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Messy creativity

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> *"We need to make sure they understand the difference between a weapon and a tool. Language is messy, and sometimes, one can be both."*
>
> Dr. Louise Banks, Fictional Linguist in *Arrival*

In the science fiction movie *Arrival* (2016), linguist Louise Bank along with the rest of humanity find themselves in a bit of a mess. Twelve spacecraft containing aliens with messy amphibious bodies who speak an unintelligible language expressed through drawing stain-like circles in the air with black smoke have landed in twelve different countries on earth. Banks is charged with making sense of their language in order to discover why they have come. The biggest obstacle to this task, however, proves not to be the aliens, but the inherent messiness of language itself, with its maddening ambiguities and inconsistencies, as well as the messiness of human social systems that stand in the way of the different countries involved cooperating to solve the puzzle. In the end Banks learns that the task of understanding what the aliens want requires more than just linguistic analysis; it also requires intuition and premonition and no small amount of rule-breaking.

The reason I begin with this reference to popular culture in considering the studies of linguistic creativity published in this special issue is that it aptly illustrates the main problem we encounter when we try to analyse linguistic creativity—the fact that both language and creativity are ultimately 'messy', and most of the tools we linguists have at our disposal are designed to detect orderly patterns rather than to confront messiness. As a result of this, many previous studies of linguistic creativity have focused more on the surface intricacies of creative language rather than the messy underbelly of contradictions, contingency, and indeterminacy that these papers attempt to confront. When I speak of the 'messiness' of linguistic creativity, it is not my intention to rehearse romantic notions of the creative artist as someone who is able to 'create order out of chaos' (which is, after all, more about 'neatness' than it is about 'messiness'), nor to explore more everyday observations about 'creative people' leading 'messy lives' (Roiphe, 2012) or having 'messy desks' (Vohs, 2013). Rather, I would like to highlight the aspects of 'messy creativity' that are apparent in the articles in this issue, the 'noisy', 'dislocated', even 'unintelligible' quality of some linguistic creativity, and the way it sometimes brings chaos out of order rather than the other way around.

It might be that linguistic creativity has always been messy, but there is a real sense in this collection of essays that much of the creativity in these examples arises out of the cauldron of globalisation, inequality, conflict, and the dizzying developments in communication technologies which have brought about what Sommer (2004) (cited by Pratt) calls 'invigorating combinations of beauty and fear, pleasure and unpleasure, certainty and risk, comprehension and incomprehension.' It is a kind of creativity that shakes us out of our comfortable assumptions about the way applied linguistics ought to be carried out, and challenges us to develop 'messy' methods to confront this messy creativity, methods that go beyond trying to 'make sense' of it through traditional conceptual categories and attempt to approach it from the less traditional perspectives of *embodiment* and *entanglement*, *affect* and *action*.

One messy thing about the linguistic creativity revealed in these papers is that it does not fit so easily into the categories we have developed to talk about either creativity or language. To say something is 'creative' is, above all, to make a value judgement, and the value we assign to something by calling it 'creative' is not just a judgement about its formal qualities or the relative skill it took to make it. It's a judgement about its social worth, about its place within a particular moral universe. In the moral universe that dominates most Western conceptions of creativity, it is invariably associated with ideas like progress, invention, freedom

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and liberation, an ideological construction of creativity bequeathed to us partly from Enlightenment notions of the individual creative genius as the driver of human progress, and partly from Romantic notions of creativity as the path to transcendence and spiritual fulfilment. That's why it's slightly jolting to encounter the sometimes regressive examples of creativity presented here. They are instances of creativity that are either too 'nasty' – like the 'weaponised' racist and homophobic language produced by the rappers that are the subject of Alim, Lee, Mason and Williams's contribution or the scatological slurs of the schoolchildren analysed by Cekaite – too 'noisy' – like the 'incomprehensible' utterances described by Storch, which 'hurl ruined order before our feet' – or too 'normal' – like the buttoned down tweets about cricket and weather presented by Gillian, the 'concentrated markers of conformity' offered up by the undocumented immigrants analysed by Pratt, or the creatively 'conventional' language exhibited in the digital writing of South African university students analysed by Deumert. So the first thing that is 'messy' about these instances of creativity is that they 'mess with' our 'semiotic ideologies that construct certain actions as creative' and our 'social ideologies that project some contexts and actions as … extraordinary and noteworthy' (Deumert this issue). This is a creativity that is often neither progressive nor liberating, sometimes not even particularly 'inventive' in the usual sense of the world. It doesn't bring 'order out of chaos'; rather it rubs our faces in the contradictions of contemporary life and the inadequacy of our bourgeois, overly-intellectual ideas about what constitutes the 'creative'.

