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Chapter 15

Speaking Dada: The Politics of Language

Andreas Kramer

My intention in this paper is to explore how Dada's internationalism can be related to Dada's radical work in poetic language. Dada's internationalism is often seen to reflect the fact that its groups were made up of displaced, exiled individuals. In February 1918 Richard Huelsenbeck stated in his "Erste Dadarede in Deutschland": "Der Dadaismus war notgedrungen ein internationales Produkt. Man mußte etwas Gemeinsames zwischen den Russen, Rumänen, Schweizern und Deutschen finden" (Riha and Schäfer 1994: 96). The Dadaists have insisted that their international make-up should also be seen as a form of resisting and opposing the hyperbolic nationalisms of World War I. Hugo Ball, for example, introducing the anthology *Cabaret Voltaire*, declared the Zurich group's intentions to be transnational and pacifist: "über den Krieg und die Vaterländer hinweg an die wenigen Unabhängigen zu erinnern, die anderen Idealen leben" (Ball 1916: 1).

Dada's internationalism, while undoubtedly a reaction to the politics of war, can also be understood in a way that is directly linked with Dada's stance towards language. Its internationalism was a reaction also to the increasing nationalization of the European avant-garde during the war. Russian Futurists, German Expressionists (including, for a brief time, Ball himself) and English Vorticists were to varying degrees supporting the war efforts of their respective countries, but the most infamous example was provided by the Italian Futurists who agitated for Italy's entry into the war. Futurist poems, including experiments with "words in freedom", did feature in the dada performances and publications in Zurich and during the initial

stages of Berlin Dada, but Ball and others objected to Futurism's subsumption under Italian patriotism and the fundamentally static model of literary language so closely tied to Italian. Among Dada's own artistic models, abstract and phonetic poetry manifests the most radical difference from conventional models of language. Furthermore, through live performances of this sometimes multilingual poetry in theatrical settings, on the stages of the Cabaret Voltaire and elsewhere, the Dadaists proclaimed a fundamental difference to the print cultures that had created the imagined community of the nation-state. And even where Dada embraced print culture, in its journals, manifestos, pamphlets, books and anthologies that were published in many European and non-European locations, it was keen to move that print culture into a multilingual and non-national direction.[1] If this assumption of a broad overlap of political and linguistic internationalisms in Dada is correct, then we will also need to ask what kind of new language Dada speaks, and what kind of alternative identities or communities it seeks to promote against and beyond nationalist models.

Displaced from national territory and community, Dada Zurich is perhaps the most obvious example of an avant-garde in exile. Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings and Richard Huelsenbeck came from Germany, with Ball from the region of Palatine, situated close to the French border, and Hennings from the German-Danish border; the author of the bilingual credits at the end of the first and only issue of *Cabaret Voltaire*, presumably Ball himself, uses the terms "Heimatlose" and "sans patrie" to describe Hemmings, suggesting a status divorced from national and emotional belonging as well as, perhaps, a more open relationship to patriarchal forms of identity. (It may be significant here that the German term "Vaterländer" from Ball's Introduction has shifted to become the French signifier "patrie".) The Zurich group also included the bilingual Alsatian Hans (Jean) Arp as well as the Romanians Marcel Janco and Tristan Tzara (*nom de plume* of Sammy Rosenstock; the Romanian word "Tzara" apparently meaning "homeland"). If Dada Zurich deploys, and persistently performs, the language and the aesthetics of exile, as T.J. Demos (2004) has persuasively suggested, then how can we understand Dada's ongoing experimentation with language in other locations providing other national and linguistic contexts? To what extent might there be a similar aesthetic displacement from national language and the rhetoric

of identity? Or might examples from Dada Berlin suggest a form of inverted displacement from national models that affects the ways in which Dada speaks?

