

## **Response to Amanda Fulford's 'Ventriloquising the Voice: Writing in the University'**

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*Writing frames are widely employed in academic writing courses in the U.K. Amanda Fulford raises the question of whether a student's voice is silenced, rather than facilitated, by them. She explores a path of writing as recovery of voice, by discussing Stanley Cavell's writing as a representative of a continual process of re-finding the self. The notion that expressing one's own voice is enabled by conversation with the other is, however, paradoxical: If one is apart from the community, how could the conversation be carried on? Is the uniqueness of one's voice unheard by or irrelevant to one's society? Fulford's stress on continuity, this paper argues, is associated with Cavell's ordinary language philosophy in terms of its awareness of how language changes. What I say represents but recreates what we as a community say. Writing as a re-finding of the self and as an expression of one's voice, is thus characterised as reading as conformity and rereading it as deconformity.*

### **THE FUNCTION OF WRITING FRAMES**

Amanda Fulford, in her paper 'Ventriloquising the Voice: Writing in the University', argues that current trends in higher education demonstrate a tendency towards courses of vocational training and a culture of performativity (Fulford, 2010). Characteristic of such trends in the U.K. is the use of writing frames: tools that are designed for helping university students to compose academic papers. In spite of their probable usefulness in primary/secondary and adult literacy education, the use of the writing frame in higher education is questioned.

Fulford's criticism of writing frames is twofold. First, many lecturers adopt them as a tool for assessment. Second, such adoption indicates an increasing assumption that frames enable students' construction of ideas. Fulford suggests that the writing frame may function not only as a support for writing, but also a mechanism for determining students' thought.

As she reveals, the use of writing frame not only reinforces a certain performativity, but also a simple dichotomization of the relationship between form and content. Fulford calls for attention to inseparability between structure and concept in one's style of writing. This attention goes beyond form-content interrelation to the very question of what writing is.

## VOICE COVERED AND RECOVERED IN CONVERSATION

Based on this sense of apprehension, Fulford explores ways in which students find their own voice in the process of writing, ways that are contrary to the outcome-based instructions of the frame that amount to students' filling in the blanks. Instead of 'the silencing of the student', she claims, Stanley Cavell's writing exemplifies expression of voice. In exploring the interconnected path of writing and voicing, Fulford is cautious of a paradox: While Cavell illustrates the expression of *individual* voice, he is 'also concerned with the political, the community's voice'. One way of approaching to this complexity is Cavell's reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

Whilst Emerson rejects conformity in favor of self-reliance, this is no mere individualism; conformity is a threat to democratic society, but self-reliant individuals benefit the society, its religion, arts and culture. Non-conformity, characterised by aversive thinking, reminds us of Thoreau's description of thinking as being: 'beside ourselves in a sane sense' (Thoreau 1954/1999, p. 123). 'Writing', Cavell claims, 'is the aversion of conformity, is a continual turning away from society, hence a continual turning toward it, as if for reference . . . One might call this process of writing deconformity' (Cavell, 1996, p. 66 quoted in Fulford, 2010).

Voicing and writing are, according to Fulford's Cavell, processes of turning away from what is conventionally said and written. How could this turning be possible?—Fulford depicts the nature of this process by distinguishing two characteristics of recovery of voice:

First, what is required is an initiation into language . . . This is not an easy, once for all event, but rather part of an ongoing relationship with words that Thoreau describes as being our father tongue. Acquiring the father tongue is characterised by a finding of one's own way rather than by an unthinking reliance on the monologues imposed by others. Second, as Cavell highlights from his readings of a genre of 1940s Hollywood film that he terms the 'Melodramas of the Unknown Woman' the recovery of (a woman's) voice from the monologues of a man, is through a form of conversation with another, a turning away from one form of language to embrace another (Fulford, 2010).

The two steps that Fulford suggests here indicate the relationship between individual and community in search for one's own voice. Thoreau's father tongue represents aversion to conformity, and it is conversation where deconformity is made possible.

## RETURNING NOT IN CONFORMITY BUT IN CONTINUITY

Fulford's discussion on voice from the standpoint of language and conversation leads to a question: How can one sustain conversation when speaking with a tongue whose subtleties may not be recognised by others? How could such an individual contribute to society in spite of his separation from it? The clue resides in Fulford's emphasis on an adjective, '*continual*':

If the denial of voice is a denial of the self, then the recovery of voice is a finding of the self and the expression of voice a *continual* process of re-finding one's self (Ibid.).

Re-finding of voice has to be conceived as continual process, not because repetition is necessarily the means of securing this, but that continuity is in the essence of expressions of recovery. In other words, deconformity is not a for once-and-for-all transcendence from the conventional world and language, but rather, it is a continual departure from, and return to, the language community.

The most obvious example of this is Thoreau himself, a writer who left his community, writes for his neighbours, and develops the notion of the 'father tongue'. Moreover, the term 'father tongue' is itself an example of father tongue. It is a coined word by Thoreau, but also a derived word of the 'mother tongue'. This means that father tongue cannot make sense without the mother tongue. This dependence has nothing to do with inferiority. The former brings new light to what the latter means, i.e., its intrinsic nature of initiation to the familiar. The interconnectedness is also true of one's finding of voice. The individual creates something new, but it is rooted in something more conventional, and its newness only makes sense if it recognizes the conventional definition that the community shares.

