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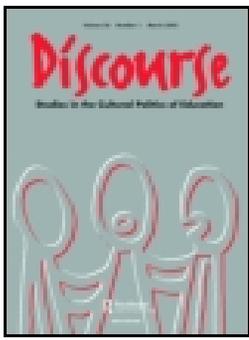
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## Reconceptualising early language development: matter, sensation and the more-than-human

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### ABSTRACT

This article critically interrogates the model of language that underpins early years policy and pedagogy. Our arguments emerge from an ethnographic study involving 2-year-olds attending a day care centre that had begun to hold a substantial proportion of its sessions outdoors. The resultant shift in pedagogy coincided with changes in the children's speaking and listening practices. We take these changes as a starting point for a reconceptualisation of early language and the conditions under which it develops. Drawing on posthuman and Deleuzian theory, we propose a relational- material model of early language, which situates language within a wider, multi-sensory and more-than-human milieu, in which children are immersed from their earliest days. We end by asking whether early language development might be better supported by paying *less* attention to words, grammar and meaning, in favour of fostering participation in dynamic, multisensory, collective events.

### KEYWORDS

Early childhood; language; more-than-human; Deleuze; posthumanism

## Introduction

Young children's language development has often been associated with their chances of success at school. We argue that the model of language underpinning this association with educational success is fundamentally misconceived, rendering remedial interventions largely ineffective, and misconstruing the development of very young children. We propose an alternative relational-material conceptualisation of language situating spoken language, as conventionally understood, within a wider, multi-sensory and more-than-human milieu, in which children are immersed from their earliest days.

Our arguments emerge from an ethnographic study of young children (aged 2 years) in a day care centre that had reconfigured its pedagogical approach resulting in children spending a substantial proportion of each half-day session outdoors. This coincided with changes in the children's speaking and listening practices, in their everyday interactions, and as registered in the assessments routinely carried out by the day care staff.

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We take these observed changes in speaking and listening in the nursery setting as an occasion for re-theorising young children's language practices.

The article builds on existing work in anthropology, educational ethnography, multimodality and sound studies that highlights the significance of non-verbal elements of language such as gaze, gesture, sound, facial expression, bodily disposition and movement. This work has challenged the dominant focus on grammar and vocabulary in explanations of early language development, and generated rich insights into language as a complex, culturally-inflected and contextually-sensitive interplay of modes and senses. In common with much of this work, we hold that language demands routinely placed upon very young children in educational settings are extremely taxing, because they abstract speech from the material supports and the multisensory events within which it draws its significance. However, in turning to posthuman and Deleuzian theory for conceptual resources, we diverge from some founding assumptions about language in previous work – about culture, meaning-making, and individual agency – as we outline below. Nevertheless, we find common cause with those who argue that early language development might better be served, paradoxically, by paying *less* attention to language itself, or at least to words, grammar and meaning, in favour of fostering participation in dynamic, multisensory events.

### **Early language and literacy: attitudes and approaches**

Early language has long been associated with educational success, social mobility and economic prosperity. Waves of policy initiatives over several decades have tackled perceived inadequacies in the language and literacy resources that some children are held to bring to mainstream education (at around 4–5 years in the UK). Many local authorities in England now promote language assessment for children entering their nurseries. The rationale given for one such screening package makes clear the sheer weight of societal and educational concern that has come to be attached to young children's language:

By targeting preschool children, the aim is to increase school readiness and decrease the risk of poor literacy, behavioural difficulties, mental health difficulties, criminal activity, and unemployment that are associated with poor early communication skills. (RSPH, *n.d.*)

Two-year-old children have been a particular focus of recent policy in England, with free education and care made available to all 2-year-olds from lower income backgrounds, with the aim of 'levelling the playing field and improving a child's life chances' (DfE, 2014). Although the aspirations of the 'two-year-old offer' go beyond language and literacy, the initiative has concentrated public and professional attention on early language and disadvantage. Whilst the initiative may well be providing children with experiences they would not otherwise have,<sup>1</sup> it is important to consider the quality of the language experiences being offered, given that the introduction of accountability systems into early years settings in the UK has already resulted in a narrowing of language pedagogy and curriculum, (e.g. Flewitt & Roberts-Holmes, 2015; Roberts-Holmes, 2015). This concern is mirrored internationally (e.g. Yoon, 2015).

