**My Language Which Is Not My Own:**

**Heidegger and Derrida on the Ambiguity of Linguistic Life**

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**Introduction: Questioning Linguistic Determinism**

In his *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, Derrida reflects on his lived experience of language, explaining: “My monolingualism dwells, and I call it my dwelling; it feels like one to me, and I remain in it and inhabit it [*l’habite*]. It inhabits me. The monolingualism in which I draw my very breath is, for me, my element. Not a natural element, not the transparency of the ether, but an absolute habitat [*un milieu absolu*]” (1998, p. 1). Derrida presents us here with something quite rare. While describing his deep and intimate identification with the French language, Derrida nevertheless highlights the irreducible difference therein. His identification with his mother tongue may be a profound one, but this does not make the relationship transparent. He remains in the midst of it [*un milieu*].

Derrida’s description is striking, because it challenges two of the most common ways of thinking about language today: first, as a mere instrument for expressing a world that is external to and known independently from language and, second, as a force in our lives that exerts an absolute power by determining how we approach things at the most fundamental level. Let us call this second idea “linguistic determinism” in order to highlight its essential feature.[[1]](#endnote-1) It is this idea of language that Hans-Georg Gadamer has in mind when he speaks of a pervasive doubt today “about the possibility of our escaping from the sphere of influence of our education which is linguistic, of our socialization which is linguistic, and of our thought which is transmitted through language” (2013, p. 588). On this view, language is a force that so influences our thinking that our identification with it is guaranteed. It shapes the way we think and thus what we do in the world. It shapes how we interact with one another. As Gadamer suggests, the appeal of this claim is indeed broad. To get a sense for this, we need only consider the willingness of so many today to equate features of a language with an epistemic worldview, for example, when referring to language in order to explain a way of thinking characteristic of some group of people.

Its appeal is also evident in the work of several influential thinkers over the past century who have in some way been associated with the “linguistic turn” in philosophy, arguably one of the strongest common threads linking disparate philosophical traditions over the past century. Within the early analytic tradition, Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example, famously argued that the limits of one’s language indicate the limits of one’s world (2010, p. 88). Richard Rorty makes a similar case, arguing that the debt of thinking to language requires philosophers to abandon the search for foundational truths beyond a given vocabulary. For Rorty, “we have no prelinguistic consciousness to which language needs to be adequate, no deep sense of how things are which it is the duty of philosophers to spell out in language. What is described as our consciousness,” Rorty continues, “is simply a disposition to use the language of our ancestors, to worship the corpses of their metaphors” (1989, p. 21). For these philosophers, we do not transcend the limits of language. Rather, these limits are thick walls so high that we cannot see beyond them. Indeed, for most, the very idea that something exists hidden from our understanding beyond the walls of language is misguided, since there is nothing to understand without language.

Derrida has often been read as promoting this very idea that the reality we know is nothing but the impress of language and that there is no limit to language’s influence on one’s thinking. Commentators like Rorty and Gerald Graff find in statements like the infamous one from *Of Grammatology* that there is “nothing outside of the text” evidence of a monistic thinker for whom language is a quasi-transcendental structure (contingent yet *a priori*) governing all.[[2]](#endnote-2) In other words, interpreters often locate that pattern that I have called linguistic determinism in Derrida’s philosophy.

The same interpretation has also been offered of Martin Heidegger’s conception of the role of language in thinking. It was, after all, Heidegger’s attentiveness to how our present ways of thinking are greatly indebted to the historical language of metaphysics that most influenced Derrida’s project of *déconstruction*. Thus, the writings of both philosophers continually bring us back again and again to the scene of this inheritance, even as they hope to recover another beginning, some unrealized possibility through this return. To the extent that this inheritance determines what can and cannot be thought, both Heidegger and Derrida might appear to espouse a kind of linguistic determinism. Thus, Cristina Lafont (2000) situates Heidegger in what she identifies as the linguistic turn in German hermeneutical philosophy. For Heidegger, according to Lafont, language continues to be a historical inheritance that ultimately renders tragically inadequate our knowledge of the world as well as our ability to communicate with others.[[3]](#endnote-3) Lafont’s interpretation is not unique. Jürgen Habermas also explains that, for Heidegger, the language of being is something “absolutely unmediated,” “a contingent occurrence to which Dasein is delivered over” and to whose authority Dasein must ultimately bow (1987, p. 152-153). Rorty too comes to a similar conclusion, one I’ll revisit later, although, for him, Heidegger’s recognition of the historical and linguistic contingency of philosophical thought is not a liability but a shining achievement of his project.

In this essay, however, I will argue, that neither Heidegger nor Derrida presents language as a determining feature of our understanding and that, instead, their work offers some important challenges to linguistic determinism. For, as I will explain, both attend to how the language we use, even in our habitual everydayness, can become *questionable* to us. Indeed, both perform a questioning attitude toward language in their writing. As I will argue, this is important because when habitual language use becomes questionable, presence itself becomes question-worthy, as does the power that justifies itself by appealing to pure presence. In the first half of the essay, I begin to develop these points by applying Heidegger’s analysis of “readiness-to-hand [*Zuhandenheit*]” and “unreadiness-to-hand [*Unzuhandenheit*]” in *Being and Time* to language use, arguing that the analysis reveals the immanent possibility of transformation that lies hidden at the ground of any language. I propose that, while *Being and Time* accounts for the possibility of rupture in everyday, ready-to-hand language, Heidegger’s later work demonstrates the event of this rupture more concretely. I pay particular attention to *On the Way to Language* to develop this point. While Heidegger himself does not draw out the implications of his analysis for a study of power, I argue that Derrida does just this in his *Monolingualism of the Other*, my focus in the second half of this paper. For here Derrida attempts to recount how his mother tongue came to appear to him as *other* and how this experience revealed for him language’s function in the preservation of cultural power. In Derrida’s description, we can recognize Heidegger’s account of how an experience of the unready-to-hand [*unzuhanden*] can reveal the assignments that comprise a referential totality. Over and against the linguistic determinist, then, for whom language is a transcendental structure admitting of no instability, I argue that the kind of philosophical thinking Heidegger and Derrida invite is one that exposes this structure as but one moment in an iterative process – a process that Heidegger understands as the ongoing task of world-disclosure and Derrida, with a more explicit interest in the interrogation of power, as a process of “politico-phantasmatic construction [*construction politico-phantasmatique*].”

