
‘Don’t you know how to speak English properly?’: language and writing in the production of a doctoral dissertation

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Abstract

In recent times, some research which includes student perspectives has been undertaken on understanding the relationship between language and writing. This paper aims to render more visible the perspective of a recent doctoral student on what still appears to be taken for granted in producing doctoral dissertations. Drawing selectively drawing on the work of Edward Said and Judith Butler, it is argued that the use of language and writing in relation to the production of doctoral dissertations is not neutral but, rather, is contoured performatively by different cultural norms and practices. In particular, language and writing are embodied discursive practices, shaped by the past and re-articulated in the present through which the present speaks back to the past. The paper begins with an anecdotal reflection on one memory of an experience that took place during the early years of my formal education prior to coming to Australia. The paper then reflects on and analyses three memories that capture some of my experiences with the English language and writing across the Australian education settings.

Introduction

Said (1985, p xv) suggests that ‘beginnings’ can consist of ‘something one does and ... something one thinks about’. While the two may not always go together, they are nevertheless ‘always necessarily connected when language is used’ (Said 1985, p xv). For Said, beginnings are crucial yet not always evident, embodying activities that imply ‘... return and repetition rather than a simple linear accomplishment ...’ (1985, p xvii). My aim in this article is indeed, to return to the past by rendering visible what it meant for me to write a doctoral thesis in the English language after having lived in Australia for almost 20 years. Drawing selectively drawing on the work of Edward Said and Judith Butler, it is argued that the use of language and writing in relation to the production of doctoral dissertations is not neutral but, rather, is contoured performatively by different cultural norms and practices. In particular, language and writing are embodied discursive practices, shaped by the

past and re-articulated in the present through which the present speaks back to the past. The paper begins with an anecdotal reflection on one memory of an experience that took place during the early years of my formal education prior to coming to Australia. The paper then reflects on and analyses three memories that capture some of my experiences with the English language and writing across Australian primary, secondary and tertiary education settings. These were 'beginnings' which directly influenced the writing of my doctoral dissertation. Each memory will build on to the next to articulate and re-articulate the contours of the argument.

To make sense of what it meant for me to write my doctoral dissertation, I draw on past memories and experiences. I take memory to be part of an active meaning-making process, intentional in use and capable of influencing the present (Passerini 1987). Memory is something which one interprets and reinterprets (Chanfrault-Duchet 1991; Koutroulis 1993; Radstone 2000; Schratz 1996). In a sense, memories are cultural activities of remembering through which we can 'inscribe past experiences in the present to facilitate future recall' (Dijck 2004, p 261). Remembering becomes temporal, moving 'forward in time in order to demonstrate a state of affairs' (Steedman 1987, p 20). The state of affairs this article illuminates is perhaps nothing new for those working with postgraduate students who write their dissertations in English as the second language: nor is the argument of the article novel since much research has been done on understanding the relationship between language and writing (e.g., Kamler & Thomson 2006; Lillis 2001; Richardson 1990; Richardson & St. Pierre 2005). However, what the paper illuminates is a student perspective from someone who considers retrospectively what it meant to write a thesis in an analytical manner. In doing so, my purpose is two fold. First, I want to show reflectively and reflexively how writing and language articulated the production of my thesis. Secondly, I want to show how writing a doctoral thesis did not simply 'happen' in isolation but instead, as Kamler and Thomson (2006, p 19) insist, was shaped by broader cultural, social and personal influences and discursive practices. It is important to make the student perspective explicit so that there is no taking for granted some of the less visible discursive practices and the views of students whose specific practices play a significant part in producing doctoral dissertations. The particularity of experiences adds another layer to understanding what is meant by the process of thesis writing and completion.

Functional

It's a grey, cheerless late November morning. Surprisingly, it's not raining. The wind, however, is another matter. It howls without mercy, cutting through all the layers of my attire as I approach my primary school, Szkoła Podstawowa number 62, im. Aleksandra Omieczynskiego in Szczecin, Poland. My school is a large, square, grey, three storey high building with large square windows. It's functional. It has to be. After all, it takes care of 800 students. My school looks particularly functional this morning with not a single leaf left on any of the bushes or trees surrounding the perimeter of the building. The time is just after 7.30 am and classes will begin in 30 minutes.

