

21. The Child's Claim to the Transmission of Language

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Sandra Laugier describes Stanley Cavell's contribution to philosophy as the bringing back of the human voice into central consideration: "For Cavell, the stakes of ordinary language philosophy (particularly Wittgenstein's and Austin's work) are to make it understood that language is spoken; pronounced by a human voice within a form of life."¹ How can I then express my own voice when all of my expressions are those of others? In other words, how is it that a child becomes part of her or his form of life? How does she or he claim her or his own voice? Presenting the transmission of language this way implies another way of seeing what language is, what learning language is, and finally what subjectivity in language is.

The Claim of Linguistics

Linguistics, born with Saussure, has not much to say about childhood and has traditionally left the study of language acquisition to the psycholinguistic. In my book *Des jeux de langage chez l'enfant*, I review the state of affairs by showing a relationship between Saussure, Wittgenstein, Cavell and the study of ordinary language that initiates, let's say briefly, a modern view on language at the end of the nineteenth century.

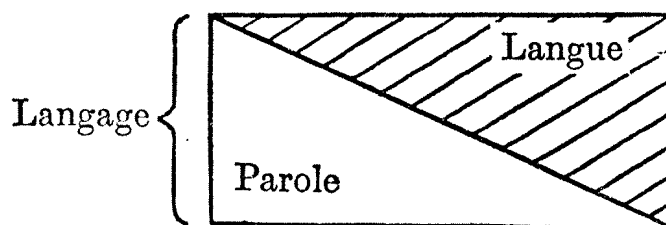
If we look for mentions of words like "child" or "language learning" in Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*, we would not find anything. Childhood seems indeed to be totally absent from the book that gave birth to linguistics. The refusal of

1. Sandra Laugier, "Voice as Form of life and Life form," in *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 4 (Helsinki: Nordic Wittgenstein Society, 2015), 63-82.

a diachronic point of view on language by Saussure seems to discard any interest in language learning. But if we take a closer look at his thoughts, it would appear not to be the case. It is in fact quite the opposite: the transmission of language will turn out to be a central insight of his linguistics.

At a conference in 1891, Saussure avoided defining languages as objects. He prefers to give some principles that will determine a point of view. The first principle lies in the fact that languages present continuity and transformation through time and space. In other words, languages are stable and unstable; they vary historically as well as geographically. These two facts are correlated, and the first task of linguistics is to take the infinite variations of languages into account and to recognize that: “By themselves, they are unperishable. It means that there is no reason their transmission stops due to a cause depending on their proper organization” (« *En elle-même elle est impérissable, c'est-à-dire qu'il n'y a aucune raison pour que sa transmission s'arrête pour une cause tenant à l'organisation de cette langue.* »).²

This enduring feature of language doesn't depend on an individual's will but relies on the “speaking mass,” on the approval of the collectivity: “Languages are inevitably social, language not inevitably. The language cannot exist without languages. Likewise languages imply the existence of a faculty of language” (« *La langue est forcément sociale, le langage pas forcément. Le langage ne saurait exister sans la langue. De même la langue suppose l'existence de faculté du langage.* »).³ Saussure illustrates the relations between language, languages, and speech by this diagram:



To complete this picture of Saussure's thought we can add that language can only be observed in individual speech acts with at least two people involved. In these remarks, I focus on this intermediate zone of language where languages are transmitted and ask myself what precise role the child plays in this process.

2. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Ecrits de linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 154.

3. Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Wiesbaden: O'Harrassowitz, 1967), 31.

By reading a key scene of instruction in Stanley Cavell's *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (2010), I will interrogate this intermediate space in terms of a "linking of generations." This transmission has something to do with comprehension between generations; in that double meaning, children and adults understand and comprise or acknowledge each other (in French, the word *comprendre* can have these two meanings). This agreement between generations—this social contract, in a way—is described by Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*: "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?—It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life. If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments. [...]" (*"Richtig und falsch ist, was Menschen sagen; und in der Sprache stimmen die Menschen überein. Das ist keine Übereinstimmung der Meinung, sondern der Lebensform. Zur Verständigung durch die Sprache gehört nicht nur eine Übereinstimmung in den Definitionen, sondern (so seltsam das klingen mag) eine Übereinstimmung in den Urteilen."*)⁴ The English version of the *Philosophical Investigations* translates *Übereinstimmung* as "agreement." This translation put too much emphasis on discourse depriving the vocal part of our attunement in language that involves voices, screams, claims, and silences.

The Child's Claim

A perfect place to hear the child's voice without too much distortion (caused by adults) are schoolyards. To do so, I will now refer to a video I recorded a long time ago in Lausanne showing the schoolyard of a daycare, which looks after children from five to ten years old—in these moments between school and home. Kids do their homework and then play inside or outside.