That the newness—or strangeness—of the language is not a total disconnection from, but a renewed connection with, the community is evident when we examine the case of inventing a word, a case in which one asserts one's own meaning in language, a meaning totally private and blocked from the community. The case is discussed by Cavell in his earlier essay 'Must We Mean What We Say?', in which he defends ordinary language philosophy such as J.L. Austin's against the logical positivist view (Cavell, 1969, pp. 1–43). After arguing that empirical approaches to language fall short of capturing what saying means to human language,<sup>1</sup> Cavell mentions elusiveness of language, its changing nature (p. 42). This evasiveness, however, does not make scientific rigidity a valid a tool for proceeding in language philosophy. Instead, he sees why ordinary language matters to philosophy, and vice versa.

The meaning of words will, of course, stretch and shrink, and they will be stretched and be shrunk. One of the great responsibilities of the philosopher lies in appreciating the natural and the normative ways in which such things happen, so that he may make us aware of the one and capable evaluating the other. It is a wonderful step towards understanding the abutment of language and the world when we see it to be a matter of convention (Ibid.).

Philosophy and ordinary language help us to be aware of the changing nature of language, and such awareness leads to elucidation. An understanding of the relationship between language and the world is enabled by acknowledging how language works conventionally, also, how it does not work, because it is changing and/or it needs change. In light of this, *deconformity* is an expression out of conformity, not a denial or negligence of conformity. One may ask: Although there seems to be a departure from the community, is there any way back to it?

Cavell suggests that our continual awareness of language changes the culture that the language contains. This is by no means influencing the community as an objective entity, but as if a contribution from within.

[L]inguistic change is itself an object of respectable study . . . It is exactly because the language which contains a culture changes with the changes of that culture that philosophical awareness of ordinary language is illuminating; it is that which explains how the language we traverse every day can contain undiscovered treasure. To see that ordinary language is natural is to see that (perhaps even see why) it is normative for what can be said. And also to see how it is by searching definitions that Socrates can coax the mind down from self-assertion—subjective assertion and private definition—and lead it back, through the community, home (pp. 42–43).

Adding something new to the language does not come to pass by simply asserting that one invents one's own meaning. Expressed voice makes sense only if it is said, meant, and tested in conversation. No one can make one's case with the language that is only understandable to oneself.<sup>2</sup>

In this regard, the sense of receptivity counts in the process of finding one's own voice in writing. What one has to pay attention to is not only what is said and how people use language in the culture, but also whether unheard—unknown—ways of saying are there. Writing with, and for, the father tongue is, in view of this, reading—reading what they would say, what one is trying to be expressed, and what the next self must express.

### NATURAL CHANGES IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION<sup>3</sup>

Two questions arise: If a father tongue needs to be coaxed down from private definition and shared with other community members, isn't it correct to say that writing frames help students? Do writing frames help students realize how people normally compose sentences and paragraphs? In response to these questions, let us ensure that this essay has not insisted that writing frames are harmful and useless no matter the circumstances. As Fulford suggested, a writing frame has the 'potential to help develop children's confidence with some of the basic aspects of the genre' of writing, such as structure or cohesion (Fulford, 2010). It falls short, however, especially in university-level education, of ushering students into experiencing some of language's essential characteristics, e.g., its changing nature. Cavell says that linguistic change is itself an object of respectable study. This implies that ordinary language philosophy, in which Cavell positions himself, studies the fact that 'the language which contains a culture changes with the changes of that culture' (Cavell, 1969, p. 42). In this regard, writings frames are fixated: thus, they can fixate students' use of language. Literacy teachers need to be aware of this ambivalence, i.e., writing frames might help to suggest ideas on how people normally write, but they are unnatural because they do not change as the language naturally does.

Here, some may say that writing frames could be updated or be introduced with specific varieties, so that teachers and students can pick one from several choices based on their needs and circumstances. Still, writing frames are artificial. The nature of the change mentioned above is not a matter of updating or making choices. Rather, this linguistic change is related to language's supernatural aspect. It is as inexhaustible as human thinking: thus, it is impossible to capture within any kind of 'frames'.<sup>4</sup> The notion of the supernatural here is not something beyond our everyday practice. On the contrary, it always resides in our language every time we

think and write. In other words, it symbolizes human language's possibilities because of its inexhaustibility and, at the same time, signals its impossibility in terms of the fact that language and thinking go beyond their writer.

At this point, Fulford's criticism of writing frames comes to the fore. Finding one's voice does not mean tracing what other people write, but excavating what others (and oneself) have not fully grasped in their familiar line of thinking. It is a recovery from the conventional to a renewed ordinary life. It is, therefore, both a return and a rebirth.<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

1. Cavell explains: Saying something is not merely pronouncing certain words in a certain grammatical order with intended meaning, but rather executing the appropriate business with a right tone of voice at a proper cue. In this sense, what we mean to say is, like what we intend to act, something we are responsible for (Cavell, 1969, pp. 32-33).
2. According to Cavell, what we must not say is: 'I know what words mean in *my* language' (p. 35) because this claim would have pushed the speaker to madness. The fact that he insists on validity of the word's meaning based on *his* language rather than ours is absurd. He tries to make his case with the very language that he denies.
3. This section was added, in a sense, to respond to the discussion in the conference, *The 2nd International Colloquium between the Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University (Japan) and the Institute of Education, University of London (UK)*. I appreciate that Professor Paul Standish of IoE infused the discussion by bringing up the issue of language's supernatural aspect.
4. In contrast, Cavell, borrowing Thoreau's terminology, tries to approach language's multi-dimensionality by means of 'tongue(s)'.
5. Cavell says: 'Conversion is a turning of our natural reactions; so it is symbolized as rebirth' (Cavell, 1979, p. 125).

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