**Heidegger on Language and Everydayness**

While Heidegger’s later work on language clearly attempts to make us aware of our absorption into everyday speech, my discussion in this section draws primarily from Division I of *Being and Time*, where he already makes clear the force of everydayness in our lives and begins to sketch out an account of the relationship between language and everydayness. In truth, this task is already underway in Heidegger’s comments on *Destruktion* in the book’s Introduction, where he points out the hardened formulations of traditional ontology that Dasein inherits and tends to leave uninterrogated (1962, p. 44). However, in this section, I will pay particular attention to Heidegger’s discussion of the unready-to-hand as a modification of the ready-to-hand. For it is this transformed relationship to everyday language that Heidegger will later perform in *On the Way to Language* and elsewhere – a stylistic shift that accompanies his thinking of the famous “turn” (*Kehre*).[[4]](#endnote-4) As I explain at the end of this section, it is Heidegger’s recognition of this possibility and the implications that it holds for our conception of what language is that distinguishes his thinking from linguistic determinism and provides the groundwork for what Derrida does in the 1992 lecture.

To understand the relationship between language and everydayness in *Being and Time*, we must first recall the place of everydayness in Heidegger’s investigation. Here Heidegger offers a phenomenological investigation into how beings come to appear as they appear in their everydayness, that is, in the form they are most familiar to us. What he discovers in this investigation is that the independent existence that we attribute to beings is derivative of Dasein’s existential constitution. As part of this constitution, Heidegger explains, Dasein is always in a world, a phenomenological world. *Proximally and for the most part* [*zunächst und zumeist*], an important refrain that we will return to later, we encounter beings as what he calls “ready-to-hand [*zuhanden*],” meaning, as belonging to a totality of “equipment [*Zeug*]” and as essentially “something-in-order-to” (1962, p. 97). So, for example, a pen first appears to me as an instrument for writing, the writing also being something ready-to-hand, part of the equipmental totality that Dasein always comports itself toward understandingly.

How will this description of the constitution of a phenomenological world help us to understand the everydayness of *speech* though? After all, it is easy to think about the pen as a tool but perhaps harder to understand how speech can be equipmental. Indeed, Heidegger does not use speech in *Being and Time* as an example of being ready-to-hand. What is more, in his later work, he will go to great lengths to distinguish *Sprache* from the set of all entities, understanding it to be, not a particular being, but the very source of being itself.[[5]](#endnote-5) We might even identify the beginning of this effort in Section 17 of *Being and Time*, where Heidegger explains that all ready-to-hand entities, have the character of being a sign [*Zeichen*]. In this discussion, signs are understood to do more than just stand in for some other element in a world. They disclose a world; they are world-disclosive. In this sense, they are originary. As Heidegger puts it, a sign is not “authentically ‘grasped’ if we just stare at it and identify it as an indicator-Thing which occurs.” Nor do we grasp it if we think about it as something that merely points to something else that is present-at-hand. Instead, it is “an item of equipment which explicitly raises a totality of equipment into our circumspection so that together with it the worldly character of the ready-to-hand announces itself” (1962, p. 110). One of Heidegger’s famous examples in this section is that of an automobile’s turn-signal, but the scope of examples is broad: boundary-stones, banners, signs of mourning, signs of a coming storm, and so on. Each of these signs sets forth a world for our circumspection, even as it comes to us folded into a referential totality, a world of ongoing practical concern. And so, although these signs are not speech, they participate in what is essential about speech – its originary, world-disclosive power.

Still, given what is said in *Being and Time* about the ready-to-hand, it is clear that a good deal of ordinary verbal communication also has a ready-to-hand character. After all, speech certainly comes to us folded into a holistic context of meaning. When someone asks me, “Can you hand me that pen?” or says to me “Look! I’ve taken your pen!” I do not perceive the words in either statement as distinct “present-at-hand” entities with distinct meanings which I analyze one by one to understand. There is an irreducible unity to such expressions. I perceive each statement holistically as “something-in-order-to,” which is to say that I understand it in terms of the referential totality toward which I am oriented. Heidegger makes this point in his discussion of assertions in Section 33, where he describes how any assertion, like any interpretation, “requires a fore-having [*Vorhabe*] of whatever has been disclosed” (1962, p. 199). This fore-having, though, is not usually thematized. Rather it operates in the background as something that we are pre-reflectively projecting ourselves toward. As Heidegger reminds us in the same section, language is always language *about something* (*logos* is always *logos tinos*) although this something is not usually addressed explicitly. *Proximally and for the most part*, then, we discover speech as it is connected to a world that transcends it, one that we are continually preserving or, if you will, remaking through our reiteration of language. Speech is, then, ready-to-hand whenever it operates inconspicuously in this way. Like the boundary-stone or the sign of a coming storm, it tacitly discloses the world for us – a world that is itself inseparable from this process of projection and reiteration.