It needs hardly pointing out that the name the movement agreed upon to identify itself is itself a token of the group's internationalism. The word "Dada" is at home in different national languages, with a heterogeneous bundle of meanings ranging from "hobbyhorse" to "daddy" to double affirmation to an emphatic gesture of "there-ness".[2] At the same time, the word serves as an allegory for Dada's challenge to conventional models of language with their reliance on habitualised communication and fixed meanings. Opening the Zurich Dada soirée held on 14 July 1916, – a date whose symbolic significance for the identity of at least one nation is hard to ignore – Ball declared that Dada was "Ein internationales Wort", only to add enigmatically: "Nur ein Wort, und das Wort als Bewegung" (Riha and Schäfer 1994: 34). Where other avant-garde movements announce their intentions in their names, Ball's remark seems to suggest the signifier "Dada" refuses to be tied to any specific signified; that it was portable as well as moveable, transient and vagrant, and emphatically not at home anywhere. At the same time, the verb-less phrases that I have just quoted, attribute to this exilic word a verbal agency, an ability to move nomadically and energetically so as to disrupt prevailing models of national and linguistic belonging. If that betrays Ball's logocentric, and perhaps ultimately theological, stance, there is also a political linguist in Ball, who in his diary entries during his Swiss exile is acutely aware of the role language plays in national identity formation and in the national imaginary. His well-known attacks on jingoistic journalism and on the commodification of the word can also be read as attacks on the very process by which the flux of natural language becomes homogenised to form a "national" language.

Similar attacks on such forms of homogenised language can be found in Dada poetry. In Zurich Dada's best-known simultaneous poem, Tzara, Huelsenbeck and Janco's "L'amiral cherche une maison à louer" (performed on 30 March 1916), the military figure of the title is forced to look for a house to rent but is unsuccessful. While the title announces homelessness, the theme and indeed any coherent textual meaning is drowned out by the three voices, which speak in French, English and German simultaneously and improvise on pieces of percussion. Dada draws here on Futurist *bruitisme*, but whereas that

experiment was designed to challenge Italian grammar and syntax, the Dada experiment moves beyond the confines of one national language. Although each voice is identified with a different national language, during the performance the languages are made to clash and blur, and while at least one voice, Janco's English speech, does suggest a movement towards a climactic fulfilment, the final phrase, spoken in unison, frustrates even this: "L'Amiral n'a rien trouvé". Despite such rare consonance, any live performance of this poem would produce a dissonant assemblage of sounds and noises, with hybrid words emerging intermittently. As a result, the poem might be perceived as an exemplification of what Bakhtin (1981: 270–1) calls "heteroglossia" – an inherent quality in linguistic discourse which cannot be reduced to the order of any single, authorial voice or indeed any system of linguistic norms. Trilingual performance serves to demonstrate an intrinsic otherness within "national" languages; an otherness that emphasises the contingent nature of semantics. "L'amiral" foregrounds messy, disparate speech, producing "centrifugal" forces by making the three languages clash, upsetting the conventional order of a national language. Such forces are not in themselves unified as forces of opposition with which to resist streamlined hegemony, and indeed the very term "centrifugal" might be misleading, suggesting forces emanating from some sort of centre (Morson and Emerson 1990: 139–40). It is worth remembering, too, as T.J. Demos has pointed out, that the poem is designed to produce speech co-operatively, following a vocal regime but located in three distinct bodies. Ball gave this vocalisation a distinct reading when he commented on this performance of this (as he called it) "kontrapunktisches Rezitativ" in his diary; the elemental noise produced by the performers, he wrote (entry dated 30 March 1916), was more energetic than the individual human voice, and the poem charted the conflict of the human voice with a world that threatens to ensnare and destroy it through increasing mechanisation (Riha and Schäfer 1994: 20). If language's richness is conventionally homogenised into the procrustean bed of national belonging, then a simultaneous poem such as this would indeed become international. "L'amiral" occupies a hybrid poetic space, being a script for live performance and – in a version published in *Cabaret Voltaire* – a visual tableau with a symmetrical layout and unified typography, to which a polemical "Note pour les bourgeois" by Tzara was added. Its

visual regularity and formal orderliness make for a marked contrast to the vocal cacophony that the score would inevitably produce. The poem's representation in the print medium here might highlight the fact that, like much of Dada art, it is not intended as an object of contemplative, individual immersion, as Walter Benjamin has written in relation to Dada generally, but as a vocal script and a visual object pivoted on public, collective realisation.

