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Language and Humanity

In Wallace's work, the depiction of dialects represents rather than enacts "realism": it is representational not only in the sense that various voices do exist and always have co-existed in the United States, that they do have unequal prominence and prestige, but also as a signal that the *character* is "keeping it real," not trying to pose or front or pass. In some cases, this may be active resistance to the pressure to assimilate or to aspire to upper-class norms; in others, it is less an act of resistance than a lack of access. It is not necessary that the dialect depictions themselves be entirely realistic to achieve those ends; Wallace was neither linguist nor ethnographer; he was a *creative* writer, even when ostensibly writing nonfiction. His allegiance was to his writing and to the relationship he was attempting to cultivate with readers, not to "reality." In a 1993 interview, he distanced himself explicitly from a view of fiction as "travelogue": "It *used to be* a way to take people to foreign lands and exotic cultures, or to important people, and give readers access to worlds they didn't have before."¹ It even seems fitting that Wallace got at least some details wrong, whether this was intentional or accidental, as the worlds presented in his writing are always skewed and off-kilter. It seems that Wallace placed too much trust in his ability to mimic and too little effort into researching actual dialect features (and didn't think it really mattered, didn't worry about offending), and that readers were often too awed by Wallace's linguistic skills, so evident in other ways, to question the accuracy of his dialect portrayals.

Linguistic Relativism

Dawson² argues that Wallace's writing highlights "characterological cognitive self-awareness"—that is, that his representation of consciousness is not just

¹ Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk, "Looking for a Garde of Which to Be Avant: An Interview with David Foster Wallace," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 11–20, esp. 19, emphasis added.

² Dawson, *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator*, 189.

mimetic, but “a means for interrogating the relation of language and thought.” Others have already explored how Wallace’s earliest work plays with the linguistic determinism of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, the view that language shapes the perception of reality. Linguist Edward Sapir’s³ magnum opus, *Language*, published in the same year as *Tractatus*, argues for a weaker connection between language and thought, what is often now referred to as linguistic relativism, or the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis” (based also on the research of Sapir’s student, Benjamin Lee Whorf), according to which, because each language reflects reality differently, its speakers tend to unconsciously and uncritically accept certain default categorizations. Presumably, different dialects within a language also encode and encourage subtly different worldviews. Wallace’s non-native dialects (particularly Marathe and Schtitt) represent different philosophies, although there is little reason to believe that it is the native languages of those speakers that shaped those philosophies. Wallace’s portrayals of ethnic and regional US dialects argue against stronger views of linguistic relativism: speakers of different dialects share fairly similar worldviews, and speakers ostensibly from the same dialect community are nonetheless carefully distinguished, showing the power of individuals to forge their own identities.

In *Jest*, Michael Pemulis makes a forceful distinction between *map* and *territory*: “It’s snowing on the goddam *map*, not the *territory*, you *dick*” (333, emphasis original), reiterated even more forcefully a few pages later (“the *map*, not the clusterfucking *territory*” [338]). It is possible that Wallace learned of Korzybski’s famous dictum that “the map is not the territory,” a warning that symbols for reality should not be confused with reality itself, in one of his college philosophy courses. Korzybski was an engineer and independent scholar who developed a field called “general semantics,” which he viewed as including, but going beyond the linguistic subfield known as semantics. Linguists have largely dismissed his work as unsupported by evidence, although the above slogan is unobjectionable. Wallace would not have had much truck with Korzybski’s proscriptions of particular usages such as avoidance of “to be” as grammatical copula (the “*is* of identity”), which he thought caused “many human semantic difficulties.”⁴ (That is, a statement such as “Gately is a criminal” could create a false equation in people’s minds, causing them to think that Gately is *foremost* or *only* a criminal, that he *is* what we call him. Training ourselves to avoid such usages, to say instead “Gately committed crimes,” would supposedly lead to clearer thinking.)

³ Edward Sapir, *Language* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1921).

