Project*, involved the production of an 11 min., short promotional film. The film, entitled *Speaking your language*, was produced as a promotional, public engagement tool for the research project's public launch event in May 2014 in Glasgow, UK. It can be found on the project's homepage. Here is a link to the film:

<https://vimeo.com/96840216>

My focus for this paper is on my feeling of bodily discomfort as the interviewer for this film, at the moment when I asked interviewees to switch from speaking in English to speaking in their chosen, spoken language. The sensation of bodily discomfort was caused by my inability to interact in my conversation partners' chosen languages. Here, I explore the ethical and artistic consequences that resulted from this experience of being linguistically out of control and feeling 'uncomfortable' during film interview. The effects of my linguistic incompetence

(as Phipps 2013 calls it) on the actual making of the *Speaking your language* film, is theoretically framed by Mieke Bal's (2007) Migratory Aesthetic and Sara Ahmed's notion of Hearing-as-Touch (2000).

My paper is organised in three points:

1. Firstly, I define Mieke Bal's (2007) term 'Migratory Aesthetics' and Sarah Ahmed's (2000) notion of 'Hearing-as-Touch' and give an example of their manifestations in filmmaking practice, through Bal's (2005) example of making the film *Lost in Space*.
2. Secondly, I use the key terms migratory aesthetic and hearing-as-touch to frame my own experience of linguistic incompetence when interviewing for *Speaking your language*, and analyse the ethical and artistic decisions it entailed.
3. In my third and final point I reflect on the place and potential of filmmaking for a multilingually conceived research practice that places migratory aesthetic - and with that people's languages practices - at its methodological heart.

My first point: The key terminology and its application in filmmaking practice

The first Key term: Migratory aesthetics.

Bal writes, "*Migratory aesthetic is a non-concept, a ground for experimentation that opens up possible relations with the 'migratory', rather than pinpointing such relations*" (Bal 2007 a, 23).

Migratory aesthetic is not a concept, that is an abstraction or generalization from the experience of migration, but is rather described as a space of experimentation in itself; one where an aesthetic is conceived and shaped through the various manifestations of contemporary, migratory experiences (ibid, 23f). Within this experimental space of migratory

aesthetics, the distinction between the act of making an aesthetic 'as form' and the experience of migration 'as content' collapses. Form, in my case the (technical) production phases and end product of a film and the content - people's relationships to their languages - are interdependent.

Working from a migratory aesthetic in the context of the *Speaking your language* film production thus meant to be open to people's language practices as manifestations of their migratory experiences and how these might guide and shape ensuing methodological and artistic decisions during filmmaking. In other words and to quote Bal again:

"What makes an aesthetic is the sentient encounter with subjects involved" (Bal 2007, 26)

The second Key term: Hearing-as-touch

The notion of Hearing-as-touch might be seen as a mode of engagement that manifests within migratory aesthetic; a hearing-as-touch encounter might result in specific methodological and artistic considerations and responses that have to take into account the sensory and non-verbal dimensions of communication in general, and of multilingual encounters in particular.

Sarah Ahmed (2000) writes,

"To think of hearing as touch is to consider that being open to hearing might not be a matter of listening to the other's voice: what moves (between) subjects, and hence what fails to move, might precisely be that which cannot be presented in the register of speech."

(Ahmed 2000, 156)

Hearing-as-touch is described by Ahmed as a form of hearing between subjects that allows a questioning of the assumption that communication is about straightforward linguistic exchange and transparency of meaning in the first place. Hearing as touch might draw attention to the fact that communication in all its complexity, especially during multilingual

encounters, can manifest in sensory ways other than auditory perception. Those breaks, breakdowns and silences in communication hint at the unsaid, the misunderstood and the inarticulable stories beyond the spoken words, but also at the communicative flows that moved well. These breaks and flows in communication might then manifest as what Appadurai (2003) calls 'private sources of confidence': random flashes, epiphanies, and I might add other bodily sensations', such as bodily discomfort or even more concretely, as in my case, a rigid body posture.

Let me give an example of Migratory aesthetics and hearing-as-touch during an interview situation by the example of Mieke Bal's and Entekhabi's film *Lost in Space* (from 2005). I will analyse my own filmmaking practice through the same lens of Migratory Aesthetic and Hearing-as-Touch.