An instance of an individual performance is Ball's famous recital of what he called "Verse ohne Worte" – wordless lyrics. Unlike the better known "Karawane", "Gadji beri bimba" (performed on 23 June 1916, following a recital of "Karawane") does not have a descriptive and hence suggestive title (Riha and Schäfer 1994: 56). It has been described, by Demos, as modelling language's autonomy, its resistance to becoming an instrument for nationalist purposes. Ball radicalises the performative nature of language already suggested by Tzara's score. The poem lays bare its device, as Shklovsky would say – like the word" Dada", it performs the uprooting of the sign from its referent and it thrives on its recurrent refusal to close the gap between the two. Instead, Ball's poem suggests non-mimetic, trans-verbal, rhythmic functions. We have predominantly syllables and syllabic fragments moving and proliferating through the text; they seem to echo one another but are made to mutate subtly and occupy shifting positions within the lines and the overall text. For example, there is a cluster of "g" and "gl" sounds, which is mirrored by sounds beginning with or revolving around "bi" and "bl". We can also see a patterning that works through repetition, mutation and resonance. Although such variations suggest a single stable phonetic core, the different materialisations deconstruct such core material; the poem becomes centrifugal and decentred – unless, that is, one knows what each phonetic bit may have "meant" or connoted for Ball (Sheppard 2000: 137). The sounds and syllables are reminiscent of ancient and modern languages, and commentators have devoted a great deal of energy to Germanic/Nordic languages. White (1998: 112) suggests that we read Ball's sound poetry as "a synthesis of all languages, each individual poem a note within a resonant universe". This would be to locate the poem in the tradition of the abstract *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where the emphasis is largely on musicality and movement. Another reading, however, might stress the text's asynthetic character, with rhythmic sounds providing a centrifugal force. I would suggest that the few

recognisable words are also part of this centrifugal patterning, making the text self-reflexive. An example of this is "gramma" (line 2), whose sound structure becomes also a "subject" in the poem and whose referential meaning (letter of the alphabet) haunts the poem's very structure. Another example is "Zanzibar" later on, which in its non-German spelling may be suggestive of Apollinaire's poetic phrase of geographic dislocation that opens his play *Les Mamelles de Tireisias*, "Paris est Zanzibar"; in Ball's poem it might refer also to the island off the coast of East Africa, then a British protectorate which was supplying troops to fight the German army on the Tanganyikan/Kenyan border, which saw intense fighting in early 1916. So, "Gadji beri bimba" obliterates meaning through the centrifugal character of both script and vocalisation, as does "L'amiral", but a key difference lies in its individual, isolated performance described by Ball in a famous diary entry and documented in the famous photograph. Ball certainly believed that his liturgical chanting and the experience of near total liberation from conventional language and authorship could be a model for a utopian, if temporary, community where not only the performer, but the listener too is made to experience language at an elemental level beneath semantics and understanding. The experience, however, was highly disturbing for Ball personally, and given his subsequent attitude towards Dada and his stance on the revolutions 1917 and 1918, he remains highly suspicious of any claims that such a community might be socially or politically cohesive.

If Dada Zurich spoke the language of exile, foregrounding heteroglossia, then Dada Berlin adopted the language of home to attack "monologic" languages. Operating in a much more circumscribed cultural field under political conditions radically different from Zurich, Dada Berlin was perhaps bound to internalise such exilic languages. It did, however, turn up the volume of its political language through its advertising and propaganda strategies, its mock sloganeering and its participation in the revolutionary struggle. Both formations, then, deploy language performances, but they do so in different ways. Berlin Dada's stance is epitomised by their demand to introduce the simultaneist poem as the communist state prayer (Riha and Schäfer 1994: 139) – a demand that mocks, of course, political discourse as an ideological form of community-building, but in its incongruity it alerts us also to language's potential