My classroom is located on the second level, right opposite one of the stairways. With very little regard for the fact that it's no longer warm outside, one of the school committees has decided to repaint the stairway walls overnight. To aid the drying process, the windows have been left open. My friends and I wait outside our

classroom, making quiet remarks about the circumstances. At the age of eight, most of us seem to understand the lack of insight behind this particular interior decorating decision. We remark on how the new colour is really no different to the one before. It's hard to identify it. It seems to be a combination of grey and beige. Very functional, indeed! In a way, the atmosphere the new colour creates suits the portraits of Stalin and Lenin hanging alongside other Communist figures on the hallway walls. For some reason, I prefer Lenin. I'm not sure why: probably because of the quiet adult conversations I wasn't meant to overhear.

As luck would have it – which by now seems to be rather diabolical – the door stops working soon after we enter our classroom to prepare for our teacher's arrival. It's impossible to close it. What's worse, it has to be taken off its hinges. The head janitor is called in. He tells us he will fix it later on. When our teacher arrives, she's less than impressed. She sends us downstairs in small groups to collect our warmer clothing. Wearing our coats, scarves, gloves and hats, we officially start the day. The first lesson is Polish and it's time for dictation. As our teacher dictates and as we sit at our desks writing, the wind moves swiftly throughout the classroom. The single, terribly outdated heater has no effect. All we can do is attend to our writing and steal glances at the clock above the blackboard. The sooner the day is over, the better.

In re-staging this experience as a point of entry to my argument, I must emphasise that this is *one* example of what it was like to be part of Poland's 1980s primary school system. Not all experiences were the same and, for the most part, the school I attended did not put its students through such unusual interior decorating exercises. I want to make visible in a slightly comical manner, one experience of learning how to write. The landscape of this experience is influenced by a particular geography, history and political system, configured through a language quite different from English. Yet, despite the differences and the passing of time, none of this can be made separate from being educated in Australia. The Polish education system, as well as the Polish culture and society at large, is where I first learnt how to read and write, how to understand and use language. In some sense, the English language is infused with, and even exceeded by, the Polish language – something I was especially conscious of as I laboured through writing my thesis. Quite often, while working through an idea or point, I would simultaneously think about the structure and flow of a particular sentence. I doubt very much that most of my friends and colleagues writing their theses were able to avoid this experience. Our countless conversations about writing theses suggested this to be the case. However, at the same time, perhaps they did not have to voice the question 'Is this right in *English*?' or, at least not as often or in the same way as I did, since for me the question of something being 'right' in English continually suspended the possibility of ever seeing this language as neutral. I understood English's lack of neutrality through writing and, as such, I could never experience writing as a purely mechanical practice.

Reflecting on the significance of this earlier context of my education shows that perhaps writing as a discursive practice travels. Said (1983) pays attention to what 'travelling' means in relation to theories and ideas. Said (1983, p 226) argues that travel as movement is not only 'a fact of life' but also 'a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity'. Such conditions are particularly important not only because they highlight the circumstances through which theories and ideas take shape, but

also because of how they become incorporated and transformed as a result of people having to move between contexts.

The proposition that writing travels in relation to the production of a doctoral dissertation is useful for two reasons. First, it suggests that, as Said (1993, p 65 [original emphasis]) puts it, '[w]e are, so to speak, *of* the connections, not outside and beyond them'. Secondly, travel indicates that what was part of writing my thesis was 'a double perspective that never sees things in isolation' (Said 1994, p. 60).¹ In this sense, the idea of writing travelling emphasises the relationship between education, language and writing as wired by diverse settings (Richardson & St Pierre 2005). Thus, doctoral students 'work *within, not above*, broader historical, social and intellectual contexts' (Richardson 1990, p 11 [emphasis added]). Such an emphasis on contexts acknowledges a certain level of contingency by which knowledge can materialise on the basis of what becomes part of the processes and practices of writing (Richardson & St Pierre 2005). This also acknowledges a certain level of reflexivity – a disposition that is 'profoundly about the being and doing of scholarship' (Kamler & Thomson 2006, p 66), which simultaneously teaches us not to take for granted what might initially appear ordinary, self-evident and neutral.