What we have said so far about everydayness and language can shed light on one of the guiding motifs in Heidegger’s later work, *On the Way to Language*, namely, that of our simultaneous distance and proximity from language. In light of the fore-having by which Dasein, in its speaking, runs ahead of itself, we have seen that language’s role in our lives, for the most part, belongs to the inconspicuousness of the proximally ready-to-hand. In the language of *Being and Time*, we could describe this in terms of the environmentally remote: though it is basic to the existential constitution of Dasein, our speech remains as environmentally remote as a pair of glasses on one’s face which somehow seem further from us than a picture that we gaze at on a wall. But this motif, that of language’s simultaneous distance and proximity, is operative throughout the later essays that comprise *On the Way to Language*. Indeed, if we recall the opening sequence in “The Way to Language,” it is why there is a need for a *way to language* at all (1971, p. 112).[[6]](#endnote-6)

And in “The Nature of Language,” Heidegger echoes the point that Dasein runs ahead of itself in speaking. At this point, Heidegger has abandoned the concept of the fore-structure in *Being and Time*; however, his thought is still drawn to the idea that speech runs ahead of analytical reflection. Here he describes how the lag between language and theoretical understanding is something that scientific investigation of language systematically overlooks. Speaking at this point in the essay from the perspective of such investigations, Heidegger explains:

We speak and speak about language. What we speak of, language, is always ahead of us. Our speaking merely follows language constantly. Thus we are continually lagging behind what we first ought to have overtaken and taken up in order to speak about it. Accordingly, when we speak of language we remain *entangled* [*verstrickt*] in a speaking that is persistently inadequate (1971, p. 75).

In the language of *Being and Time*, we cannot separate language from its *tinos*, from what is fixed upon by Dasein’s understanding, its way of being-ahead-of-itself. Understanding is always already at work. Thus, for the one who wants to examine the meaning of words apart from Dasein’s existential constitution, this entanglement appears to be an absolute limit.

At this point, then, it may seem as though Heidegger’s argument, as I have interpreted it, supports the theory of linguistic determinism that I outlined earlier which suggests that language is a force that unequivocally shapes thinking. Indeed, for Rorty, Heidegger’s writing brings us face to face with a certain limit of language, namely, the historical and cultural contingency of metaphysical language, “reminding us,” Rorty says, “that this language is not that of ‘human reason’ but is the creation of the thinkers of our historical past” (1991, p. 16). The determining force of such inheritance is, for Rorty, far-reaching. Citing Heidegger’s *On the Way to Language*, Rorty explains, “For there will be no way to rise above the language, culture, institutions, and practices one has adopted and view all these on par with all the others. . . . Or, to put the point in Heidegger’s way, ‘language speaks man.’ Languages change in the course of their history, and so human beings cannot escape their historicity” (1989, p. 50). In his reading of Heidegger, then, Rorty’s understanding of language inheritance resonates deeply with the idea of linguistic determinism presented above, the idea that language exerts a sovereign force upon human beings. Now, taken alone, it is not hard to see how one derives such an interpretation of Heidegger from a line like “Language speaks man,” but is Rorty right to assume that, for Heidegger, the experience of language entanglement must involve finding one’s thinking thoroughly conditioned by a vocabulary from which it cannot escape? Based on what we have developed here, is it right to say that language consistently confronts Dasein as a simple, sovereign presence? To indicate the shortcomings of this interpretation, let us consider two points where it is incompatible with Heidegger’s account.

First, let us notice that Rorty’s interpretation misses the force of Heidegger’s refrain: “proximally and for the most part [*zunächst und zumeist*].” Heidegger uses this refrain to mark the fact that Dasein’s everyday relationship to beings belongs to its habitual, primordial praxis but is not the only kind of comportment toward beings that is possible. Indeed, throughout his life, whether through the concept of *Destruktion* or the *Verwindung der Metaphysik*, Heidegger tries to think through how the traditional habits of thinking that we carry with us as historical beings dissolve and give way to new habits.[[7]](#endnote-7) Likewise, the everyday relationship that one has with language is by no means the only one possible either – least of all because language has an important role in either preserving or dissolving legacies of traditional ontology. This is crucial to *On the Way to Language*, where each of the five essays describes and, in most cases, performs a fundamental transformation in the human comportment to language, the path for which is often prepared for us by a poet. Rorty, however, overlooks the possibility of such transformation.

This means that a reading like Rorty’s also fails to account for disruptions of our everyday comportment toward speech. Yet, for Heidegger, anything that is ready-to-hand can become unready-to-hand, which is to say, conspicuously unusable, missing, or in the way. Heidegger’s famous illustration of this in *Being and Time* is the malfunctioning of a hammer. In this breakdown of equipment, we not only notice the unusable hammer, but “the context of equipment is lit up, not as something never seen before, but as a totality constantly sighted beforehand in circumspection. With this totality,” Heidegger adds, “the world announces itself” (1962, p. 105). From this we can imply that the breakdown of the readiness-to-hand of some language accomplishes a similar illumination. When, for example, someone points out to me something ignorant and shameful in the way that I have described some state of affairs, I will find myself taken aback and, in particular, more self-conscious of my speech – whence it originates and how it sets forth the world. In this way, such breakdowns of ready-to-hand speech can actually occasion the kind of transformations just mentioned. Of course, not everyone who experiences a moment of shame about their speech will become a poet; however, it is clear that writers are generally more attentive to the kind of language that is otherwise mostly inconspicuous for us.