Arguments for early intervention are by no means new; indeed they stretch back over several decades (e.g. Bernstein, 1973; ICAN/RCSLT, 2018; Law, Charlton, & Asmussen, 2017; Melhuish et al., 2008; Tough, 1977). The evidence base for a language 'gap' or delay might

therefore appear to be strong. However, such research has also been challenged by anthropologists, linguists and child language researchers, on the grounds that it assesses a narrow subset of language skills, fails to value cultural diversity, downplays the importance of culturally relevant texts and measures all children against the linguistic norms of the white, middle classes of the global North (e.g. Adair, Sánchez-Suzuki Colegrove, & McManus, 2017; Ahrenkiel & Holm, 2020; Dernikos, 2020; Flewitt, 2005; Gee, 2014; Heath, 1983; Kuchirko, 2017; MacLure, 1999; Rosen, 1974; Viruru, 2001; Wells, 1977). Avineri et al. (2015) condemn language-gap research for pathologising home language skills as ‘a panacea for academic woes and social inequity’ (p. 66).

The research evidence for a link between early language and educational success tends therefore to be based on a particular view of language that focuses on vocabulary, phonics, ‘meaning-making’, and familiarity with a small set of culturally valued speech acts and routines. The significance of non-verbal dimensions of language is often overlooked. Yet multimodal analysis has shown how movement, gesture, gaze and facial expression are non-trivial elements of communicative events (e.g. Kress, 1997; Lancaster, 2001), leading Flewitt (2005) to warn that ‘the current focus on talk in the early years may be detracting from the diversity of ways children make and express meaning’ (p. 207).

### **Beyond meaning, communication and representation: ‘the sense of life’ in language**

The centrality of talk in the UK early years curriculum reflects an emphasis on language as *meaningful communication*. Language is viewed principally as a medium for representing things, ideas or feelings, and for communicating these to other speaker/hearers. Such a view of language – as a vehicle for communicating meanings – does not, as noted above, in principle exclude non-verbal behaviours such as gesture, gaze and movement (Kress, 1997), but it considers such non-verbal elements primarily in terms of what, and how, they contribute to communicative exchanges.

However, language is only partly concerned with meaningful communication. There are also non-verbal, affective and sensory forces ‘inside’ language that have nothing to do with meaning or signification. Horton and Kraftl (2018) draw attention to ‘social-materialities’ in children’s accounts of their play environments that are strictly meaning-less, but nonetheless reek of visceral affect and adverse socio-political consequence. In drawing attention to the ambivalent, shifting, material-discursive significance of substances that are typically overlooked, such as shit and tainted water, they urge attention to the ‘many ongoing, everyday, moment-by-moment, autotelic, intra-active, seemingly point-less or *meaning-less* experiences’ (Horton & Kraftl, 2018, p. 929; emphasis added). This account of the powerful charge of the *meaning-less* bears some resemblance to what Deleuze (2004) called the ‘wild element’ in language – something mobile, lively and relational that resists definition and evades ‘capture’ by representation. Deleuze calls it ‘sense’. Sense works at the frontiers of language and the world. It ‘happens to bodies and ... insists in [linguistic] propositions’ (p. 142), causing them to resonate, without ever settling on one side or the other of the boundary that supposedly divides matter from mind, language from reality.

In a Deleuzian understanding of language, the agency and autonomy of the individual speaker is displaced. The speaking subject is no longer recognisable as the self-contained

subject concisely summarised by Massumi (2002) as ‘a self-governing, reflective individual whose inner life can be conveyed at will to a public composed of similarly sovereign individuals – rational atoms of human experience in voluntary congregation, usefully sharing thoughts and experiences’ (p. xiii). Language is not the property and responsibility of the individual speaker, and speakers can no longer be seen to ‘own’ their utterances in a straightforward manner (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004; MacLure, 2016; Mazzei, 2013; Mazzei & Jackson, 2017). Expression does not come from ‘inside’ us. Rather, to speak is always to be part of an *event* that exceeds, and precedes, our own consciousness and intentionality, in which forces strike the body and spark sensations. Only subsequently do these forces become ‘captured’ as meanings owned by an individual speaker. In Massumi’s (2002) words, ‘Expression is “abroad in the world”’ (p. 13).

Recent work in sound studies provides further support for a relational-material view of language, in which sound is understood as relational, emergent, connective and dynamic. For LaBelle (2014), sound is a kind of ‘radical empathy’. It ceaselessly makes connections ‘between bodies and things, culture and social experience, and diverse fields of thought’ (p. ix). Sound, in this analysis, can be understood as part of the immanent relationality that precedes the individual speaker. Gallagher (2016) describes it as a kind of *affect*: ‘an oscillating difference, and intensity that moves bodies, a vibration physically pushing and pulling their material fabric’ (p. 43). He considers sound to be a fundamental, inhuman force that nevertheless underpins specifically human capacities.

Whilst Western language socialisation practices encourage young children to attend to and tune in to human words in particular, this is not universal. For example, Feld’s (2012) work with the Bosavi in Papua New Guinea argues for an expanded notion of ‘song texts’ to accommodate the way the Bosavi people interweave singing, speech and the sounds of the rainforest during mourning. Arguing for ‘an emplaced, all species approach to vocalisation’ (p. xxv), Feld argues that Bosavi tacit knowledge of the rainforest is closely linked to their expressive vocalisation practices.

