

Listening to language as a border

Visualizing borders is different for everyone. Borders are physical, literal and sometimes undefinable. Often there is a border between countries, but there can also be a border between places, embodying a margin. This margin can be there because of an own experience of violence or an invisible rule by for instance the government or your parents. Both of those borders have been accompanied by the same, which is language, in spoken, written or typed form. Experiences of violence always coincide with language. The tone of voice, hateful words that exclude and divide, and also the exclusion of understanding what is being said. When we describe how words were violent to us, we often use physical terms like "it hit me in the face" or "it left an emotional scar" favoring the physical violence over the lingual violence. (1)

It seems very normal for me to switch to English, like I do in this writing. But when men speak or write in another language it influences our identity and way of thinking totally. I still view English as the norm, I should be able to communicate in. Being poor in English immediately and unconsciously translates into being less professional or less intelligent and retain a suppression of other languages.

As is being emphasized in the theatre play "LANGUAGE" by Vanja Rukavina, "When having knowledge of other languages, that's where it becomes difficult". You can step into another world, another culture, other habits but do you fully understand them? (2) Are you aware that by not fully understanding them but talking about them, you can create more violence?

Therefore I like how Bell Hook explains in "Choosing the margin as a space for radical openness" that Language is also a place of struggle. Having to speak in the oppressors language, though, is necessary to reconcile and renew. (3)

I think we have to acknowledge the violence within language before we can understand how to use language to reduce violence. When investigating this, listening is very important. How do I listen to language in a different way?

To actively listen is to evaluate how I approach people and how people interpret my speech. What languages do men favor? To which do we feel connected or alienated? Do we feel intimacy or fear for certain languages? Do we because of that see their speakers as part of "we" or "the other"?

To become more aware of what experiencing language as a margin can do to a persons identity and positioning in oppression, I started asking what language means to my surroundings. I had conversations with friends who are bilingual and asked them to share a short moment or story where they experienced violence within language.

When did they experience violence because of their languages? What are the consequences of favoring languages and connecting it to intelligence and professionalism (at a young age already)? Together with my group I want to create a space where we challenge ourselves and the viewer to change our listening habits. When letting people tell their stories through language, it is important for me to have a space where language and its struggle is acknowledged and listened to.

Bronnen:

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- (2) Rukavina, Vanja, "LANGUAGE", Januari, 2019. <https://www.hnt.nl/voorstellingen/2342/Vanja-Rukavina-Het-Nationale-Theater-in-coproductie-met-Zaal-4A-LANGUAGE/>, Accessed 25 Nov. 2020.
- (3) Hooks, Bell. "CHOOSING THE MARGIN AS A SPACE OF RADICAL OPENNESS." Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media, no. 36, 1989, pp. 15–23. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/44111660. Accessed 29 Nov. 2020.

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