In the first video, a girl called Sarah engages in a ball game, the aim of which is to make the others sit by hitting them. The game becomes so loud and the game turn

4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Recherches philosophiques*, trans. F. Dastur and E. Rigal (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), §241-42.

so brutal that an educator gets involved.⁵ The first thing to mention is the moment when you remove the adults from the children's world. Relations between children don't become more equal but, in this example, more brutal. Some children appear to be more childish than the others and certain voices tend to cover the others. Without grown-ups, there is still younger and older and our ways of contrasting grown-ups and children is a hard-line approach of this form of life. The second thing to mention is that some children are unable to follow rules. For example, Sarah pretending that if the ball touches the head, it doesn't count as a hit. Other children point her out as a cheater to the intervening educator.

In a second video, the educator speaks directly to Sarah. She tries to draw the attention of the girl pointing a threatening index finger at her, telling her she has to follow rules or do something else. The girl steps back, arguing that the one that chooses the game is the one that commands, pointing her finger at the educator. The adult then bends down to be at her height and tells her: "It is not because you chose the game that you have to command. There's nobody giving orders, the rules apply to everybody the same."⁶

Is the child's claim not bringing out a paradox here? Is there not a contradiction in setting the game while giving orders with a finger up and claiming at the same time that there's nobody ruling the game? Isn't the child right saying that the one that sets the game is the one that commands the game?

The third video takes place half an hour later. The children have tried to play but they don't really succeed to set the game. They start a lot of matches that quickly dissolve in unruled actions. The game ends when Sarah asks the educator for help. She gathers together the children of the yard to help them in their will to play. This desire is part of the game; it doesn't give any reason for one to obey rules. The question should then be reformulated: what if I don't follow the rules of a game? The issue is now set in terms of my need to follow rules. This type of necessity will show up in the next video, where Sarah continues to argue the rules while wishing to play. She still has something to add to what the educator says, and again the adult doesn't let her speak, leaving her no other option than to be part of the game or do something

5. To access the video, visit: <http://av.unil.ch/hva/3447/v1-s1.mp4>.

6 To access the video, visit: <http://av.unil.ch/hva/3447/v1-s2.mp4>.

else.⁷ The one that formulates the rules dictates the rules and the child is required to keep silent. The child's claim is denied. I defended this idea in a paper from 2011, but I now have to confess that I totally missed the point.

In fact, in the first extract, the educator commands, but not for herself: "Nobody commands, Sarah, you play with the others, everybody with the same rules." The rules are a tool for a collective action. In the second place, when Sarah say "No, no, I'm the one that commands the game, because I'm the one who chose it." The educator takes Sarah's claim deeply into account: she first stands in an upright position and then bends down from her grown-up stance to face Sarah at her level. The educator has a democratic manner of seeing the rules: they apply the same to everybody. She also gives a special attention to Sarah. I was later told that Sarah was suffering ADHD.

When asked if the educator will play, she clearly answers "No," and adds that she will referee. The referee is part of the game but doesn't play. This figure of mediation is very important in the process of transmission because they represent the interface between the authority of the rules and the normativity of the rules, a difference noted by Descombes in *Le Complément du sujet* (2004). In setting the rules with authority, the educator enables the child to express her real needs: "I do play" claims the child when asked if she wants to play or not. She obeys the rules by necessity and not by obedience. The rules are not imposed on her by elders. She agrees to follow the rules because it meets her real need to be part of the game.

If we take a closer look at the scene engaging the girl and the educator, two phases have to be distinguished. In the first move, the educator calls out to Sarah in a stance with her finger demanding her to follow the rule. The child steps back and makes a claim. The voice of the adult covers the voice of the child. To find a term for the discussion, the taller person says "Do you hear me?"—that sounds like an order to silence. The child's voice is not being heard. In the second move, the educator gets closer to the child, squats down below the child's head, takes her hands and explains to her that the rules apply equally to every player. The grow-up holds a conversation at the child's level. Does the child learn the collective force of the rules? Impossible to know at this stage. Nevertheless, two conceptions of learning rules show up in Veena

7. To access the video, visit: <http://av.unil.ch/hva/3447/v1-s3.mp4>.

Das words: first, by reference to Kripke's note about the educator who "simply stands in for the authority of the community," and second, a remark by Cavell, where the educator shows "a gesture of waiting" and positions herself where the child stands:

Saul Kripke's (1982) view of the skeptical question as to how can we know when a child has learned something (e.g. to read) is to assert that we simply accept that learning has occurred when the child's response is similar to that of the community—the teacher then simply stands in for the authority of the community. For Cavell (1990, 70), there is an air of violence in this solution to the skeptical problematic, and he takes Wittgenstein's "My spade is turned, this is just what I do" to suggest instead a gesture of waiting. I want to think of an added dimension to this waiting. It is not only that the realization that justifications must come to an end somewhere when accompanied with a gesture of waiting will enable the child to learn, but also that the teacher might find that a different aspect of "knowing" may dawn upon her as the child plays with different possibilities.⁸

The Linking of the Generations

To spread a light on the transmission of language, I will now bring into focus the relation between the child and the adult, and the role of the child's claim in the comprehension between generations. I will exemplify it with a scene of instruction in *Little Did I Know*:

When the rabbi at my mother's graveside dismissed the company of several dozen people in attendance [...] Ben refused to leave. As I took his hand he insisted that, "The coffin is still here." I replied that since Rabbi Epstein had dismissed us he must have his reasons. Ben could not be moved. He and I and the rabbi, and two workmen were the only ones left by the grave. I glanced at

8. Veena Das, "Adjacent Thinking: A Postscript," in Roma Chatterji, *Wording the World: Veena Das and Scenes of Inheritance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 377-78.

the rabbi, who motioned to me to remain. “The child is right. The service is not over, but we have fallen into the custom of those in attendance as we lower the coffin and cover it with earth.” This admired and distinguished old man had begun walking around to us on the other side of the open grave, and pulling a shovel from the place it had been stabbed into a neat pile of soil, invited Ben to put his small hands on the shovel’s handle between the rabbi’s large hands. Thus enabled to assist one another in wielding the large implement, they repeatedly, as the coffin was lowered, together sent small clumpy showers of earth down surprisingly softly tapping upon the coffin’s lid in accompaniment to the rabbi’s completing the chanting of his canonical prayers. Afterward, as Ben and I held hands to walk over and rejoin the withdrawn gathering of participants, I was, I suppose, undisguisedly, pent with uncomplicated yet mysterious elation at witnessing this inspired, lucid linking of generations before and beyond mine.”⁹

This scene is highly interesting for the understanding of language transmission because Cavell says he is witnessing an “inspired, lucid linking of generations.” The ceremony seems to have come to its end but Ben refuse to leave arguing “The coffin is still here.” His father tries to convince him that Rabbi Epstein has certainly good reasons to have dismissed those in attendance, so the child’s behavior is not unreasonable and his claim is not nonsense in relation to the custom. Here we can feel a kind of suspension of time in the narrative with Cavell looking questioningly at the rabbi and the two workmen, whose assistance is giving publicity to Ben’s stubbornness. The child’s voice is a dissonant voice in the sense Viktor Johansson defines it in his beautiful book *Dissonant Voices*:

Sometimes we just do not know how to go on with each other; we hear voices that we just do not know how to respond to, but that seem to compel us to respond. Sometimes we are that dissonant voice and whatever we do we cannot make sense to the people we live with. There are times when a voice seems to

9. Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 467-68.

play a different tune than is played by the voices of a seemingly harmonious practice. It is a pedagogical difficulty, but it is a pedagogical difficulty not only because those voices disrupt our teaching, or is part of my learning. Dissonant voices disrupt our natural reactions, ways of interacting that we take for granted, or as given. Dissonance in a sense disrupts our forms of life.¹⁰

The dimension of waiting in this episode appears in the gesture Rabbi Epstein addressed to Stanley Cavell as Ben refuses to leave the edge of the grave. The rabbi plays the role of the mediator between Stanley and Ben. His agreement with the child lies in the coincidence of judgements: “The child is right.” The nonsense of the child’s claim turns out to be highly sensible and creates a link between an old man and a child. Both of them hold a shovel pointing at the grave, with Cavell forced to watch the disappearance of the coffin containing his mother’s dead body. Cavell hears the earth drumming against the coffin’s lid. This is a cruel but meaningful scene for someone who considers the acknowledgment of separation as intrinsic to any acceptance of the limitedness of the human condition. On the edge of the grave, Cavell is surprised that the small clumpy showers of earth are tapping softly upon the coffin’s lid, as if he would have expected something, say, more brutal or more tragic.

This surprise sounds like a relief for Cavell, while Ben and Rabbi Epstein’s insistence, in making him endure the process of separation until its very final end, sounds like a lesson: we show you that you can bear this type of separation as something uncomplicated. The mystery lies in the comprehension that both Ben and Rabbi Epstein demonstrate by their lucid and inspired linking or, better say, attunement in language that includes Stanley Cavell before and beyond himself. The elation comes from the acknowledgment of the expressiveness of a father looking from above at the deep hole announces separation.