In his discussion of equipmental breakdown in *Being and Time*, Heidegger unfortunately does not mention the disclosive possibility of conspicuous, obstinate, or obtrusive speech. But he does make this connection later in “The Nature of Language.” There he proposes that language speaks itself as language “curiously enough, when we cannot find the right word for something that concerns us, carries us away, oppresses or encourages us” (1971, p. 59). Here the obtrusiveness of language is disclosive in the way that the breakdown of the hammer is. And this breakdown, Heidegger says, allows language to speak as language, that is, to reveal itself as more than just the ready-to-hand.

As mentioned above, such experiences of language as conspicuous, missing, or in the way seem to be common for writers. The semiotician, Roland Barthes, makes this point in his *Writing Degree Zero* where he addresses the anxiety some writers encounter with the language-tools ready-to-hand for them:

In front of the virgin sheet of paper, at the moment of choosing the words which must frankly signify his place in History, and testify that he assumes its data, [the writer] observes a tragic disparity between what he does and what he sees. Before his eyes, the world of society now exists as a veritable Nature, and this Nature speaks, elaborating living languages from which the writer is excluded: on the contrary, History puts in his hands a decorative and compromising instrument, a writing inherited from a previous and different History, for which he is not responsible and yet which is the only one he can use. Thus is born a tragic element in writing, since the conscious writer must henceforth fight against ancestral and all-powerful signs which, from the depths of a past foreign to him, impose Literature on him like some ritual, not like a reconciliation (Barthes, 1977, p. 86).

What the writer describes here as a tragic lack of reconciliation illustrates well what it is like to experience language as *unzuhanden*. While the writer certainly appears to feel “entangled in a speaking that is persistently inadequate,” the situation here is clearly one of entanglement rather than determinism. Language is always familiar, according to the linguistic determinist; while, for Heidegger, because Dasein always runs ahead of itself in speech, language is *uncanny* – both familiar and strange. It appears as familiar in that, as I’ve explained, speech comes to us folded into holistic contexts of understanding. But it can also become unfamiliar, as we see in the case of the writer who finds his language a “compromising instrument.”

This brings me to the second reason why Heidegger’s account is incompatible with linguistic determinism. Recall that, for linguistic determinism, thinking is beholden to some inaugural event of language that happened in the past and that coincided with the advent of a “worldview,” to remain fixed for as long as that language system is in place. This is, of course, one way of understanding the legacy of metaphysical language, namely, as the residue of past intellectual events into which we were once fatefully thrown. In understanding the power of language this way, however, what remains unaccounted for is how a worldview, or even the linguistic system that gives rise to it, is reiterated over time. Any historicist account, to recall Rorty’s description of Heidegger’s project, would necessarily overlook this question, since it presumes that history is the power of the past to unilaterally influence the present and that such a power exists *a priori*.

In *Being and Time*, however, Heidegger is clear that Dasein’s facticity is not like the *factum brutum* of something present-at-hand. As he explains in Section 29, for Dasein, “The that-it-is of facticity never becomes something that we can come across by beholding it,” and thus, “Thrownness is neither a fact that is finished nor a fact that is settled. Dasein’s facticity is such that as long as it is what it is, Dasein remains in the throw . . . .” (1962, p. 174). According to *Being and Time* then, it is not just that each of us is cast into a history of language once and for all – one that we have no choice but to content ourselves with from that point on, given the intractable direction of the river’s flow. Understood this way, such a condition of being thrown, not to mention of being historical, would be a condition external to Dasein’s being. It would be something Dasein passively endures, something that happens to befall it. Such a characterization misses how thrownness is intrinsic to Dasein’s being.

At stake in these differences is not just an assessment of Rorty’s positioning of Heidegger within the history of philosophy but an appreciation of how Heidegger’s work challenges a popular conception of language as deterministic. To see language as deterministic is to fashion it as something sovereign. In this conception, its holding sway does not require any preservation – it is guaranteed. Nor must there ever be a repetition of the world-disclosure at work in language, according to this conception, since, by the linear movement of history, its once having taken place keeps it perpetually in motion. It is this conception of language as an absolute force that gives rise to the pervasive doubt described by Gadamer (2013) mentioned above. But for Heidegger, the “fore” of the fore-structure upon which interpretation and articulation rest does not refer to an event that took place at one point in time. Dasein must continually be disclosing the world through continual projection. Reiteration is essential. This is what we forget when we become absorbed in a system of language that discloses the world in a certain way. And it is why the sudden breakdown of speech can jolt us into an awareness of the reiteration at work in the preservation of a world.

But the breakdown reveals something else as well, namely, a point of instability in the preservation of a world. Because any world rests upon the reiteration of world-disclosure, the existence of this background environment is never guaranteed. It provides for us, at best, something like “the absolute habitat [*milieu absolu*]” that Derrida describes, one which we inhabit but which never resolves itself into an entirely “natural element.” This instability is, however, denied by linguistic determinists, who focus on the stability rather than the instability of a language system. This focus is understandable at certain point. After all, as Heidegger explains, the relative stability of the referential totality helps us to orient ourselves alongside others in the world by providing us with shared meaning and a wealth of pre-reflective understanding. I can understand your request when you ask “Can you hand me that pen?” or when you gesture for me to come over to you without engaging in any reflective act. We are ahead of ourselves together in language in such ways. And this is no doubt an important reason why so many people resist efforts to unsettle or change the language they’re accustomed to (e.g., attempts to rename or to redefine something, attempts to eliminate certain usage, etc.), a point we will return to later.