Insights from sound and affect studies throw into stark relief the impoverished sonic landscape that is implicit in conventional notions of ‘listening’ and ‘attention’ in educational contexts, where sound that does not accord with pedagogic or institutional priorities is likely to be heard only as distraction or irrelevance, if it is heard at all (Gershon, 2011). Gallagher, Prior, Needham, and Holmes (2017) conclude that, ‘[m]ainstream pedagogy is therefore ill-equipped to hear sound’s affective and environmental dimensions, as vibrations that move all kinds of bodies in all kinds of ways’ (p. 1246).

A great deal of humming, non-linguistic sounding, rhythmic gesture, onomatopoeia and idiosyncratic movement accompanies, or rather, is folded into, young children’s language (Laing, 2019; MacLure, 2016). This is of particular significance for the relational-material model of early language that we are developing here, since such practices operate at the boundary of language, sensation and materiality. They confound, or at least complicate, representational theories of language, since they do not mediate external realities or mirror internal thoughts, but are *events*. As such, they are dynamic, vital and transformative.

We suggest that the prevailing model that drives early language pedagogy *itself* creates many of the difficulties to which it demands solutions. It assumes that speaking subjects are bounded, autonomous agents individually responsible for their own speech-as-signification. It fails to recognise and accommodate that which is not strictly meaningful in

children's utterances. It severs language from its multi-sensory, material, more-than-human entanglements; or domesticates these by incorporating them only as components of 'meaningful' communication, as noted above. In short, the vision of language that prevails in educational settings often stifles what the anthropologist Janice Nuckolls (2010) calls 'the sense of life' that infuses it, through its material entanglements with worldly events. As a result, we suggest, conventional language pedagogy makes exorbitant demands on young speakers. It is hardly surprising that the lonely burden of speaking in institutional contexts, even for adults, is often accompanied by anxiety (Jones, 2013; Thiel, 2015), and often registers in the *body*: in the gut, the pulse, the dry mouth, the invisible film of sweat on the skin.

### **Outline of the ethnographic study**

The research discussed in this article is part of an ongoing, three-year ethnographic study carried out by Abi Hackett, funded by the British Academy. The study investigates the role of place, materiality and the body in the emergence of literacy in young children between the ages of 12 and 36 months. The fieldwork was located in an urban community in northern England, working across one day care centre and two community early childhood settings. The research followed the ethical protocols of the Manchester Metropolitan University, and informed consent was first sought from parents of the children attending each setting. Once parental consent was confirmed, children's assent to participate in the activities, to interact with the researcher, to be observed and to be photographed or filmed, was ascertained on a moment-by-moment basis, following their verbal and bodily cues (Cocks, 2006; Flewitt, 2006). The pilot phase of fieldwork involved three months of fortnightly visits. The first main phase of fieldwork involved visits once or twice each month over a five-month period. The second, more intensive phase of fieldwork involved 12 months of fieldwork, with an average of 2–3 field visits per month. Working collaboratively with children, families and staff, the study used ethnographic and post-qualitative methods (Lather & St Pierre, 2013) within a posthuman orientation (Hackett & Somerville, 2017) to attend to the role of bodies, places, animals, children, familiar and unfamiliar adults, material objects and affects in very young children's literacy practices. The study combined conventional qualitative data, such as video and audio recordings, field notes and informal interviews, with a post-qualitative focus on affect, sensation and relations among human and non-human participants. Children's and place names are pseudonyms.

### **Implementing outdoor sessions at Bay Tree day care centre**

Bay Tree day care centre had 28 children on the roll during the period of research, all accessing free sessions as part of the government initiative for 2-year-olds from low income families. Sarah was day care centre manager during this time. Abi carried out fieldwork at the site between March 2017 and December 2018. The day care centre serves an almost entirely white British working class post-industrial community in northern England.

The reconfiguration of the daily routine to incorporate significant portions of each session outdoors was a dramatic change for this day care setting, where the generous

outside space, including a specially-purchased 'tepee',<sup>2</sup> had been previously under-used. Abi's documentation of these changes began at the start of the process (March 2017), when a trainer was commissioned by the day care to run a series of outdoors 'forest school inspired' sessions for the children, coupled with staff training to embed practices long term. The change was not immediately experienced as easy or natural, for either staff or children. At first, the dis-comforting new-ness of the outdoor setting was evident in the children's silence, closed body language and fearful facial expressions. Staff similarly appeared nervous initially, worrying whether they themselves had chosen appropriate footwear and clothing. Adding to the children's apprehensions were the changes in clothing required for going outside (or 'down bottom' as it tended to be referred to). The day care had a supply of wellington boots, and the children were required to change out of their everyday shoes into these, as the outside space was muddy. Later, waterproof suits were acquired for the children to wear, meaning outdoor play could continue all year. The children and adults quickly embraced being outdoors however, and the less structured approach to learning and play this seemed to offer. The project was considered a success, both in terms of the enthusiasm of the children, staff and parents, and also, as we explain below, in terms of the children's language.