⁴ Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics* (Lakeville, CT: International Non-Aristotelian Library Publishing Co., 1933), 339.

Wallace argued against this type of extreme prescriptivism, which judges some uses of language as *objectively* superior to others, as some *languages* superior to others, in A&AU.

No matter how many times Pemulis verbalizes the distinction (“You can only launch against the *territory*. Not against the *map*” [338]), the Eschaton map *does* become the territory. An abstract argument about symbols and their relationship to reality, about a game that symbolizes warfare and world domination—“Real-world snow isn’t a factor if it’s falling on the fucking *map*!” [334])—becomes a real-world struggle for control of the game. Instead of symbolically fighting, aiming tennis balls for “the gear that *maps* what’s real,” the players begin aiming at each other, then eventually forego the symbol of the launched tennis balls as well, fighting hand-to-hand, resulting in actual injuries. Words matter, but words do not control reality.

Language as Shibboleth

As noted in Chapter 1, language has always been used to distinguish “us” and “them,” often with very high stakes attached. In the Hebrew Bible (Judg. xii: 4-6), Gileadites forced people to pronounce the word *shibboleth*, because the Ephraimites supposedly pronounced the initial *shin* differently); the penalty for the wrong pronunciation was death. Then, as now, language was seen as indexing one’s “real” identity. The conversation in French between Poutrincourt and Steeply undercover as a woman reporter in *Jest* contains Wallace’s clearest use of language as shibboleth: it is “the vulgate Québécois *transperçant*, whose idiomatic connotation of doom Poutrincourt shouldn’t have had any reason to think the Parisian-speaking Steeply would know” (1052) that tells Steeply his cover has been blown.

Wallace himself appears to have failed the shibboleth test himself, as many readers view his misrepresentations of AAE (particularly in the “Clenette” section of *Jest*) as proof that Wallace could not empathize across ethnic difference. He might have argued that point with them, but he would likely have approved of the underlying assumptions that language use matters, and that it reflects who people actually are.

Language as Problem and Solution

Wallace’s ongoing attempt to capture regional and ethnic dialects challenged readers to “Identify, don’t Compare,” as the Alcoholics Anonymous mantra

embedded throughout *Jest* advocates. I imagine that this was also a challenge he continued to issue to himself, to counteract his own "SNOOT-y" tendencies. He believed "that our linguistic choices can often have nonlinguistic consequences of pretty obvious practical or ethical significance"⁵—that is, that they trigger social judgments and discrimination—but not that the linguistic choices have ethical or moral significance in and of themselves.

Turnbull⁶ explores the deep morality expressed in Wallace's theory of attention, as articulated in *Water*, which advocates "a richer conception of [other, unknown] people as having, like us, genuine inner lives."⁷ This theory of attention urges us away from automatic, unconscious reactions toward a fuller awareness and appreciation of all things, including language use. We're all "stuck in here, in language, but we're all in here together," Wallace told McCaffery;⁸ "It's not that language is us, but we're still *in* it, inescapably" (45).

When Hal Incandenza says, "I am not what you see and hear" (*Jest* 13), he speaks for everyone; communication is always imperfect, and language cannot fully bridge the distance between minds. Ironically, though, this is *especially* true for speakers of stigmatized dialects, whose way of speaking is so heavily judged that what they say is often ignored. I agree with Kelly⁹ and Hayes-Brady¹⁰ on "the conceptual centrality of sincere communication to Wallace's writing, both within and without the text," but this doesn't mean that he never employed irony to further the cause of a sincere message.¹¹ Readers are more willing to accept such an observation from a speaker of the most privileged dialect in the United States than they are from speakers of stigmatized dialects. I do not read this as Wallace claiming victimization (as Joffe¹² might), but rather as an expression of the limitations of verbal communication that affect everybody, albeit not equally.

Cunningham¹³ argues that what distinguishes Wallace from the postmodernists (what makes him *post*-postmodern) is that he was not content to expose "the arbitrariness and constructedness of the stories and ideologies

⁵ Alexis Burgess, "How We Ought to Do Things with Words," in *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 5–18, esp. 16.