Indeed, Heidegger himself does not thematize this instability explicitly in *Being and Time*. That said, even here Heidegger does not fail to address the way that public discourse can provide an illusory ground for thinking. In the section of Division I on “Idle Talk (*Gerede*),” Heidegger describes how we can become absorbed in customary ways of speaking, just as we become absorbed in traditional ontologies, forgetting what makes possible this customariness and, thus, blinding ourselves to its limits. To forget this is to bear oneself toward language in an “inauthentic [*uneigentlich*]” way, taking everything as “genuinely understood, genuinely taken hold of, genuinely spoken” even when it is not (1962, p. 217). It is inauthentic not because it involves inheriting a language that one did not author oneself, since then authenticity would be equivalent to worldlessness, but because it overlooks the process by which the ready-to-hand emerges and is sustained. Taking an authentic attitude toward language would begin, then, not with resignation to language as a sovereign presence but with the recognition of a certain ambiguity much like the one Derrida gives voice to in his *Monolingualism of the Other*. But it is this ambiguity that linguistic determinism wants to deny in insisting that we are always simply *in* language.

**Derrida on the Otherness of Language**

We have seen so far how, according to Heidegger in *Being and Time*, the very speech that we are most familiar with can come to appear to us as alien. Just as the seemingly firm ground provided by a traditional ontology recedes in the event of *Destruktion*, so too can the ground provided by customary speech also become compromised. The immanent possibility of such an event is what authentic Dasein experiences as the ambiguity of its linguistic life. As we have seen, such experiences of language as unready-to-hand can also, however, light up for us the very processes that embed it into a holistic totality of what is ready-to-hand and thus imbue speech in the first place with customary, pre-reflective sense. In the second section of this paper, I want to turn to a more concrete expression of this ambiguity, Derrida’s account in *Monolingualism of the Other*, paying particular attention to how this account exposes the reliance of hegemonic power upon the preservation of language as inconspicuously ready-to-hand. This dimension of Derrida’s thinking, I argue, constitutes a serious criticism of linguistic determinism by making clear how it forecloses the possibility of questioning power by failing to recognize ruptures in the limits of language.

In the lecture, Derrida puts forth two premises which, in their tension with one another, echo the uncanniness of linguistic inheritance outlined above. These two premises are the focus of the second section of Derrida’s lecture: “we only ever speak one language,” yet in another sense, “we never speak only one language” (1998, p. 7). He acknowledges that making both claims at once will solicit criticisms from philosophers who will accuse him of contradiction and even of insincerity. Nevertheless, to clarify his fidelity to both claims, Derrida draws from his lived experience of the French language. Let us return, then, to the passage with which we began, where Derrida confesses to his audience:

I am monolingual. My monolingualism dwells, and I call it my dwelling; it feels like one to me, and I remain in it and inhabit it. It inhabits me. The monolingualism in which I draw my very breath is, for me, my element. Not a natural element, not the transparency of the ether, but an absolute habitat. It is impassable, indisputable: I cannot challenge it except by testifying to its omnipresence in me. . . . I would not be myself without it. It constitutes me, it dictates even the ipseity of all things to me, and also prescribes a monastic solitude for me; as if, even before learning to speak, I had been bound by some vows (1998, p. 1).

What we find here is the kind of attention to ready-to-hand speech that, as we have explored, transforms it into something that is not simply ready-to-hand. Language here is something primordial and omnipresent – from which, Derrida claims, he draws his very breath. At the same time, Derrida clearly does not attribute pure presence to it. It lacks the transparency we would assume a “natural element” to have. It remains other – something to which Derrida describes feeling bound even before learning to speak. The ambiguity of the situation is encapsulated by the Heideggerean concept that Derrida uses here when he calls language his *dwelling* [*ma demeure*].

Now, this description might come as some surprise to those familiar with the complicated history of Derrida’s native Algeria. Of all Arab countries colonized by the French, Algeria was, by most accounts, the most thoroughly taken over by French culture. Until the revolution in 1962, French infiltrated almost every corner of Algerian culture – not only government but education, religion, and eventually nearly all aspects of cultural life.[[8]](#endnote-8) Like most Algerians of his day, French was the language that Derrida spoke at home and the language in which he was educated. Thus, very early on, Derrida’s world was bound up with French language and culture, so much so that it would not have dawned on him at the time to think about himself as an Algerian Jew assimilated into French culture or into *francophonie*. After all, Derrida did not identify strongly with Jewish culture as a child. As he notes, nothing comparable to Yiddish was available for him. Indeed, as a part of assimilation, many Jewish rituals had been given Christian names and were inflected with Christian signification during French colonization. Derrida indeed found his intellectual identity as a young student within the rich landscape of French literature, the one part of his education, he reports, that he enjoyed, leading him to continue his education in France. For these reasons, Derrida is hesitant to separate himself from his mother tongue.

Yet Derrida insists that this dwelling of his, this language in which he draws his breath, is not a “natural element” for him. It is never fully naturalized for him; indeed, it remains other. Part of this can be explained by considering the history of political events affecting the relationship between Algerian Jews and French culture. Derrida’s family members were not citizens but subjects of France with limited rights until the *Crémieux Decree* of 1870. As Derrida recounts in this lecture, the status of his own national identity always felt precarious though – particularly when during the Vichy period, when Derrida was a boy, Algerian Jews were stripped of their French citizenship. Derrida was forbidden to attend school for a year based on his Jewish ethnicity. It is no wonder, then, that Derrida reports the lived experience that he does with the French language. In such a case, most people would readily make an exception to the normal rule of linguistic and cultural determinism. Indeed, they might even support a political initiative to reissue parts of Algerian culture as they existed before colonization.