Thirty words

In my Year 6 class in Australia, we had spelling tests on a weekly basis. Each test consisted of 30 words in total. A week earlier, we would receive a new list of words so that we had enough time to prepare. I remember each list always started with simpler words that were a lot shorter and less complicated. To motivate learning, our teacher set up a system in which students who spelled all the words correctly in a single test five times throughout the semester would receive a fridge magnet. These magnets weren't just any magnets. They were often quite big and colourful; they seemed to have substance. Having one was like winning a prize, something you wanted to possess, to own – something that hailed achievement. And I really wanted to achieve.

At that stage, I had been in Australia for almost two years. Preparing for each spelling test was a labour intensive episode as I still grappled with the English language. The most difficult part was recognising the difference between the written spelling and the spoken sounds of words. It confused me. I was confused about why it was that certain letters did not correspond to their particular sound in the alphabet. So two days before each test, I'd sit down at my tiny desk in a house we rented with two other families and write out each word 30 times. I felt that two days in advance was enough time since each word would still be fresh in my memory, eliminating any phonic confusion on my part. At the end, if I still did not feel confident enough, I'd rewrite the word in question another 10 times. During the week, I would also listen to how each word was pronounced by others. At times, if I plucked up enough courage, I would ask the teacher to pronounce some of the longer words for me. After finishing the writing exercises, I spent a few minutes verbalising each word. I didn't just want to learn the words by reading and writing them; I also wanted to learn by hearing and speaking them. I wanted to master the words, to possess their strange sounds, to make them sound like they were my own. I was afraid that if I did not know their sounds, I would not do well. And I would certainly not get the fridge magnet.

¹ This perhaps explains why, as Richardson and St Pierre (2005, p 964) highlight, 'students from diverse social backgrounds ... are attracted to seeing the social world through two lenses'.

Getting the magnet didn't materialise as quickly as I wanted. I would start each test with a quiet measure of confidence. But the words were never pronounced in their pre-given order or how I thought they sounded. At times, I would not recognise them immediately because they did not sound familiar enough. Suddenly the test was over and there was no time for corrections. I would feel disappointed and frustrated even if I only spelt two words incorrectly. I knew those words! I felt like I could spell them backwards! So why did I still get some of them wrong? What was it that I could not remember, could not get right?

These days spelling is no longer a problem. Nevertheless, the English language remains strange. I still become slightly confused when someone spells a word phonically. There is a short-lived moment between the spoken word and my comprehension of its and meaning in which I am slightly unsure and feel like I need to stop and think about the word momentarily and filter it to translate its meaning.

The lessons I learned from the intensity of my labours as a 12-year-old informed my more recent writing practices. I only recognise this now as I reflect on my postgraduate years and think regularly about what it means for me to write. If I need or want to understand a theorist who matters to me, I have a tendency to shut myself away, read, and write copious notes. I do this because of a desire to understand another writer's work to which I am already drawn and/or to establish the manner in which I can use the tools they offer my own work. Once again, this is a labour intensive process, particularly since my notes are almost always hand written despite my being a regular computer user. There is something personal about this labour. To perform it any differently feels as if I will not be able to understand the knowledge offered by the text I am reading at the time. In some sense, this connects to what Smith (1998, p145) calls an active practice where meaning 'is not entirely in the text, for at the point of reading, the reader activates the text and is responding to it'. Therefore, as Smith (1998, p. 146) further contends, reading is a like double-sided conversation, for '[t]he reader is not wholly subdued to the text' because each person brings 'projects and concerns to the reading, as well as resources of memory and attention.'