Another aspect of messiness apparent in these examples of linguistic creativity is the way they 'mess with' our traditional ideas about language, compelling us to engage with the 'messy interpenetrations and switchings and embeddings and decouplings' (White, 1992: 341) that have come to characterise the 'messy linguistic marketplaces' (Blommaert, 2010) of our fragmented yet interconnected world. Although linguists have long admitted to the messiness of language, their response has always seemed to be to develop tools and concepts to make that messiness seem neat. Even the words we use to describe hybridity, such as code mixing, and the more recent translanguaging, imply more or less orderly, deliberative processes. In the papers in the special issue, such words are replaced with messier, more transgressive terms like code-entanglement, script fusing, enmeshment and infiltration, metaphors which more accurately capture the messy interactions of codes and meanings which characterise many of the examples of linguistic creativity represented here. Even more unsettling is the decoupling of code from meaning altogether that we see in the examples of 'noisy creativity' given by Storch, in which utterances derive their power not from meaning but from unintelligibility. But a stubborn refusal to cooperate with conventional ideas of syntax and semantics to some degree characterises almost all of the examples we see here. As Deumert puts it, 'in engaging with language creatively, speakers and writers regularly go beyond the symbolic, the conventional and the referential,' and so, as analysts, we must be willing to do so as well, seeking out ways to 'explore signs as invested with emotion and affect, not simply describing the world, but also expressing our relation to it.'

Taken as a whole, then, what the papers in this issue argue for is the development of a new set of 'messy methods' for understanding linguistic creativity, ways of looking at linguistic creativity that move our attention away from abstract words produced in abstract spaces to an understanding of creativity as a matter of messy assemblages of language, bodies, intentions, emotions, rules, and transgressions.

In his book, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*, the sociologist John Law (2004:2) argues that 'when social science tries to describe things that are complex, diffuse and messy … it tends to make a mess of it.' He offers four possibilities for the development of methods for 'knowing mess' which, interestingly, articulate with the very orientations suggested by the authors of these papers: 1) knowing as *embodiment*, 2) knowing as *emotionality* or apprehension (or, as the authors in these pages put it, knowing as *affect* and *aesthetics*), 3) knowing through techniques of deliberate *imprecision*, and 4) knowing through *situated* inquiry. All of these forms of knowing, he points out, involve a kind of 're-knowing' of ourselves as scholars, and a rethinking of 'our relations with whatever it is we know, and … how far the process of knowing it also brings it into being' (Law, 2004:3).

One thing that makes these studies of linguistic creativity unique is the extent to which the authors focus their attention on the ways linguistic creativity is *embodied*. Most of the work on linguistic creativity to date has, not surprisingly, focused primarily on language, without sufficient attention to the bodies that produce it and the bodies that hear it. In many of the contributions in this issue, however, the embodied nature of linguistic creativity is front and centre. An important aspect of the verbal duels described by Alim, Lee, Masin and Williams, for example, is the way performers make use of 'gestures, facial expressions, and bodily comportment' as semiotic weapons. Similarly, Cekaite observes how the everyday linguistic play of children cannot be understood through the analysis of language alone, but also requires attention to 'embodied actions, gestures, gaze, laughter, smiles, and repetitions, configured within embodied participation frameworks.' Even the disembodied digitally mediated performances described by Gillian and Deumert call attention to the body through its absence or, more accurately, its *displacement* (see below). Bodies can serve as carriers of loneliness, rage, despair, and ecstasy in ways that language never can. Bodies can at one moment be the source of intelligible speech, and at the next moment be the source of noise and confusion. They can prop up what we say, or contradict it, as in the anecdote in Pratt's paper about the street corner altercation in which participants say one thing and do another. But verbal creativity does not just emanate from 'messy bodies'; it also creates them, in the form of the overtly racialized figures of Alim, Lee, Mason and Williams's rappers, whose bodily features are used as weapons against them, or in the feminized male body described by the term 'hole of your father', which, as Storch argues, does not just invoke an 'unwanted and dangerous' body, but also disrupts the patriarchal order of the social body. The performance and representation of bodies in discourse is always about more than constructing physical forms; it is about, as Alim, Lee, Mason and Williams remind us, creating, maintaining, or subverting *social categories* such as those of gender, race, ethnicity, class and national origin. In other words, we use the body as a creative resource, and at the same time create (and destroy) those very same bodies in our social interaction.

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