### Language outdoors

When the new academic year began, Sarah, as day care centre manager, structured the daily routine so that the children spent the first hour of every two and a half hour session outdoors. The tepee, which the children visited at the beginning and end of each session, with a cry of 'tepee time!', became a location for more structured activities such as speaking and listening games, drawn from the Letters and Sounds programme (DfE, 2007), which would previously have taken place in the indoor classroom.

It is not our intention to explore here the many benefits that this intervention has brought to the day care experience for children, staff and parents. Rather, we want to dwell on one particular aspect: namely, that *there appears to have been a marked change in the children's language practices*. Positive changes were registered in Abi's field notes and practitioners' observations. For instance, Sarah noted how circle time activities from the 'Letters and Sounds' programme had changed with the move to the tepee. Previously, the children had been separated into small groups based on ability, and some children seldom spoke. Within a few weeks, nearly all the children were speaking during 'tepee time', including children who had arrived at day care seemingly with few words or unwilling to speak. In one example, children composed a shopping list for 'Lola' a cuddly tiger, taking turns to repeat the list and add a new item. One child who had never joined in Letters and Sounds before, did so for the first time.

The dynamics of the children's interactions with one another during the less structured activities also changed. On a hot day, Sarah set up a shaded area outdoors for play with Play-Doh. Indoors, the Play-Doh was usually set out on a small table with four chairs, allowing for a maximum of four children at a time. Staff often found themselves telling the children to be careful as the Play-Doh was going on the floor, and the children often squabbled over it. But with the Play-Doh set up outside on a table, ten children gathered around it for 20 min or more, with no arguments or problems.

Perhaps the most surprising change involved children's scores on the assessment of their language and social skills, as compared with those of previous cohorts. ECaT (Every Child a Talker) is a simple monitoring tool, widely used in early years settings in England, assessing children's language across four categories: (1) *listening and attention*; (2) *understanding of language*; (3) *speech sounds and talk*; (4) *social skills and play* (see Tables 1 and 2) (DCSF, 2009). Each child receives a colour score on each ECaT category, according to the 'traffic lights' system: green indicates performance ahead of expected development; amber indicates performance at the expected level of development; red indicates performance below expected development. With no signs of improvement after two assessments, red would trigger a referral to speech and language therapy. ECaT scores are recorded *in situ*, once every term, when the practitioner observes a child displaying the requisite behaviour.

The two tables show the assessment ratings for 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 cohorts. Many educational researchers have criticised the narrowness of the categories that are commonly used to assess young children's literacy development (c.f., Flewitt & Roberts-Holmes, 2015), and we would broadly endorse such critiques. Here however, we want to focus on some issues thrown up by the scores themselves. The proportionate decrease in red scores and increase in amber scores in the 2017–2018 cohort appears to indicate that a majority of this new cohort of children were demonstrating speech and language skills of an expected level, albeit according to the narrow categories of the ECaT tool. Sarah notes that the 2017–2018 results differed not only from those of the previous year, but from all the assessments that had been carried out during her 12 years at the setting, despite no notable differences in the makeup of the cohorts. Only one child was referred for additional speech and language support at the end of 2017–2018, the first year of the outdoors initiative; previously, between 8 and 12 children had been referred annually.

We do not suggest that this impressionistic comparison of assessment scores amounts to evidence of a correlation, far less a causal relation between the outdoors experience and gains in language proficiency. Our intention is rather to take the possibility of an

**Table 1.** Tracking of the children's literacy and language development at the setting – February 2017.

Age in months	Child's outcome for each strand – on exit			
	Listening and attention	Understanding of language	Speech sounds and talk	Social skills and play
<i>February 2017 ECAT scores</i>				
37	Average	Average	Average	Average
40	Average	At Risk of delay	At Risk of delay	Average
39	Average	At Risk of delay	Average	Average
38	At Risk of delay	At Risk of delay	At Risk of delay	At Risk of delay
39	At Risk of delay	At Risk of delay	At Risk of delay	At Risk of delay
39	Average	Average	At Risk of delay	At Risk of delay
37	Average	At Risk of delay	At Risk of delay	At Risk of delay
37	Average	Average	Average	Average
39	Average	Average	Average	Average
35	Average	Average	Average	Average
25	Average	Average	At Risk of delay	At Risk of delay
26	Average	Average	At Risk of delay	Average
26	Average	Average	At Risk of delay	Average
26	Average	Average	Average	Average
27	Average	Average	At Risk of delay	At Risk of delay
26	Average	Average	At Risk of delay	At Risk of delay