In “Time’s a Trickster,” Veena Das call this scene “the gift.” I understand it as a gift of a son to his father.¹¹ The claim of the child—“the coffin is still here”—allows the father to make himself known: his entire body is in full despair on the edge of the

10. Viktor Johansson, *Dissonant Voices : Philosophy, Children’s Literature, and Perfectionist Education* (Stockholm: Doctoral Thesis in Educational Science, 2013), 20.

11. Veena Das, “Time is a Trickster and Other Fleeting Thoughts on Cavell, His Life, His Work,” in *MLN* 126, no. 5 (2011): 943-53.

grave. He contemplates his mother disappearing under the earth, thrown by the wavering hands of a little child and an old man with two expert workmen, looking on at the pair of them. A natural body goes down at the same time as the expressiveness of bodies manifest the life of language in a link between Ben and Rabbi Epstein.

To let yourself matter is to acknowledge not merely how it is with you, and hence to acknowledge that you want the other to care, at least to care to know. It is equally to acknowledge that your expressions in fact express you, that they are yours, that you are in them. This means allowing yourself to be comprehended, something you can always deny. Not to deny it is, I would like to say, to acknowledge your body, and the body of your expressions, to be yours, you on earth, all there will ever be of you.¹²

The scene at the grave is an inverse instruction scene where the adult comes to learn something from the child through the mediation of another adult. The adult's uncomplicated elation is nothing mysterious: it is the joy that is provided by an understanding of a witty remark such as "the coffin is still here." Wittgenstein highlights that "The game, I would like to say, has not only rules but also a point" (*Das Spiel, möchte man sagen, hat nicht nur Regeln, sondern auch einen Witz*).¹³

The common view of death is a wrong point of view. When one stands at the edge of a grave, one can only see a pile of soil falling softly on a coffin's lid, and the dreaded moment of separation appears surprisingly ordinary. The spade of our questioning the world is turned, hitting bedrock, the hole of our search has to be filled up again by a shovel. The elation comes with the understanding that enables the learner to say, as in an instruction scene in the *Philosophical Investigations* —that he "knows how to go on."¹⁴ But Cavell doesn't continue alone on his path, a child holds his hand. A child that comprehended him so deeply that he is able to teach his father lessons. The linking of the generations is another expression for the transmission of language.

12. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 38.

13. Wittgenstein, *Recherches philosophiques*, §241-42.

14. Ibid.

I realize now that positioning the camera at a distance, overlooking the yard, gave me a disengaged view of the action. I filmed the schoolyard as if it was a field. Space tends to acquire too much importance and the human down there, in the hole formed by the yard, tends to be defined solely by places without faces. I endorsed Pierre Bourdieu's structuralism by defining from outside the dominant/dominated of the language game—the adult being the dominant and the child being the dominated. This view is one of a distant neighbor, not a participant of the language game. Neither the normativity nor the authority of the rules applies to this kind of observer, one who contemplates the schoolyard as a squared hole where the living world is about to be buried by objective science. The paradox—"that the one that chose the game is the one that commands it"—only appears at this disengaged height.

My Voice in Other's Ear, the Other's Voice in My Ear

Cavell comes to know himself through the eyes of his son watching him on the edge of a grave. We see ourselves in the reaction of others to what we do or say. In this case, of how one should reply to a remark as "the coffin is still here," Cavell's question "must we mean what we say?" could now be paired with the question "must we mean what we reply?"—giving us a more complete picture of the transmission of language:



This illustration of the speech circuit comes from a diagram that Saussure drew on the blackboard in his course of 1911. The meaning of what I say is located between my expression and what I perceive in the other's reaction to it, but also in this intermediate space between what the other asks and what I perceived of my answer. The other could indeed complain about my answer: "that's not what I was asking you."

My subjectivity lies in an intermediate space, *ein löchriger Raum*, *un espace troué*, as Sandra Laugier calls it—referring to Wittgenstein, in her paper of 2005 “*Le privé, l’intérieur et l’extérieur*.” The signs of languages are not dead signs as long as they circulate in the speech circuit. We could also express that idea in a more ordinary way by saying that signs live in living conversations where I come to know myself through a multiple holed space that lets light come through in an intimate flow, as described by Veena Das:

The obvious place to begin is by asking what it means to be in conversation with a younger generation whose future I will not be there to share, but which decisively defines the feel of my present. In this, a scene of some forms of resentment that one must feel as one contemplates one’s absence, I also discover what it is to abandon my words to these other lives, and hence find myself by abandoning myself to the trust of the intimate other.¹⁵

15. Veena Das, “Adjacent Thinking,” 377.