But according to Derrida, his relationship to language is not exceptional. It is “exemplary of a universal structure;” he writes, “it represents or reflects a type of originary ‘alienation’ [*aliénation*] that institutes every language as a language of the other” (1998, p. 63). If one were to miss this part of the argument and to see Derrida as presenting his story as exceptional, his story could then be seen to confirm our normal assumptions about language, worldview, and identity. We would see someone caught between cultures and presume this is the reason for not feeling completely determined by a language. It would confirm for us that language appears alien only when one doesn’t have a single language transmitted through a single culture.[[9]](#endnote-9) Only then, we expect, should one feel caught between worlds. The presumption then is that one’s “own” language, that familiar habitat, can never on its own accord appear strange to the one who inherits it and lags behind it.

Derrida’s positing of an originary alienation that makes every language a language of the other [*toute langue en langue de l’autre*] has been controversial. Geoffrey Bennington points out that Derrida’s claim seems to problematically conflate the situation of different political subjects (e.g., treating as synonymous the Kosovar Albanian, the Tibetan exile, and the English-speaking native-born American in Dallas), and, moreover, to justify or at least present as inevitable “the very coloniality that the point is to protest against” (2000, p. 8). In other words, the text seems to both assert the inevitability of this originary alienation and to protest against it on normative political-ethical grounds. Like several other commentators, Bennington questions whether there can be any real protest against operations that are constitutive of meaning and thus ubiquitous and, if not, what this means for Derrida’s attempts at political-ethical critique.[[10]](#endnote-10) However, if we read Derrida’s emphasis on the universal condition of language’s otherness in the context of the interpretation of Heidegger that I have developed here, the coherency of Derrida’s critique comes more clearly into view. Essential to understanding the protest that Derrida makes in the *Monolingualism* lecture is the distinction between two forms of language’s otherness.

There is a sense, on the one hand, in which every language is the language of the other and thus represents, as Derrida says, a kind of originary alienation. This is apparent when we consider the problem that plagues Derrida’s own attempt in the *Monolingualism* lecture to recollect the influence the French language has on him, what he calls his task of “autobiographical anamnesis.” In this effort, he recognizes that the “I” that he invokes “would have *formed* itself, then, at the site of a *situation* that cannot be found, a site always referring elsewhere, to something other, to another language, to the other in general” (Derrida, 1998, p. 29). In other words, in recounting one’s life events in language, what remains unspoken is how one came to inhabit that language in the first place – a transformation that no “I” can have undergone since, as Derrida points out, it is how the “I” first emerges. One is always already thrown into language, since, as Heidegger shows us, we find ourselves having already understandingly listened and spoken. The scene of this inheritance is thematically unrecoverable, and in this sense language is always other.[[11]](#endnote-11)

At the same time, if one were to then posit this event of language acquisition as the simple *factum brutum* of an origin, one would then fail to acknowledge the way that the inheritance of language is redoubled or reaffirmed when the “I” speaks. In a later interview on the *Monolingualism* lecture, Derrida describes this in terms of a necessary counter-signing that takes place whenever one inherits or receives a language. Derrida explains:

When one is born into a language, one inherits it because it is there before us, it is older than us, its law precedes us. One starts by recognizing its law, that is to say, its law, grammar, all this being almost ageless. But to inherit is not simply to receive passively something that is already there, like a possession. To inherit is to reaffirm through transformation, change, and displacement . . . . An inheritance must be signed; it must be counter-signed – that is to say, at bottom, one must leave one’s signature on inheritance itself, on the language one receives. That is a contradiction: one receives and, at the same time, one gives (2005, p. 104).

It is because the inheritance of a language involves “transformation, change, and displacement,” for Derrida, that the French language does not appear to him as a system whose meaning is guaranteed in advance, but rather – to recall his earlier formulation – as something that he inhabits even as it inhabits him [. . *. j’y reste et je l’habite. Il m’habite*]. Although not regularly acknowledged and, as we shall see, often even repressed, all of us must continually inhabit language in this way. This is not to deny the facticity of his linguistic inheritance but to consider the conditions which enable it and, thus, to acknowledge the instability of its ground. This is the sense in which Derrida proposes that his situation within the French language is not exceptional but “exemplary of a universal structure.”

But Derrida’s desire to expose this point of instability also has another motive, namely, to expose the political manipulations that deny it and so configure language as a “natural element.” In this, Derrida is able to address a kind of alienation from language that Heidegger does not. While Heidegger recognized the human tendency to deny the limits of the readiness-to-hand into which we are absorbed, Derrida recognizes the use of such a denial in the construction and preservation of hegemonic power. Such denial renders language “other” in a distinct sense, namely, as concrete forms of alienation sustained by certain social arrangements. And while there is no overcoming the first sense of language’s otherness described above – that “originary ‘alienation’ that institutes every language as a language of the other,” Derrida indeed protests against the forces that produce this modified form of alienation. These, then, are the target of Derrida’s normative political-ethical argument – not language’s otherness as such. As he writes:

Because the master does not possess exclusively, and naturally, what he calls his language, because, whatever he wants or does, he cannot maintain any relations of property or identity that are natural, national, congenital, or ontological, with it, because he can give substance to and articulate [*dire*] this appropriation only in the course of an unnatural process of politico-phantasmatic constructions, because language is not his natural possession, he can, thanks to that very fact, pretend historically, through the rape of a cultural usurpation, which means always essentially colonial, to appropriate it in order to impose it as ‘his own.’ That is his belief; he wishes to make others share it through the use of force or cunning [*par la force ou par la ruse*]; he wants to make others believe it, as they do a miracle, through rhetoric, the school, or the army. It suffices for him, through whatever means there is, to make himself understood, to have his ‘speech act’ work, to create conditions for that … (1998, p. 23-24).