**Table 2.** Tracking of the children's literacy and language development at the setting – February 2018.

Age in months	Child's outcome for each strand – on entry			
	Listening and attention	Understanding of language	Speech sounds and talk	Social skills and play
<i>February 2018 ECAT scores</i>				
39	Average	Ahead	Average	Average
35	At Risk of delay	Average	At Risk of delay	At Risk of delay
37	Average	Average	Average	Average
35	Ahead	Ahead	Average	Average
34	Average	Average	Average	Average
33	Ahead	Ahead	Ahead	Ahead
34	Average	Average	At Risk of delay	At Risk of delay
33	Average	Average	Average	Average
34	Average	Average	At Risk of delay	Average
30	Average	Average	Average	Average
32	Average	Average	At Risk of delay	Average
34	Average	Average	Average	Average
30	Average	Average	Average	Average
27	Average	Ahead	Average	Average
41	Average	Ahead	Ahead	Average
35	At Risk of delay	At Risk of delay	At Risk of delay	At Risk of delay
28	Average	Average	At Risk of delay	Average
28	Average	Average	Average	Average
28	Average	Average	Average	Average
28	Average	Average	Average	Average
26	Average	Average	Average	At Risk of delay
27	Average	Average	Average	At Risk of delay
33	Average	Average	Average	Average

association between the outdoors intervention and the changes in children's language as a *provocation to thought*. We have been moved to think differently about the relation of language and materiality, and this in turn has prompted a critical revaluation of the model of language and literacy that prevails in early years education. We surmise that the outdoors experience may be working to restore some of the 'sense of life' that animates language, in which language moves through and across bodies as a collectively-felt force. We still have a long way to go before we fully understand how this happens. However, we offer below a discussion of two fragments from the data, reading these through the relational-material lens that we have attempted to develop.

### The 'hello' song

As soon as the children arrived for their day care session, they would change shoes for wellies and put on waterproof suits, ready to go 'down bottom' for outdoor play. Play outdoors was largely unstructured, but began with 'tepee time' in which the children were ushered into the tepee for a speaking and listening activity, typically songs, rhymes or games that prompted each child to speak individually in turn. One of the most popular 'tepee time' activities was the 'Hello' song (Figure 1).

The children are ushered into the tepee. There is the sound of the wind, the rustling of the waterproof suits, feet on the wooden floor of the tepee. Very bright sunlight streams through the Perspex windows, causing eyes to squint.

Teacher announces: 'Boys and girls, we're going to say hello to everyone today'. The gaze of Beth and then Ryan moves to the teacher's face, and Beth waves her hand high at shoulder



**Figure 1.** Entering the tepee.

height, whilst saying 'Hello' in reply. Ryan moves both his hands, lower down and more tentatively, in a waving wiggling motion. He looks to his friend Beth, seemingly for reassurance.

Teacher: 'Shall we, ready to sing. Shall we show everyone our song?'

As the teacher continues to talk, both Beth and Ryan continue to move their hands in a waving motion. Beth sings quietly to herself, anticipating the song '*heellooo e'one*'. The teacher begins the song, to the tune of 'Goodnight Ladies/Merrily We Roll Along'. (*Italics font indicates sung words.*)

Teacher: '*Hello everyone.*' Ryan and Beth both sit still and silent. Ryan drops his hands into his lap. Beth hugs her shoes tighter to her chest.

Teacher: '*How are you?*' Ryan and Beth both begin waving their hands along to the song, whilst silently gazing out of the tepee door.

Teacher: '*Hello everyone, who's sitting next to you?*'

At the end of the teacher's question, Beth becomes immediately animated – she is the first in the circle! Sitting up straighter, she makes eye contact with her teacher, jabbing her finger into the centre of her own chest to claim her turn, exclaiming 'my name!' The teacher extends her arm over Beth's head and says 'we're going to start with Beth'. A child can be heard cheering in the background, and during the cheering, Beth quietly says her own name.

Teacher: 'What is your name, Beth?' Beth sits in silence, swinging her wellie boots vigorously. Her arms are limp by her side, her lips pressed shut. 'Want to tell everybody?' prompts the teacher, 'Say I'm ...'. There is a silence, which is filled by a child and a member of staff from the other side of the tepee, saying Beth's name.

Teacher: 'Beth – that's right'. The teacher raises her hand into a wave and begins to sing the verse, seemingly giving up on Beth saying her own name on cue. As she begins to sing '*Hel ...*'. Beth says her own name, more firmly and clearly than the first time.