Lost in Space is a 17 min. long colour film that presents statements on the 'triple notion of home, security and borders' (Bal 2007b, 111) by people who have been themselves geographically and linguistically displaced. Video artist Mieke Bal describes her own experience of linguistic incompetence when encountering her interviewee's, to her, unfamiliar languages and explains how linguistic incompetence shaped her artistic decisions as filmmaker.

When interviewing Daryush, a Farsi and Greek speaking, 32 year old man who had been an asylum seeker for half his life, Bal struggles to sustain the linguistic flow of the situation despite Daryush's eagerness to speak and be interviewed. Interviewer and interviewee have no language in common and English and French as the lingua franca of necessity are slow and limited. When asked what he most misses about being away from home, Daryush falls into 'a frantic expression of the incapacity to speak - most desirous to speak, most incapacitated by

the foreignness of the language we were using' (Bal 2007, 112). When Bal encourages him to speak in Farsi he bursts into self-expression.

Bal describes her experience of linguistic incompetence during interview, when listening to Daryush as a moment of communicative loss but also as a moment where their communication was transformed into, what Ahmed might describe as a hearing-as-touch encounter. Although Bal can't linguistically decode Daryush's words, she is able to tell from his body language and facial expressions that he speaks about something meaningful to him. Touched by the words she can't understand, Bal takes Daryush hands and he hugs her with tears in his eyes. Their mutual experience of linguistic incompetence has led to a hearing-as-touch encounter. Within the breakdown of communication, they (quite literally) reached out in the face of the out-of-placeness of their migratory bodies and languages. The transformation from a loss of language to a conscious act of re-establishing human connection through other non-verbal means (reaching out, hugging as an example) takes place in the experimental space of migratory aesthetics. Here, Daryush's self-expression gains relevance over their interviewer's ability to decode and instantly translate Daryush's moment of venting Farsi. The aesthetic of the film interview is shaped by the interviewer's and interviewee's in-situ improvisations and negotiations of how an ethical, or what Bal calls 'sentient' encounter might take place in the face of out-of-placeness, language loss and linguistic incompetence. The interview content (Daryush's Farsi outburst) has shaped the form of the interview. Form and content of the interview have collapsed into a migratory aesthetic. What Daryush most missed about home, as Bal's translation later reveals, was speaking his language. Asserting his right to speak in his chosen language, and NOT to be

translated instantly, resulted in a hearing-as-touch-encounter between interviewer and interviewee: a hug, tears, the taking of hands.

I explained how hearing-as-touch and migratory aesthetic manifested in Mieke Bal's filmmaking practice. Now, the question poses itself: how did they manifest in my filmmaking practice when producing *Speaking your language* for our research project launch in May last year?

This leads me to my second point: Let me now use the key terms migratory aesthetic and hearing-as-touch to frame my own experience of linguistic incompetence when interviewing for *Speaking your language*, and analyse the ethical and artistic decisions it entailed.

Speaking your language is a short, reflective documentary piece which explores people's personal connection to their spoken languages through interviewees' multilingual songs, spoken welcomes and their reflections on notions of home as well as the sensory quality of their languages. Interviewees consisted of twenty multilingual staff and students from across all disciplines at the University of Glasgow. They were all volunteers who had responded to my university-wide email invitation for a film-based interview. The interviews took place on two days and were conducted mainly in English, and partly in interviewees' respective languages. Interviewees reflected on the relationship to their languages in English first and then repeated some of these reflections in their chosen, spoken language. This short excerpt from the final film will give you an idea of the multilingual interview dynamic.

Interviewees sang in Gaelic and Maori and as bell hooks says words 'hurtled, flew and sang' through the room in a way that had a physical, discomforting effect on me as the interviewer.

When exposed to those new language rhythms out of my already linguistically limited comfort zone , my body literally stiffened.

I am a bilingual German-English speaker and trained as a language teacher. I value language learning as a deeply enriching, human activity and am normally not afraid of facing my own linguistic incompetence or making a fool of myself when trying to learn new words. In the face of this interview situation however, my values and knowledge didn't seem to easily translate into a form of bodily comfort when sitting and listening to this vast array of (for me) new sounds. As the interviewer and researcher in the room, I felt out of control. I couldn't interview people in their own language. I wasn't able to 'usefully' steer the conversational flows with the film's narrative structure (and the editing stage) in mind. In my role as film interviewer, a role normally imbued with power over the conversational flows of the interview situation, I had lost control.

