

MODULAR LINGUISTICS: Playing Neologisms

The process of constructing language, both written and spoken, has always been modular. Modularity presupposes a certain compatibility between interlocking parts—this is the crux of language. Modular Linguistics then, is not a claim for the discovery of a new function within the field of linguistics, but simply an emphasis on its constructibility instead of its descriptive abilities.

However, orality is strictly interlinked with sound as a carrier of language, which invests the act of speech with multitudes of aesthetic qualities. The sonic and phonetic dimensions of language are what articulates speech, while simultaneously imposing its ephemerality. As Walter Ong fundamentally states:

“All sensation takes place in time, but sound has a special relationship to time unlike that of the other fields that register in human sensation. Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent. When I pronounce the word ‘permanence’, by the time I get to the ‘-nence’, the ‘perma-’ is gone, and has to be gone.”¹

It is then important to consider the recording of language as not only a practice of writing, but also one of speaking and listening.

LIST OF COMPONENTS

The voice appears here as an electronic anomaly: a synthetic placeholder for a missing vocal anatomy. You are now faced with a device which is able to speak—a disembodied voice sounding from an electronic circuit. The voice struggles to articulate through the constraints of a lo-fi sound output. Some sounds fade and are left to exist only as the memories of certain phonemes in the listener’s cognitive effort. Although, listening is performed without the ability to localize the precise source of the sound. It is therefore an acousmatic voice with origins unknown. As Mladen Dolar puts it in *What’s in a Voice?*:

“In this universe it is more appropriate to say that the voice, far from being a self-expression, a harbinger of interiority and

individuality, is more like an intruder, a foreign body, a prosthesis, a bodily extension, an artificial limb – it is never ‘authentic’, it is never just an expression. The voice has like a spectral autonomy, it never quite belongs to the body we see, the voice never sounds like the person emitting it, there is always a gap, a *Verfremdung*, a mismatch, a ventriloquism.”²

The possibility of producing new words with distinct speculative qualities is why the construction of neologisms is a practice that proposes to constantly reinvent and revise the use of language as pertinent to a certain time. A neologism can manifest as a cut-up: a swift or abbreviated manner of swapping and shifting connotations. Or in other words, the (un-)intentional clumsiness of hot-gluing a semantically loaded prefix to an unsuspecting root-term.

What comes out of the device is a relentless noise which proposes a different kind of deep listening: a low fidelity practice of cutting-up, sampling and mixing prefixes, roots and suffixes. The cultural theorist Kodwo Eshun writes about this act of mixing and sampling, in his book *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*:

“The cut is a command, a technical and conceptual operation which cuts the lines of association. [...] The stammer of the new. Each cut magnifies the words so you hear in closeups which expand space until it blows up.”³

Without the presence of written language, listening becomes a translation of the practice of developing neologisms into an aesthetic experience. And therefore allows for the phonetic process of tapping into the production of neologisms. Or, in other words, this device favors homophonic relations over homographic relations: playing neologisms instead of writing neologisms. The act of listening to the words being produced allows for the possibility of different ways to write.

Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy*. Routledge, 2002.
Eshun, Kodwo. *More Brilliant than the Sun*. Verso, 2018.
Dolar, Mladen. “What’s in a Voice?” *Resonant Bodies, Voices, Memories*. Revolver, 2009.