to disrupt any such process momentarily. As for the Berlin group's "exilic" status at home, many of the participants in Berlin Dada were German nationals, but they were "Germans" who were in a precise sense immigrants into the city, learning the new languages of urbanism and modernity. Franz Jung and Salomo Friedlaender (who published his literary work using the pen-name "Mynona" – which is the German word for "anonymous" spelled backwards) came from Pomerania and Silesia, located on the Eastern margins of the German Empire. The provisions of the Versailles Peace Treaty, signed in June 1919 following months of negotiations, meant that some of these territories were to be restored to a newly reconstituted Poland, leading to a resurgence of divided nationalist feelings in these provinces. Some of Dada Berlin's "polarity", as theorised by Friedlaender, may come from such internal displacement. George Grosz, although a native Berliner and an urban artist, also derived some exotic regional experience from stays in these provinces, whose hybrid ethnic make-up and imagery were useful tools in his anti-Germanism.[3] Huelsenbeck spent much of the year 1918 working as a military doctor outside Berlin, experiencing "national" homogenisation at many levels while simultaneously organising Dada activities in the capital. A number of the German Berlin Dadas were Jewish, further alienating them from any concept of national, ethnic or linguistic homogeneity. Such diverse backgrounds and experiences among the German nationals within Berlin Dada may serve to question the conventional links between territory, language and national belonging – and prompt not just political, but a linguistic kind of internationalism. As early as spring 1918, Raoul Hausmann and Jung had founded the "Club Dada" – a spelling that uses international, non-German words, and for the Anglophile Hausmann, the word "club" was perhaps also suggestive of violent attack; according to Hausmann (1982: 41), Club Dada represented "die Internationalität der Welt" in war-torn Germany. Conceived aggressively by Haussmann (in "Dada empört sich regt sich und stribt in Berlin") as a "Standarte des Internationalismus" (Riha and Kämpf 1992: 15), it was subsequently to recruit also displaced Russian, Dutch, American and Japanese artists into its ranks.

The Dadaist most richly and suggestively displaced from homeland and nation is perhaps Raoul Hausmann. Born in Vienna and therefore a subject of the Austrian Empire, he had lived in Berlin since

the turn of the century, and was always keen to stress his otherness from Germans and Germany. In a letter to Tzara dated 26 March 1919, he made much of the fact that his family tree had roots in Alsace, Styria, the Tyrol, and Moravia – all of these are marginal, bicultural regions within the disbanded German and Habsburg Empires and subject to intense nationalist disputes before, during and after the war. Several months later, writing to Tzara in Paris, Hausmann insisted he was not a "boche", but a Czecho-Slovak, a citizen of the newly created nation-state whose name hyphenates the two main national and linguistic groups within it, but cannot conceal the artificial character of the political and linguistic creation. Hausmann is adamant: "c'est toujours une autre chose, infact! Dear Sir" (Sheppard 1981: 111, 115). (As fas as we know Hausmann did have Czechoslovakian identity papers from 1919, if only to facilitate his divorce from his first wife Elfriede Schaeffer, a German national.[4]) But Hausmann's insistence on his non-Germanness has implications for his linguistic experiments. By virtue of his family's origin, Hausmann enjoyed "Heimatrecht" (the right to settle) in a small village near Prague. The village's name, Stehelceves and later: Stelcoves, is translated by Hausmann as "Chant d'Oiseau," or "Vogelsang". In his poem "Oiseautal", dating from 1919, Hausmann contracts the two languages in the title, while the lines of the poem, beginning with "Pitsu puit puittituttsu uttititi ittitaan", mimic birdsong by largely distancing themselves from words and structures that would be recognizable within the French and German languages.[5] However, there may be a tension here between the liberation of language from signification within a national framework, and an imaginary grounding of an inter- or transnational experience back onto a private arcadia, a natural state prior to subjection to nationalisms of all kind. By evoking the birdsong Hausmann heard as a child, the poem gestures towards a phonetic territory, a linguistic homeland that pushes beyond the set parameters of national languages.