Unable to fully decode the unfamiliar words that 'hurtled' towards me, although they sometimes only constituted a repetition of things that were already said in English, I was rigid in my seat and feeling physically uncomfortable at not being able to linguistically connect. My communicative awkwardness and linguistic loss was mirrored in my feeling of bodily discomfort; it produced the physical manifestation of a rigid body posture. Hearing these new language sounds had become a form of hearing-as-touch that I was able to internally locate in my body. My tummy felt squeezy, my body felt awkward, I uncomfortably sat in my seat, smiling (probably awkwardly) at interviewees. What had linguistically 'failed to move' (Ahmed 2000) between myself and my interviewees manifested instead non-verbally, in the bodily sensation of discomfort. My discomfort however was not the endpoint of communication. It required my conscious decision to accept being linguistically out of control of the interview

situation. And it required the decision to listen beyond the register of speech, in the face of my linguistic discomfort.

The physically manifested experience of linguistic incompetence points towards the ways in which hearing new words and language rhythms can touch a person to a degree that might be experienced physically, in a form of bodily sensation. The moment of being touched by unfamiliar language sounds, led to a physical manifestation of bodily discomfort. This forced me to face my linguistic incompetence and make a conscious decision to listen beyond the register of speech, as an act of valuing people's spoken languages. The moment of incompetence and discomfort led to self-reflection and, by the nature of filmmaking, the need for artistic concrete action.

What ethical and artistic decisions did then concretely ensue from facing my bodily discomfort and the linguistic incompetence underlying it? First, I made a practical and an ethical decision. I had to consciously relax my body and accept being linguistically out of control. Rather than feeling threatened by my linguistic loss I decided to reconsider the interview situation not as an act of straight linguistic transfer and transparency of meaning but as a hearing-as-touch encounter. I adapted my listening habit to hear the embodied aspects of people's languages and focussed on the language's rhythm, melody, people's intonation, body posture and facial expression. My body started to relax and I was able to open myself again to the here and now of the interview encounter.

My decision to listen as a form of touch and beyond speech also had an effect on how the film was edited. How did my hearing-as-touch encounter influence artistic decisions during the post-production phase?

The aesthetic key moment for the production was the hearing-as-touch encounter during interview, which resulted in an overall shift onto the 'artful' aspects of multilingual expression (rhythms, melody, facial expressions). This shift onto the artfulness of language involved the recognition that the embodied elements of communication (rhythms, melodies, facial expression) had the power to carry communication and enable human connection beyond transparent, linguistic exchange. The final edit of the film artistically acknowledges this embodied power of people's spoken languages through what might be described as a hearing-as-touch aesthetic. Scenes open with multilingual speech and with multilingual song. This puts languages' embodied aesthetics before an audiences' need for instant linguistic clarification in a lingua franca, that is (in our case) English.

Conclusion

I contend that the final film *Speaking your language* that evolved out of interviewing and editing as imaginative acts then inhabits the place of migratory aesthetic. Our filmmaking, from production to post-production, was shaped through what Bal calls the 'sentient encounter with subjects involved' (Bal 2007a, 26), which resulted in concrete artistic decisions that impacted the film's aesthetic. At the same time however, this was not a pure movement from content to form, where people's manifested migratory experiences, through their spoken languages, 'touched' the interviewer and shaped the interview and final aesthetic of the film. The materiality of our film, located within conflicting, language-related objectives, and produced as a public engagement tool *and* celebration of multilingualism, equally intervened in the content it carried. The film's dominant language is still English; as filmmakers we didn't reject institutional language expectations wholesale. The film, with

English as its main language, was screened at *our Researching Multilingually* project launch in May 2014 in Scotland, UK, to our interviewees and the launch audience. As such, the film *functions* within academic language expectations and doesn't fully artistically force back the 'linguistic imperialism' associated with the global, English language dominance in the academy. At the same time however, the film *ruptures* these language expectations by carving out a researcher praxis and film aesthetic that is shaped through multilingual encounters and manifested, migratory experiences. Our film production can thus be considered to work from an in-between position which *functions* within, as well as *ruptures* institutional language expectations. Within the film's 'contested' migratory film aesthetic, there is however no 'pure' multilingual voice emerging. It is a tentative, multilingual voice, rooted in the researcher's attempts to map and navigate the concrete possibilities and challenges of working multilingually during a film production about people's personal connection to their languages.