Here Derrida analyzes a dimension of language’s power that Heidegger did not elaborate on, namely, the way language’s readiness-to-hand is sustained by the reiteration of certain social arrangements. It is, thus, inseparable from “an unnatural process of politico-phantasmatic constructions” which through “force and cunning” ensures the felicity of certain speech acts. Derrida’s point comes more clearly into view if we consider the practice of naming as an example of such power. Naming requires an intricate social convention – not just a theory of being’s relationship to the word. Without others to accept my naming ritual, without institutions and set conventions to regulate it and interpret it – to assess its felicity or infelicity, the power of naming would be nil. From this, it is not hard to see why the colonial power of France insisted upon translating Jewish rituals into the idiom of Christianity. The ritualistic power of speech, that is, its capacity to “work” in performing any number of socially significant tasks such as performative name-giving, belongs to what is most ready-to-hand for Dasein. Such speech indeed sets forth a world for Dasein, and yet this power of worlding is void without the simultaneous reaffirmation of certain enabling conditions that allow it to operate. Thus, against the one who wants to naturalize this power through the “use of force and cunning,” Derrida’s point here is that the ground and origin of this power cannot be established thus.[[12]](#endnote-12) The origin stands in need of a “prosthesis,” as the title of Derrida’s lecture suggests. To repeat Derrida’s earlier formulation pertaining to autobiographical anamnesis, this power “would have *formed* itself, then, at the site of a *situation* that cannot be found . . . .” Thus, what runs ahead of any particular kind of utterance is not only convention, but indeed political power.

Essential to political power is the naturalizing of certain ways of speaking and the delegitimizing of other ways. And yet, the conditions that satisfy the efficacy of a ritual are never as fixed as hegemonic political power lets on. In an important sense, they always remain open to rupture and contestation. For this reason, it is not always clear whether a speech-act “works,” for the measure one uses to determine this is always conventional, always part of the world to be interpreted.[[13]](#endnote-13) One could have surely protested against France’s redesignation of Jewish rituals, for example, insisting on the infelicity of the names even after they were commonly accepted. Or, as Derrida himself does in the *Monolingualism* lecture, one could defy the prohibition against contradiction in academic writing. But these are indeed risks, since such counter-signing is prohibited in advance as antithetical to common-sense interpretations of speech. One risks in these gestures becoming misunderstood and even unintelligible to others. And it is this form of alienation from language, wherein the denial of the ambiguity of linguistic life is enforced, that Derrida attempts to speak against.

This protest – the normative political-ethical argument that Derrida gives here – marks a point of difference from Heidegger’s otherwise quite parallel account that I have sketched above. Both theorize how the presence sustained by language in its readiness-to-hand is subject to rupture. Both also insist that this rupture – what Heidegger early on calls *Destruktion* and Derrida *déconstruction*, takes place of its own accord. However, Derrida goes further than Heidegger in recognizing the political stakes of highlighting the necessity of such rupture. Moreover, while Heidegger insists that being inauthentic need not entail any moral failure, Derrida has more condemnation for the one who, lacking a natural possession of language, manipulates social arrangements so that certain forms of language can remain unproblematically ready-to-hand while other ways of speaking are foreclosed. It is to such a person that Derrida speaks most of all when he insists that language is other for *us all*, no matter how inconspicuously and effectively it operates in our lives.

**Conclusion**

But let us return now to the central claim of linguistic determinism, namely, that language is something that determines the way we think, making it impossible to think outside of the worldview it provides. Recall that, on this account, this linguistic worldview is something that we share with others but only those others with whom we share a language. Having now explored the descriptions that Heidegger and Derrida offer of language inheritance, we can now make clear what such a claim overlooks. First, if language is an isolated worldview, then it would be in relationship with nothing else. It would be self-referential, not equipmental – in other words, without world. But being thrown into a discursive world does not mean that all possible meanings are worked out in advance. On the contrary, Dasein is continually in the throw of language. As Heidegger puts it in “The Way to Language:” “There is no such thing as a natural language that would be the language of a human nature occurring of itself, without a destiny. All language is historical [*geschichtlich*]” (1971, p. 132). I have argued that this is precisely what the breakdown of everyday speech discloses – the continual throw, the need for language to be reiterated, which is, I have argued, the pervasive possibility of discourse’s instability.

Next, linguistic determinism would seem to overlook what political power denies – namely, that an ongoing reiteration of certain social arrangements underlies the relative stability of language conventions. If, however, language is ready-to-hand for us, even “determining” for us, its readiness-to-hand nevertheless results from the ways it is reiterated and entrenched through the organization of our social world. That we tend to overlook this is understandable. Because we are thrown into a world where language is already at work, for example, as part of our social rituals, it is easy to forget what makes language’s efficacy possible in the first place, that is, how it “works” in our lives. Yet it would appear to be an important aim of philosophy, certainly of phenomenology and deconstruction, to provide an account of the context in which certain habits and ideas come to appear as unquestionable and thus to open up opportunities for thinking anew.