Berlin Dada's main contribution to experimentation with language was perhaps that it visualises language's displacement from its national models. Hausmann's phonetic poems and poster-poems from 1918–19 militate against any desire for a linguistic homeland grounded in territory or demarcated by political borders. Displaying apparently random sequences of letters and visual signs they can be seen as very early forms of self-aware "subvertising," drawing

attention to the official discourse of corporate and political advertising so ubiquitous in Berlin at the time and designed for both distracted reception and percussive shock. The regularity of typeface and design is further disturbed in "kp'erioum", published alongside Hausmann's "Manifest von der Gesetzmäßigkeit des Lautes" (1919) (Hausmann 1982: 57). The poem was published in a more compact and somewhat more regularised form in the first issue of Hausmann's *Der Dada* (June 1919), and therefore comes in two versions, each using the various typefaces and font sizes suggesting differences in volume, pitch and vocal realisation. Given Hausmann's de-nationalising deployment of language, it is perhaps not too fanciful to read "kp'erioum", as an extended pun on the disintegration of territorial empires as well as linguistic imperialism. It is also an example of what Hausmann called "Klanggesten" (sound-gestures) which would always imply the self-performative framing of speech. In that sense, they prefigure Brecht and Judith Butler's ideas of the performative gesture, a reflexive speech act that embodies the power of ritual linguistic behaviour, but also opens up a modicum of critical distance by exposing structural and systemic contradictions that prescriptive performances would conceal (Webber 2004: 132–3). The fact that "kp'erioum" was appended to Hausmann's manifesto adds further significance. The manifesto is a striking example of literary collage that makes extensive use of found text; advocates automatism in the creative act; and foregrounds the physical aspect of sound production. Using the extended metaphor of smoking, Hausmann frames Dada's speech as one that emerges at a moment of "creative indifference" – a term borrowed from Friedlaender – and with the emanating work blurring the distinctions between subject and object, the conscious and the unconscious, the bodily and the spiritual. A slightly later work by Hausmann, his collage "ABCD" (1923), which includes a photographic self-portrait, illustrates such a poetic moment when individuality and cosmic existence merge to give, literally, voice – what is emanating from Hausmann's mouth is a kind of new language, not an indistinct Expressionist scream, but the first four letters of the alphabet. This is underscored by another set of four different letters which can be combined to form "Voce", while the mouth and ears – areas where Dada speech is generated and received – are made to blend with a starry background, suggestive of Johannes Baader's milky way, to indicate the universal claims associated with Dada's

new, denationalising language. A key role in this denationalising strategy was to be played by abstraction, including linguistic abstraction, which Hausmann thought to be crucial to prevent art and literature's subsumption under national purposes and characteristics, as he suggests in his satirical piece "Rückkehr zur Gegenständlichkeit in der Kunst" (Huelsenbeck 1920: 114–17).

In addition to linguistic experimentation in phonetic and visual texts, Dada Berlin employed another strategy to displace national languages from within, through the sustained use of foreign languages, in particular English, and more broadly through "Americanisation". Where Ball, for example, identified Americanisation in advanced art with the kind of formal simplification and geometricisation conducted by Arp and Taeuber, suited to challenge German Romantic and Expressionist art (Riha and Schäfer 1994: 17–18), the Berlin Dadaists projected themselves onto and embraced a different kind of "America" – one that provided them with a model to produce global, transnational signs, markers and products. Anglicizing their names, Grosz, Heartfield and Mehring would adopt American identities to emphasise their otherness to German rootedness. Grosz and Mehring would perform jazzy, syncopated songs that celebrate urban modernity by mixing several languages – a model that is certainly more popular than Ball's exclusive incantations in Zurich. Franz Jung's "Amerikanische Parade" and Mehring's "Enthüllungen" [Revelations or Manifestations] model American mass culture and receptive distraction as political opportunities. Mehring's text features a location called "Dadayama", displacing European Dada to what seems like a futuristic Japan infused by American mass culture; and this punning, self-aware text mixes not only a great number of genres,[6] but references an eclectic blend of ancient and modern languages and discourses to reinforce Dada's linguistic and geographical instability. Grosz and Heartfield's photocollage *Leben und Treiben in Universal City, 12 Uhr 5 mittags* (c.1919), which was reproduced on the cover of the International Dada Fair exhibition catalogue, uses fragments of English speech to help locate Dadaist distraction in a dizzying urban space that, although evocative of American mass culture and its social relationships, remains emphatically disconnected from German or any other national territory. What unites such multilingual, often visual texts is their tendency to de-nationalise language so as to embrace a potentially