⁶ Daniel Turnbull, "*This Is Water* and the Ethics of Attention: Wallace, Murdoch, and Nussbaum," in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles and Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 209–17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁸ McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace," 44.

⁹ Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction."

¹⁰ Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 19.

¹¹ Cf. Kaiser, "Humor after Postmodernism."

¹² Joffe, "*In the Shadows*."

¹³ Cunningham, "The Hazards of Being Free," 5.

people believe to make sense of modern life,” but sought to “also offer a meaningful, if not *hopeful*, way forward out of the rubble of disillusionment.” Language is part of the problem: it allows people to conceal and mislead, it keeps groups divided, it never perfectly communicates meanings—but it is also part of the solution. Wallace believed that “language and linguistic intercourse is, in and of itself, redeeming, remedy-ing.”¹⁴ We can choose to avoid automatic, reflexive, negative judgments of people’s language, to pay attention to the meanings they wish to express, which would allow us to “Identify” rather than “Compare.” We can find or form communities that support individuals, finding commonality and universality of experience across acknowledged differences, rather than communities that require erasure of individual differences in order to fit in.

Wallace deemed the term “discourse community” “a rare piece of academic jargon that’s actually a valuable addition to SWE because it captures something at once very complex and very specific that no other English term quite can” (CTL 98). Alcoholics Anonymous is presented in *Jest* as a healthy discourse community because everyone learns not just to signal their in-group identity by echoing the rather-simplistic-yet-deeply-profound slogans, not only to learn to speak in their own authentic voices but also “to listen . . . with an empathy (‘identification’) that manages to quiet a certain habitual cynicism and negativity.”¹⁵ Wallace explicitly specified that this crosses cultural, racial, and ethnic divides—“no matter what the color or fellowship” (*Jest* 345)—perhaps that it also crosses linguistic divides is too self-evident to warrant mention. McGurl¹⁶ notes that Wallace’s conception of a “therapeutic community” revolves around “individual ethical choices” rather than political questions or challenges to the political system,” and Williams¹⁷ agrees that “the rehabilitation of the individual is Wallace’s chief concern, and he hopes that improvement of the community will follow.” Individual readers might disagree with this as a philosophical matter, seeing it as a cop-out, preferring writers to take more explicitly political stances—but that would be a very different writer, not Wallace.

Wallace’s alter ego characters typically do not live up to the goal of empathetic, nonjudgmental identifying, but his narrators often do. Readers are challenged to bear witness to all kinds of horrors and indignities; the

¹⁴ McCaffery, “An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace,” 33.

¹⁵ Paul Jenner, “Don’t Compare, Identify: David Foster Wallace on John McCain,” in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles and Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 199–208, esp. 203.

¹⁶ McGurl, “The Institution of Nothing,” 36.

¹⁷ Williams, “*Something Real American*,” 170.

pain of this is made bearable by identifying with the always deeply ethical perspective of the narrator. Wallace presented his own endless anxieties both as human and specifically as author,¹⁸ not because they were greater than other people's, but because they were his; the implication that readers will respond with understanding and care is flattering to their positive face, as was the implication of reciprocity—that if readers could articulate their own anxieties and traumas (in their own dialects), “Dave Wallace” would identify and care.

In *Water*, Wallace concludes that “there is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship” (99–101; italics in original). Wallace's choice was language and the power of narrative. Those who share that choice cannot help but respond to the masterful way Wallace wielded language, somehow creating “words that are not and never can be words” (487) (as Lucien Antittoi was not able to do). He could not sound “a bell-clear and nearly maternal call-to-arms in all the world's well-known tongues” (489) (as the release of Lucien's soul from his body did); for Wallace's fans, the muddled call-to-arms in English will have to suffice.

¹⁸ Cf. Holland, “By Hirsute Author,” 60–70.