Teacher; 'Good girl!' *Hello Beth, how are you? Hello Beth, who's sitting next to you? 'Who's this?'* asks the teacher, gesturing to Ryan, who sits silent and still.

Three other children shout 'Ryan!' whilst slapping their hands energetically onto their water-proof suits to make more noise.

Ryan says nothing, the song continues. Beth nods her head along with the song, though she continues not to sing. (Vignette written from viewing video, October 2018.)

The hello song video offers a kind of paradox: children who murmur the song lyrics, nod heads in time and contentedly swing wellie boots, whilst at the same time not stating their names on cue as required. The collective experience of being in and being part of the song seems to move through Beth's and Ryan's bodies: through their waving hands, nodding head, the way bodies straighten and become animate when their turn comes. After a couple of voices on the other side of the tepee furnish the song with Beth's name, the group more forcefully take up this idea of collective naming, shouting Ryan's name into the song. Ryan sits solemnly whilst his peers shout his name. In contrast, the teacher's appeal for the children to say their names on cue (Say, I'm ... ) is met with the kind of silence that MacLure, Holmes, Jones, and MacRae (2010) describe as creating a kind of 'rage for explanation' (p. 494).

Recalling the kind of performance anxiety that requirements to speak on cue can cause, we argued above that the language demands early years pedagogy can sometimes place on young children, are exceptionally taxing. The individual voice, according to Deleuze and Guattari (2004), emerges from the inchoate, impersonal 'murmur' of the 'collective assemblage of enunciation' (p. 93). In the silence where Beth and Ryan might have said their own names, a new possibility opens up, for their peers to state their names for them. The other children do this willingly and joyfully. Perhaps this is what Beth indicates when she grows an inch, points to her own chest and declares 'my name'. Beth and Ryan's stance concurs with a Deleuzian understanding of language in which the 'hello song' and their names, are part of an impersonal collective assemblage that pre-exists the individual voice. The 'hello song' has been sung many times before, and invites little modification or experimentation in this context. Beth knows that 'my name' is also part of this pre-existing assemblage, to be inserted into the song according to her seating location in the tepee. In this sense, the 'hello song' is about collective participation, and the way in which this moves through bodies, rather than the exchange of new information.

Tropes such as the 'word gap' (Avineri et al., 2015; Kuchirko, 2017) equate the quantity of words a young child hears with their ability to reproduce them; in this conceptualisation words once heard are 'banked' in the mind (or elsewhere in the body) of the individual child, to be accessed at will in future communicative encounters. Examples such as the vignette above, in which Beth and Ryan participate through nodding heads, swinging legs, murmured song lyrics, and yet do not speak their names on cue, illustrate the partial and inadequate nature of the 'word gap' and other 'transmission' models of communication to fully explain the emergence and development of young children's language. Expression, Massumi (2002) asserts, is a process that begins with the body, rather than the mind. It captures and constitutes us.

The force of expression ... strikes the body first, directly and unmediatedly. It passes transformatively through the flesh before being instantiated in subject positions subsumed by a system of power. Its immediate effect is a differing. It must [subsequently] be made a reproduction [i.e., a representation]. The body, fresh in the throes of expression, incarnates not an

already formed system but a modification – a change. *Expression is an event.* (p. xvii; emphasis added)

This prompts us to consider the ‘hello song’ as an event, one which pre-exists the children’s and teacher’s consciousness and intentionality, but in which they are caught up and moved; sensations spark, bodies twitch or tense. And when, in other situations, children do not take their turn or answer a direct question, this may also be due to how the event moves bodies and catches them up. Enclosed within the tepee, amidst the streaming sunlight and the noise of waterproof trousers rubbing together, new possibilities for a collective reconfiguration of the hello song, rather than a collection of isolated responses, seems to have become possible.

It is also possible that the tepee generated the peculiar sensory enchantment that dens, forts, treehouses and other small, enclosed spaces hold for children (Sobel, 1993). Dens have been recognised for both their potential within child-centred research (Procter, 2013) and as a means to facilitate early childhood talk (DCSF, 2009). In remobilising and redistributing the play of light, sound, movement and texture across the child bodies, *within a confined space*, the tepee may offer the rapture of ‘enclosure’ that, according to Barthes (1983), persists into adult life. Or, we might think of the tepee as a *heterotopia* as defined by Foucault – an analysis that is also proposed by Barron, Taylor, Nettleton, and Amin (2017) in their discussion of the power of dens for children and adults. Foucault describes the heterotopia as an uncanny, ‘ceremonial’ space, both actual and virtual, that is not bound by the rules of representation. Heterotopias, according to Foucault (1973), ‘secretly undermine language’, shattering the customary arrangements for making words and things ‘hold together’ (pp. xix–xviii). The tepee is heterotopic in that it inserts a miniature ‘inside’ within the ‘outside’, condensing and focusing its sonic and light waves into intensities that strike and connect bodies, human and non-human, in new ways. By redistributing the vectors of affect in the pedagogic event, the tepee changes the usual relations that hold between sense and language. Although tepee time (and space) is still haunted by the structures of ‘classroom’ talk, those structures are, if only slightly, displaced and frayed by the differential affective relations in which they now participate.

