

# The Event, Writing and the Self: Walter Benjamin's Language Theory

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## INTRODUCTION: AN UNSPEAKABLE MOMENT

The importance of self-narrative has been emphasised not only in therapeutic practice, but also educational theory and practice. In the age of the end of 'grand narratives', it is said that only 'small narratives' are possible. On this point, autobiography has been in the spotlight in myriad educational contexts. However, if we place too much emphasis on the importance of self-narrative, the individual will be understood only in terms of autonomy, or in other words our presumption of the individual as self-directed and responsible for his or her actions. From this point of view, we tend to see the individual as a volitional subject who can fully express herself. It seems that this view misses the *involuntary* aspect of the individual in expressing 'herself'.

Regarding this point I would like to offer one example. An elementary school teacher once lamented that he had no words to explain why art classes, such as music, drawing and manual arts, are useful for children. For parents who see the learning process as a preparation for securing their children's future condition, the art classes seem to be a 'waste of time'. This shows the same problem described above from another angle. There is a tendency to think that learning is valuable only if it has an exact aim that enables the individual to be an autonomous self. This amounts to a diminishing and reduction of learning.

When it comes to examining what is happening in learning, asking 'what is the aim?' is problematic, for if we place too much emphasis on the outcome of learning, an accident or a chance event occurring in educational practice can be missed. This chance event might remain 'unspeakable' if we remain guided by the question of what the aim is, like the elementary school teacher mentioned above. Such an accident can be understood as an a-teleological moment of learning. This moment presents us with new meanings of our lives and our world. To better understand the a-teleological moment of learning, I want to ask the following question: What is happening in the moment of learning? To answer this question, this paper examines Walter Benjamin's theory of language in order to bring to light the a-teleological aspect of the moment of learning and writing that is deeply related to opening new possibilities or meanings of the self and the world.

Benjamin (1892-1940) developed his unique thought in the critical epoch when the world was suffering from horribly destructive world wars. It is well-known that he diagnosed his age as the age of the 'poverty of experience' because of collapsed traditions or customs (Benjamin, 1933a, pp. 731-736). This diagnosis urged Benjamin to explore how people can speak the unspeakable: what has been forgotten, what has not been yet and what is unmemorable. The unspeakable that Benjamin concerned with is the nature of the moment of the chance event, which is inevitably occurring without language of human being, but it does not mean that there is something we

cannot say in our language but the conflict of the speakable and unspeakable makes language possible as we will see in the following sections. In this sense, the unspeakable can only appear in our writing for the first time. Although Benjamin claims that we cannot communicate our experience, he is deeply concerned with the idea that we could somehow write ourselves in ways that are inspired by the not-I—namely a sort of otherness to ourselves. This essay will show the inseparability of the unspeakable (otherness) and writing, and how the experience of writing involves an unceasing transformation of one's self because learning is a kind of transformation of the self.

The aim of this paper is to examine the ideas of experience and writing in Benjamin's thought, especially his allusion to the event that we cannot fully understand.<sup>1</sup> This paper also explores the nature of writing, understood as distinct from sentimental reminiscence driven by the modern tendency of resentment or reinforcement of our autonomous selves. According to Benjamin, the experience of writing cannot be separated from a chance event. This is related to the a-teleological aspect of learning. The first section will look at Benjamin's early theory of language.

### **'ON LANGUAGE AS SUCH AND ON THE LANGUAGE OF MAN'**

For understanding Benjamin's theory of language, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' (1916) is the most influential text, and focuses on the theological aspect of language. Gilloch characterises Benjamin's understanding of language as follows: 'Benjamin rejects the view of language as a mere instrument of communication and arbitrary sign system, on the grounds that it is predicated on an inadequate and impoverished conception of human experience' (Gilloch, 2002, p. 61).

Based on this understanding of language, Benjamin sees language in terms of a conflict of the expressed (speakable) and unexpressed (unspeakable). Benjamin thus explains this conflict:

Within all linguistic formation a conflict is waged between what is expressed and expressible and what is inexpressible and unexpressed. On considering this conflict, one sees at the same time, from the perspective of the inexpressible, the last mental entity. Now, it is clear that in the equation of mental and linguistic being, the notion of an inverse proportionality between the two is disputed. For ... the deeper (that is, the more existent and real) the mind, the more it is expressible and expressed (Benjamin, 1916, pp. 66-67).

According to Gilloch, Benjamin criticises Martin Buber's 'theological conception of the fundamental inexpressibility of the most profound and privileged forms of human experience', which is characterised as an 'intuitive experience of mystical insight' (*ibid.*). For Buber, God is the absolute Other, thus it is impossible for humans to express the mystery of God (i. e. revelation). Although Benjamin has a theological view of language, unlike Buber he rejects the inexpressibility of the mystery that enriches the depth of human experience. In other words, he avoids substantialising the moment in which God and humans are unified into the oneness that repels the language of man. He, however, still sees language in terms of the conflict of

speakable and unspeakable. This conflict should not be dissolved; rather, this is what makes language possible. In this sense, Benjamin is concerned with 'the expressionless' (Benjamin, 1921/22, p. 340), which brings a difference (or new meaning) for human expression, i. e. writing.