In my case, the response to the text also involves writing. While I might begin writing something with some ideas already in mind, most often these ideas continue to develop: they morph into other ideas through language and the act of writing, and this then becomes part of my work (or perhaps not, but instead leads to still other ideas). In a way, through the creative and active act of writing, 'a continuum emerges between past and present; time and memory shape each other' (Dijck 2004, p 264). What once was, becomes yet again through writing, renewed in quite a different context and never outside the past in the present. Importantly, what this shows is that, as Richardson & Pierre (2005, p 967) argue, 'writing *is* thinking, writing *is* analysis' [original emphasis].

The connection between the earlier attempts of writing myself *into* the English language and my more recent practices of academic writing exemplifies writing as an embodied practice. Such a practice can be seen as 'a performance of the body' requiring various bodily parts, functions and sensations (Threadgold 2000, p 57). But there is more to this bodily doing. This more, is not neutral since my already gendered, raced and sexed body embodies what I write and how I write *in* and *through* the English language. If as Butler (1990, p 25) suggests, what is

performative can be understood as being ‘constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results’ and can also be seen as ‘repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time’ (1990, p 33), then what my body enacts is part of rendering my thesis culturally. Such a doing, as Butler (1993, p. 2) further argues, reiterates and cites different norms and assumptions ‘through which discourse produces the effects that it names’. In here, the English language is enmeshed with the discursive operation of norms. However, this, is not simply because English is an accepted language of mainstream Australia; rather, what constitutes English ‘takes hold to the extent that it is ‘cited’ as such a norm ... [and] derives its power through the citations that it compels’ (Butler 1993, p 13). As a 12-year-old, I was compelled to cite particular phonic norms so that ‘I’, a migrant ‘other’, could feel that ‘I’ belonged by mastering the English language through writing. Nevertheless, the fact that English is the accepted language of communication suggests that my activities are shaped by conventions and contexts whose histories are beyond me (Butler 1993, 1997). Language and writing do not exist outside their cultural context of practice and, as such, the material act of writing is not a neutral activity.

Don’t you know how to speak English properly?

In Year 8, I was once asked by a teacher to read out loud from ‘White Fang’ by Jack London, a text we were studying in our English class at the time. With some apprehension, I took to the task. Within a minute or so, I heard subdued laughter from two rows behind me. Part of my adolescent defensive ego wanted desperately to believe that this had nothing to do with me, yet somewhere deep down I knew this was not the case. Shame and embarrassment filled me, and the longer I read, the more nervous I became. What probably consisted of no more than five minutes felt like forever. And to warrant my shame, I was teased soon after class. ‘Don’t you know how to speak English properly?’ ‘What’s with the accent?’ All of this was followed by more laughter.

At that time I had been in Australia for approximately eight years - long enough to imagine that I was somehow part of its cultural landscape, but not long enough for my ‘strong’ accent to disappear. After the English class experience, this was precisely what I wanted to happen. I felt betrayed by my mouth, by the sound of my voice. I wanted to fit in, to belong somewhere despite the futility of having this desire fulfilled with a surname like Jaworski in a predominantly White, Anglo-Australian high school. Growing up as a non-pork eating, non-Catholic in an overwhelmingly Catholic Poland before migrating to Australia, I understood well enough what growing up ‘different’ meant. While I did not have a problem with being different to some extent, by the age of fourteen I was no longer prepared to endure its consequences. For the next two years, I managed to avoid public reading in most of my classes. In the meantime, I practised reading aloud regularly in the privacy of my bedroom, giving detailed attention to the sound of each word in the hope that somehow my ‘strong’ accent would soften and disappear.