## Ghost stories

The teachers tell the children they can see a ‘ghost’. Over on the hills above the day care, a large white tarpaulin flaps in the wind. The children stand on upturned crates (usually used for sitting on during snack time), straining to see ‘the ghost’. As they spot it, they say ‘a ghost’ and ‘o’er there’ to each other and to the adults.

Gradually the others wander off, until only Tina remains, still standing on her crate and slowly eating an apple, whilst gazing at the ‘ghost’. Very slowly she stands, gazes, munches her apple, and every couple of minutes adds another part to her unfolding story.

‘Does GHOST like apple?’ she muses. More apple eating, more gazing. ‘Does ghost like breadstick?’ Stood on the crate still, she seemed to be thinking hard. Munching her apple ‘ghost can’t reach snack’.

‘Can’t see me.’

‘Ghost like apple.’

Tina’s apple crunches, and the wind ruffles the nearby willow tree. She climbs down briefly from the crate to fetch a breadstick, then stands back on the crate, watching the horizon. The distant white tarpaulin flaps on the hillside.

'Can't reach it.'

'Ghost likes bread stick.'

'Ghost can't get me.'

'Aaahhhh ghost', declares Tina, suddenly animated 'Get bread stick!' Wagging her breadstick mockingly in front of her forehead, she chants 'nananananerner!'. (Vignette written from field-notes, October 2018)

Language in Tina's ghost story seems to emerge in between, and to draw impetus from, munches of apple and the crunch of breadstick, the movement and sound created by the wind, and her extended gaze towards the horizon, with each of these factors being inextricable from the words spoken (Figure 2). Sarah notes that the outdoors space seemed to offer the children greater privacy, and more autonomy. For example, the outdoors snack area was laid out so that children could wash their own hands, select their own snacks and sit on the crates to eat them whenever they liked. This was different to the more adult-controlled snack routine that had been necessary in the indoors classroom. Tina munches her apple slowly and in relative privacy, before helping herself to another breadstick; these are actions bound up in the emergence of the ghost story. Sense and language are again bound together in, and as, a singular event (cf. Deleuze, 2004).

Whilst children's creative production of story using objects is well documented (Wohlwend, 2009), this work usually assumes human design and an intended human audience. In an opposite proposal, Tina's ghost story did not seem to have an intended human audience. Abi was merely standing quietly by whilst it unfolded, amidst the crunching of the apple and the flapping of the tarpaulin. Listening to Tina's ghost story from a few steps away, Abi had a sense that interrupting would have curtailed the story. Tina's gaze to the horizon seems to be of particular significance in the production of the story, offering a counter to the dominant advice in early years pedagogy that adults should work to engage young children in direct eye contact in order to encourage them to



**Figure 2.** Watching the ghost.

speak. The event also challenges the usefulness of adult questions as an engine of interaction (MacLure et al., 2010).

Hackett and Somerville (2017) offer a reconceptualisation of young children's literacy practices as always emerging from sound and movement beyond the individual human. Understanding Tina's ghost story as a result of the affective movement between wind, apple, tarpaulin and gaze, rather than a purely human-designed product with an intended human audience, offers a radical change in our conceptualisation of the relationship of language to the world, and of thought to matter. We are obliged to recognise that we are shaped and moved by forces that exceed and precede us – forces that are indifferent to distinctions between human and non-human. As Massumi (2002) notes above, the force of expression 'passes transformatively through the flesh *before* being instantiated in subject positions subsumed by a system of power' (p. xvii; emphasis added). Acquiring language is not primarily a matter of mastering a system of abstract rules for mirroring the world but of creatively intervening in the forces that are continuously composing us.

We suspect that this is what the outdoors intervention at this setting is facilitating for children: creative intervention in collective, more-than-human, multi-sensory, expressive events.

### Concluding thoughts

In challenging the emphasis on the communicative dimension of language in early years pedagogy, we have drawn on accumulating interdisciplinary arguments to the effect that language involves more than words, syntax and meaning – that something mobile, dynamic, relational and multi-sensory moves, and moves in, language. Deleuze (2004) as noted above called it *sense* – something indefinable and irreducible to linguistic meaning, inhabiting the frontier between language and the body. Conventional language pedagogy tries to still the body, quell the appetite and muffle the sensorial surround so that children can listen for meaning, mean what they say, and say what they mean. As a result, speaking out and speaking up in class is often akin to coughing up dry pellets of meaning without sense: speech is disconnected from the sensorium, and the immanent relationality in which it is moving, and to which it contributes. The outdoors experience may be restoring some of that dynamism and 'sense of life' to language.