Lastly, linguistic determinism fails to recognize the difference that the instability of language makes in the lived experience of people, almost all of whom will at some point in their lives experience the ambiguity of and even venture an explicit counter-signing of the language that is allegedly unrevisable for them. Indeed, it has no way of even recognizing the interpretive disputes that arise within a linguistic community or, for that matter, that arise within a single mind trying to negotiate its path in the world. If to share a language, after all, is to share a fixed worldview, there would be no basis for inter- or intra-subjective disagreement about speech. On this point, then, linguistic determinism is complicit in the concrete forms of alienation that Derrida protests against. Meanwhile, Heidegger and Derrida make clear, even in their own controversial use of language, that such conflicts over language inheritance do exist – both for individuals and communities. The existence of these conflicts challenges not only the assumption that language single-handedly provides a worldview but also the assumption that individuals effortlessly transcend the language they inherit. For language is, to recall Derrida again, “not a natural element, not the transparency of the ether, but an absolute habitat.”[[14]](#endnote-14)

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1. In other words, I want to highlight the determinism that characterizes this conception of language’s role in our lives. I borrow the phrase “linguistic determinism” from the field of linguistics, where it is also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Edward Sapir presents the concept clearly when he writes, “It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the ‘real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality” (1949, p. 162). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Graff situates Derrida within the school of postmodern literary theory which he argues reduces truth to a play of language thus denying the possibility of discovering first principles and thus eroding the concept of error (1979, p. 62). See also John W. Murphy’s presentation of Derrida, where he argues that sociologists can benefit from studying a theorist like Derrida who makes clear how knowledge is always “shaped by acts of linguistic signification” and hence “linguistically prescribed” (1988, p. 604). Finally, see David Novitz’s “The Rage of Deconstruction” (1986) where Novitz argues that Derrida’s philosophy entails linguistic idealism, since it suggests that language is never constrained by a non-linguistic world. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. As Lafont puts it, Heidegger views language as “the final authority for judging intraworldly knowledge,” one that is not open to revision based on any intraworldly experience. She notes the resemblance between this and Humboldt’s claim that every language “places definite boundaries upon the spirits of those who speak it” (2000, p. 7). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. To be clear, the “turn” should not be understood as a mere methodological shift in Heidegger’s philosophy unprovoked by the matter for thinking that Heidegger takes up. As Thomas Sheehan (2014) has recently argued, *die Kehre* is just another way Heidegger conceived of the abiding topic throughout his thinking, the event of being or meaningful presence, albeit a conception that would require his philosophical style to shift away from the transcendental phenomenology of *Being and Time*. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This is evident, for example, in the 1951-1952 lecture course entitled *What is Called Thinking?* where Heidegger challenges the conventional interpretation of the word *Sprache* and argues that what the Greeks called *legein* should be understood as an originary setting-forth. At the same time, Heidegger also recognizes here an ambiguity in language itself. In the second part of the course, he explains: “Language admits of two things: One, that it be reduced to a mere system of signs, uniformly available to everybody, and in this form be enforced as binding [*verbindlich*]; and two, that language at one great moment says one unique thing, for one time only, which remains inexhaustible, because it is always originary [*anfänglich*], and thus beyond the reach of any kind of leveling. These two possibilities of language are so far removed from each other that we should not be doing justice to their disparity even if we were to call them extreme opposites.” He continues, “Customary speech vacillates between these two possible ways in which language speaks. It gets caught halfway. Mediocrity becomes the rule. Commonness, which looks much like custom, attaches itself to the rule. Common speech puffs itself up as the sole binding rule for everything we say – and now every word at variance with it immediately looks like an arbitrary violation [*als Willkür und Verstoß*]” (1968, p. 192). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. “We are, then, within language and with language before all else. A way to language is not needed. Besides, the way to language is impossible if we indeed are already at that point to which the way is to take us. But are we at that point? Are we so fully within language that we experience its nature . . . ? Or is the way to language as language the longest road our thinking can follow?” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 112). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. As Catherine F. Botha (2008) argues, both terms emerge as different attempts on Heidegger’s part to address the same thing, namely, that situation where the past becomes something we no longer take for granted but comes to claim us in some new, unanticipated way. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. As a result, since the 1962 revolution, there have been several laws to make Algerian Arabic the only language used in schools, on street signs, and in government and politics – the enforcement of which has not been very successful – largely because of the population’s linguistic diversity. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. This assumption appears especially problematic when we consider that the majority of the world’s population today speaks more than one language. This fact alone demands that we rethink the assumption that one’s language provides one with his or her “worldview.” [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For a discussion of this problem in Derrida’s work, see Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (1979, p. 60-62); Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, (1987, p. 185-210); and Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, “Avowing Violence: Foucault and Derrida on Politics, Discourse, and Meaning” (2011, p. 9-14). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. In addition to Heidegger’s influence, one can see a psychoanalytic influence upon Derrida’s thinking here, particularly Jacques Lacan’s argument that the unconscious is the Other’s discourse. In a passage from “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious” that echoes Derrida’s own strained recollection in *Monolingualism of the Other*, Lacan puzzles over the radical heteronomy of the speaking being: “Which other is this, then,” he asks, “to whom I am more attached than to myself [*moi*], since, at the most assented to heart of my identity to myself, he pulls the strings? His presence can only be understood in an alterity raised to the second power, which already situates him in a mediating position in relation to my own splitting from myself, as if from a semblable” (2006, p. 436). Derrida’s autobiographical self is also an alterity to the second power, granting him a voice with which to narrate his own self-splitting. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. As Michael Naas explains, for Derrida, power, as opposed to force, is always a phantasm, one that works by eliding a performative fiction with its real effects (2008, p. 200). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For Derrida, the performative speech-act, like any speech-act, can always break with its context, with “the collectivity of presences organizing the moment of its inscription” (1988, p. 9). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. I want to thank Michael Naas who graciously read and provided feedback on an early draft of this essay as well as the members of the Heidegger Circle, particularly Emilia Angelova and Larry Hatab, who gave me insightful guidance on the project at the 2013 Heidegger Circle meeting in New Haven. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)