These days I no longer feel compelled to engage with racialised elocution lessons; nor do I feel betrayed by the sound of my own voice. Quite frequently I actually long for that accent to come back, its loss evoked by remembering what once was and can never return. At the same time, I am also reminded of how much everything changed since I commenced my tertiary studies. It is only then that I began to understand my experiences of racism in a much larger context. Yet, I must admit that even now this is not an easy experience for me to retell. Despite the passing of

time, parts of it continue to jar, reminding me of the manner I was once 'hailed' in an Althusserian (1971) sense of the term – a hailing through which I was wounded and recognised as a cultural failure. By failing to speak English with the 'right' accent, my existence was rendered abject – as outside the cultural intelligibility of whiteness that demands one to look and sound *properly*. Coming from an Eastern European background, I might have appeared visibly white, yet I did not *sound* white *enough*. My accent as a bodily act was a sign of failure through which I was named as racially visible. Thus, as Moreton-Robinson (1999, p 30) points out, 'if you speak English with an Australian accent' you are more likely to be readily accepted.

This particular memory and experience form a scar which bears the mark of the shame and humiliation I once endured as a young person. However, bearing the scar *in the present* is not entirely negative. Said (1993, p 34) reminds us that many writers 'bear their past within them – as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigations for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past tending towards a new future' in which those who were once silenced can speak again. The manner through which I was once hailed illustrates that the use of language is articulated through cultural norms that speak of racialised understandings of what it means to speak. Such norms become embodied, and require bodily acts to sustain their power since 'the body is not 'outside' the speech act' (Butler 2002, p 115). My experience shows that whiteness is a privileged corporeal invisibility rather than being colourless (Dyer 1997; Frankenberg 1993; Goldberg 1993; Moreton-Robinson 2004).

How does this relate to writing in particular? Claiming that this experience is connected to writing my dissertation by virtue of being part of my history is not enough. What it suggests is that earlier experiences with language conditioned how I came to understand the practice of writing, since even through speaking, I could never presuppose that anything to do with language was a neutral practice, suspended outside of time, history and culture. While the scars remain, in my case they instigated a reflexivity without which I could never understand writing as a mechanical, neutral and self-evident practice in the course of writing my doctoral thesis.

Making sense of English at the kitchen table

I met Louise during my first year of studying at university through a network of friends. We became really good friends and by the time I commenced my second year, Louise was my mentor. Despite a 13-year gap between us, Louise and I shared many common interests, including a strong commitment to feminism. I was particularly passionate about feminism since for the first time I could name a philosophy my mother instilled in me long before I identified it as such. The topic of feminism generated many conversations between Louise and I, whether these were about daily living or the ideals our mothers passed on to us. Louise told me different accounts of her earlier life. I listened with interest as they granted me access to memories, landscapes, experiences and histories that were so different to my own. Louise also listened with interest and enthusiasm to my accounts of growing up in Poland and Australia. Coinciding with my feelings about the university social environment in general, I felt that I was in the company of someone who recognised

my difference in ways that did not make me feel uncomfortable, patronised or disregarded.

One of the greatest gifts I received from Louise was embodied in the time and effort she spent on explaining to me the mysteries of the English language. This included checking drafts of my papers for different subjects and providing useful and constructive feedback. For the first time, without my feeling lost and overwhelmed, someone explained different structures of writing and how English worked as a language. And for the first time, I felt like I was a little bit more in charge of using a language that I often thought would overtake me, especially if it meant learning to use it well.

One of the earlier 'sessions' involved Louise checking a paper I wrote for sociology on the topic of gender and suicide methods in relation to the experiences of Australian young people. I was particularly worried and agitated about this paper. It wasn't so much that I had vested interests in the topic. It was more about the fact that I could find little research and felt rather annoyed about it. Why didn't anyone ask questions about gender that focused on wanting to know why and how aspects of suicide were interpreted in particular ways? Sitting at the kitchen table, Louise read the paper from beginning to end and took some time to respond. In the nicest possible manner, she told me that the paper didn't quite 'gel' and that my writing was a bit vague and unclear. I didn't quite know how to take it so I burst into tears. The darn thing was due in two days and this didn't leave me with a great deal of time to perform a miracle! With me crying, Louise proceeded to ask gently about what I was trying to say and write, and then to make some changes, drawing my attention to areas I really needed to rework on my own. By the end of the 'session', I walked away still feeling agitated but with a quiet sense of determination. I wasn't going to walk away from this one.