global vernacular. These works by artists with changeable identities resist the re-homogenising languages of German art and politics, but at the same time they preserve something of the memory and anxiety of displaceable subjects to suggest that national rootedness is a fragile condition, as Derrida (1994: 83) has suggested in another, highly resonant context.

Without wishing to discard differences between Dada Zurich's simultaneous performances, multilingual and phonetic speech performed by collective and individual bodies, and the disorderly visualisation of voice and sound that we see in Dada Berlin, it seems that when Dada speaks like this, it performs and proclaims its radical difference from the imagined communities of nation and language. However, Dada does not seem to totally resist any sense of communal purpose, as Tzara suggests in one of his manifestos, but its language performances do gesture towards an alternative to dispersed singular identities; to the creation of small, voluntary, functional and temporary communities of artists and audience. Puchner (2006: 140) has claimed that Dada's multinational languages "provided a model of internationalism that Dada did not fully accept but nonetheless used to forge its own, quite different, transnational project". But Dada's radical performances of linguistic liberation, its programmatic and artistic internationalism, also come with a hidden, ambivalent desire for redemptive order. I am thinking here of Hugo Ball, who in late 1918, professed himself to be completely German in his essence, and although, like the other Dadas, he was sharply critical of German militarism and chauvinism, there is a tendency for him to subscribe to an inverted German nationalism, with the "logos" performing the role of eternal homeland.[7] I'm also thinking of Hausmann and others, who give Dada's fragmentation of national languages a kind of retrospective structure. For Hausmann, Dada signals a new language that could bind together people into a global community living together on a liberated earth (*Die Erde* was the journal where Hausmann expounded his anarchist views). With its linguistic experimentation, Dada challenges ideas about "natural" languages, about the role languages play in determining national belonging and in shaping political rhetoric. Dada's noisy, brutally truncated speech in Zurich and its more elementary speech in Berlin figure difference and diversity; discredit the languages of nationalism and political rhetoric; disturb the conventional order of signs; and gesture towards a de-

nationalisation of language. Yet the linguistic currency that Dada brought into circulation in the form of displaced, heteroglossic, international speech has a reverse side, which gives the internationalism of these frequently displaced, inherently displaceable artists another value. This may be part of Dada's more fundamental ambivalence, which proves continually productive. In many of its claims, poses and linguistic performances, creating hybrid spaces that shift between art and politics, Dada also speaks of a desire for another kind of language, another kind of community beyond the conventions of discourse.

Notes

1 Puchner (2006: 136). An example might be Tzara's insistence to change the spelling of the compilation prepared by Huelsenbeck for Kurt Wolff, from "Dadako" to "Dadaco", on grounds of its difference to Germanic connotations; see Tzara's letter to Huelsenbeck, dated 5 September 1919 (Kapfer and Exner 1996: 35).

2 For an account of the various meanings as well as legends surrounding circulating around the discovery of "Dada", see Elderfield 1996.

3 See for example his letter to Robert Bell (July 1913) in Grosz (1959: 26–8).

4 Further details are provided by Koch (1994: 17).

5 A typescript of the poem is reproduced in Koch (1994: 17). The line just quoted suggests also a child's babbling and his demand for the mother, but Koch (1994: 160) points out that it equally evokes a genuinely Czech sonority, which Hausmann attributed to his father's background and conceived as the "origin" of his sound poetry.

6 "Dadayama" used to be a separate poem, but is here turned into prose. For a discussion of "Enthüllungen" as a multi-generic manifesto, see Puchner (2006: 1556).

7 See Demos (2004: 158), and more extensively on Ball's complex intellectual stance, Rabinbach (1997: 66–96).

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