As the vignettes above indicate, the outdoors initiative is *itself* a modification of relations between language, learning, sensation, movement and matter. The soundscape is altered: human noise mingles with animate and inanimate sounds that are largely excluded in the classroom, while other kinds of sound are absent or diminished – the scrape of chairs, the toppling of bricks, the distinctive pitch and tone of adult voices monitoring and directing children. Speech issues from bodies on the move, connects speakers across distances that expand and contract, and is carried on air that registers differently on the skin. Touch, texture, smell, sight, and sound are in altered, and more changeable, relation. Each child's sensorium is differently activated. Importantly, so too are *the social and educational meanings that attach to their actions*. Getting dirty, shouting, falling over, making a mess, taking turns – all assume a changed significance or valence. In turn, pedagogical criteria as to what counts as acceptable behaviour, 'good' listening or 'playing nicely' are subtly shifted.

It may be that this pedagogical shift to the outdoors has productively unsettled the customary assumptions about what counts as language, and has, as it were, deflected the stony gaze of pedagogy from its obsession with confronting language head on. For Sarah, the absence (for the children) of an ever-present risk of putting a foot wrong, is an important distinction between the indoors classroom and the outdoors space. There seemed to be less of a sense of ownership over outdoors space compared to a classroom, and this plays an important role in the sensations that bodies feel and how they are able to respond. Sarah compares, for example, the way in which nursery rhymes would usually be performed indoors and outdoors. Indoors, the children would sit in a circle, led by an adult who would direct the children to take turns selecting a song to sing. A more common way in which nursery rhyme singing might occur outdoors would be that children begin jumping on a wooden bench and swinging from a beam, a teacher spontaneously begins to sing '5 little monkeys jumping on the bed', and others join in. In the indoors singing circle, gaze is focused inwards and attention directed at the individual, whilst outdoors, gaze roams around the space, and there is a more diffused sense of who is singing, who is leading and who the audience is for these words. In neither case is the unfolding action under the control or agency of any individual (adult or child), but rather, the ways in which adults and children are moved by a more-than-human milieu, caught up in something bigger than themselves, and how this affects how bodies feel and relate to each other, is what is at stake here.

In arguing that the outdoor initiative has brought positive changes, we are aware of the risks of endorsing pastoral idealism, or value-laden assumptions about the 'natural' child. We do not wish to suggest that the outdoor environment, with its open-ness to movement, texture and organic substances is *intrinsically* more lively, innocent, authentic or virtuous than indoor worlds of manufactured objects and digital lives, or of urban locations. We are aware too of how such assumptions often plug into classed, raced and ableist value systems that implicitly critique the practices and lifestyles of others. It is not enough therefore to assert that the outdoors intervention 'somehow' gets into the bodies and language of children and adults. Or to assert that it 'somehow' changes pedagogy. We need to carefully explore the diverse and complex ways in which language resonates with the other forces that compose the material, sensory and pedagogical encounter.

Nevertheless, it is worth considering how early childhood educators might mobilise the insights described here to challenge dominant notions of language as mainly concerned with meaning, as the property of an individual speaker, and as detachable from material context. We suggest that a starting point might be the notion of looking at language out of the corner of our eye. A direct focus on language can be valuable. It can prompt, for example, quiet spaces, dyadic interactions and turn taking. Yet, looking straight 'at' language in this way also serves to hack off its extensions into bodies and minds, and the surrounding world.

For Sarah, developing young children's language practices must start with a trust that children already 'have it', at least as potential to be unfolded. The task of educators, then, is to create the conditions where talking as a bodily, as well as a linguistic act feels comfortable, easy and right. Our research indicates that situations in which there are frequent possibilities but little obligation for children to talk, coupled with an avoidance of trying to pin down the intended audience and function for talk, are some possible conditions for this. This might mean, as we suggested at the outset, paying *less* attention to words,

grammar and meaning, in favour of fostering participation in dynamic, multisensory, collective events.

## Notes

1. There is as yet little evidence of positive impact specifically on early years outcomes at age 5, according to Teager and McBride (2018).
2. The appropriation of the word ‘tepee’ by non indigenous people has rightly been criticised, particularly in relation to children, where ‘tepee’ rather than ‘tent’ seems to signal something whimsical, historical or wild (Keene, 2011). We have chosen to retain ‘tepee’ in this paper because it is the term by which staff and children constantly referred to the structure as throughout the study.

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