This memory returns and connects to a number of elements canvassed earlier in this paper. It returns and connects with sitting at a table; labouring through language; being confronted by the practices and norms of language; and trying to make ideas make sense through language and writing. In a sense, it shows that beginnings are historical rather than epistemological givens, 'combining the already-familiar with the fertile novelty of human work in language' (Said 1985, p xvii). Furthermore, the memory articulates what Morrison calls 'remembering', which also connects with Said's (1985) earlier emphasis on return and repetition. Morrison (1990, p 305).writes:

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and liveable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. 'Floods' is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were It is emotional memory – what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of our imagination is our 'flooding'

Perhaps then language and writing are also like 'flooding'. We cannot separate ourselves from our memories and experiences as we write, wherever and however writing may take place. How I wrote and how I used language during my postgraduate years and was far from mechanical – it did not consist of practices and processes that simply 'happened'. While producing a dissertation did include a set of practices and rituals which could be described as mechanical, my use of language and writing involved difficult, labour intensive activities, where what felt material

could never rest outside cultural norms, meanings and assumptions. If writing *happened*, it was because the *happening* was, and continues to be, conditioned by experiences and memories, as well as vested interests in what I was pursuing in my research. If writing happened, it was because its practice was conditioned by the past, re-articulated in the present in ways that turned out to be enabling and productive.

This account shows that for a performative address to become possible, it requires conventions and contexts that enable 'the moment of its enunciation' (Butler 1997, p 36). In addition, while the workings and effects of norms do not suddenly disappear, the manner in which 'they are invoked and cited by bodily practices' also has 'the capacity to alter norms in the course of their citation' (Butler 2004, p 52). Although my learning with Louise's guidance did not alter past experiences, I was, nevertheless, able to reconsider the past from a different place in which I no longer felt that language and writing would somehow erase me. This is the resolve with which I began my postgraduate studies. In my case at least, perhaps the reason why language and writing were never neutral and merely mechanical practice was because both came with 'history that not only precedes but conditions ... contemporary usages' (Butler 1993, p 227), depending on much more than me, or the activity of writing per se. Thus, as Butler (2004, p 32) explains, '[m]y reflexivity is not only socially mediated, but socially constituted', and this is precisely why something becomes possible rather than impossible. What this shows is that the cultural conditions through which language and writing operate in the production of doctoral dissertations cannot be taken for granted, and when recognised, cannot be treated as self-evident and neutral.

Conclusion

The English language continues to challenge me. With the passing of time, and the completion of my doctoral studies, I welcome this challenge a *little* more readily. I emphasise the word 'little' because finishing my studies has not altered my understanding of rendering words across the pages of my notebooks and the computer screen as being easy and neutral. I still think of the English language as *strange* in a cultural and personal sense. Thus what is needed is a reflective awareness of not only what is at stake when writing a thesis but also what shapes and reshapes the practices through which a thesis comes to be. A reflective awareness is crucial because, as a student, it allowed me to develop a critical relationship with language and writing. As Butler (2003) argues, this relationship is crucial to critical thinking since language and writing have the capacity to constrain thinking and ideas - precisely what scholarship should not incite. And perhaps what my argument, and the development of a relationship between language and writing, illuminates is Foucault's (1986, p 23) point that '[w]e do not live inside a void that could be coloured with diverse shades of light; rather we live inside a set of relations that delineates sides which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another'.

My research practices and everyday life continually remind me just how *unnatural* language and writing are. This is not because English in particular happens to be my second language, but because I am always reminded of the fact that norms and

practices shape its articulation, with which my gendered, raced and sexed body is continually implicated as I read, speak and write. What I am also reminded of is that failure is not always entirely bad. While some experiences may have wounded and humiliated in the past, the present may offer possibilities for re-rendering performatively what once was a mark of visible shame and failure. Do I want to speak English *properly*? Actually no, I do not, *Kasia*.

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