### **'ON THE MIMETIC FACULTY'**

In 1933 Benjamin developed a new language theory, provoked by the anthropological studies of primitive societies, Freud's psychoanalysis, graphology, and phrenology. In 'On the Mimetic Faculty' Benjamin is deeply concerned with 'the mimetic gift (faculty)' that human beings possess (Benjamin, 1933b, pp. 720-722). In general, mimesis is understood as imitation. But Benjamin's understanding of this concept is richer than mere copying. This gift enables us to connect to the world that expresses the mystery of the universe. Benjamin shows us how this human mimetic gift is related to language and writing. It is possible to say that writing itself is *mimesis*.

In this section, I scrutinize an experience of writing in relation to the mimesis of the event (otherness), in light of Benjamin's thought. According to Benjamin, the experience of writing cannot be separated from an event that we cannot recognise consciously. This is related to the a-teleological aspect of learning. I would like to consider an experience of writing in terms of mimesis and forge a connection between Benjamin's theological and mimetic theories of language.

According to Benjamin, there are two kinds of mimesis:

Nature produces similarities; one need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man's. His gift for seeing similarity is nothing but a rudiment of the once powerful compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically. There is perhaps not a single one of this higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role (p. 720).

These two kinds of mimetic momentum are 'the gift for seeing similarities' and 'the gift for producing similarities'. The former is the 'event' or the moment that occurs a-teleologically. The latter is a way of writing that makes connections between the un-connectable. This means to bring something invisible or elusiveness into forms in human body or its movement, for instance writing. Reconsidering mimesis in terms of the event and writing, we can see the involuntary aspect of writing that inspires us to realize the a-teleological elusive event. This event drives writing and generates new possibilities in our lives.

The event in which 'I' become similar to something other than 'me' (not-I) is mimesis in terms of 'the gift for seeing similarities'. In this event, the boundary of the world and the self vanishes. This event cannot be captured by our consciousness (i. e. the self) and is unspeakable because what is captured by our consciousness is necessarily different from this event. In this sense, mimesis as 'the gift for seeing similarities' is always already occurring before we ask about the aim of imitation, or even what the aim of learning is. Mimesis inevitably occurs without any intention or ends. This event can be given a shape (or expression) only when 'the gift for producing similarities' makes a connection between something un-connectable in

writing. The reason 'the gift for producing similarities' is characterised as making a connection between the un-connectable in writing and is necessarily different from the event is because the event has no boundary or shape in itself—that is to say it always exceeds 'the gift for producing similarities'. This unspeakable event can only appear in the moment of writing. To be precise, the event in which the boundary of the world and the self vanishes cannot previously exist for writing. In this sense these two momentums of mimesis are inseparable.

In 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', Benjamin claims that the conflict of the speakable and unspeakable makes language possible (Benjamin, 1916, p. 74). Now, this conflict can be translated into the inseparability of the event and writing. The event (unspeakable) can be expressed as a difference in writing. This difference drives writing as a form of mimesis that produces similarities. This means that the event and writing are not the same but they are inseparable and generate a new meaning. The event as mimesis occurs involuntarily in a moment of which we cannot be conscious, and writing as mimesis brings this event in an experience as a difference. Learning driven by mimesis needs to be understood in terms of chance or accident, in Benjamin's view. In this sense, learning is not only a volitional action but also an involuntary event occurring by chance. This kind of event is always already happening in learning.

## CONCLUSION: AN ALTERNATIVE CONCEPT OF THE SELF

This paper has sought an a-teleological aspect of the moment of learning and writing, resisting the understanding of learning in terms of what has an exact aim and what enables the individual to be an autonomous self. In light of Benjamin's language theory, it becomes possible to see an experience of writing in terms of inseparability of the event (unspeakable) and writing (speakable). The expression is always driven by the expressionless and expressed as a difference. This means that though Benjamin never sees the oneness of the self and the world, he tries to seek an alternative way to narrate the self or an alternative concept of the self that is viewed not from the self but from the experience. As I have explained, Benjamin points out the impossibility of the communication of experience in our modern age. But his claim rather could be understood as the necessity of the alternative concept of experience. Agamben characterises Benjamin's experience as 'a new concept of experience, freed from the subject's condition' (Agamben, 1978, p. 56). Jay also conceives of Benjamin's experience as 'experience without a subject' (Jay, 1998, p. 205). This paper seeks to explain this understanding of the concept of experience in the light of Benjamin's theory of language, and hence seeks an alternative concept of the self.

In this respect I want to point out the importance of Benjamin's notion that the moment of learning is a 'tiger-jump' that transforms both the self and the world, because the experience of writing is driven by something we cannot control arbitrarily. Learning is transformation—namely, opening a new meaning of the world. We cannot fully describe what is happening in the moment that what we call 'learning' occurs because learning is driven by the chance event. The chance event is the unspeakable that is always and already occurring but easily missed in educational practice which strongly restricted by the curriculum and the certain aims. In this paper, I tried to subvert the tendency prevailing view of educational practice through the language theory of Benjamin. If we want to think about the a-teleological moment

of learning being driven by the unspeakable, it does not help to ask what the aim of learning is. Rather, we need to keep trying to describe what is happening in the very moment of learning in our writings.

## NOTES

- 1 This event means something happening without being planned or intention and is always and already happening; the event is unspeakable that I try to scrutinise in this paper.

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