

**The Refrain of the A-grammatical Child: Finding Another Language in/for
Qualitative Research**

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Abstract

The article critically interrogates the figure of the child in Deleuze and its relation to language, as an entry point to the question of what a materialist theory of language might involve, and how it might be put to work in qualitative methodology. The Deleuzian child is a figure of destratification and resistance to dominant narratives – a resistance that is inextricably bound up with the materiality of the child’s body and its relation to language. Not yet fully striated by the rules of grammar that order and subjugate the world, children challenge ‘the hegemony of the signifier’ by remaining open to multiple semiotic connections (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 15). What would it mean for qualitative methodology to engage its own ‘becoming-child’?

The Refrain of the A-grammatical Child: Finding Another Language in/for Qualitative Research

I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar
(Nietzsche 1982, p. 483).

Children are supplied with syntax like workers being given tools
(Deleuze, 1995, p. 41)

Introduction

In this article I examine the figure of the child and its relation to language, as an entry point to the question of what a materialist theory of language might involve, and how it might be put to work in qualitative methodology. I also consider the implications for theory and research on children and childhood. The arguments are animated by the image of the child in the work of Deleuze, in particular in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; hereafter ATP). The Deleuzian child is a figure of de-stratification and resistance to dominant structures and value systems – a resistance that is inextricably bound up with the materiality of the child’s body and its relation to language. Not yet fully striated by the rules of grammar that order and subjugate the world, children challenge ‘the hegemony of the signifier’ by remaining open to multiple semiotic connections that do not obey the laws of conventional language and representation.

I begin by discussing some key aspects of a materialist theory of language as elaborated by Deleuze-Guattari, and then focus more specifically on the *refrain* or

ritornello, a concept explicitly associated with the child in the work of Deleuze and Guattari. The refrain or ‘little song’ establishes ‘the beginnings of order in chaos’. It marks out a fragile territory that nevertheless has the capacity to ‘open onto a future’. Deleuze and Guattari give the instance of the child who hums to himself as he walks fearfully in the dark. The refrain is pre-eminently a-grammatical and a-signifying: it accomplishes a “‘holding together” of heterogeneous elements’ (ATP, p. 323). I discuss some examples of the refrain in a corpus of video recordings of young children in the earliest years at school, assembled during a study of classroom language.

Such materially-engaged, a-signifying semiotics do not disappear as the child grows up and becomes more adept and embroiled in the ‘order-words’ of conventional language. Rather, they persist as affective ‘blocks of becoming’ that Deleuze and Guattari call ‘becoming-child’, and which they assert can befall us and carry us off in unforeseen trajectories at any age (ATP, p. 294). The notion of becoming-child should not be confused, then, with the progress of real children on the supposedly inexorable path towards adulthood. As Hickey-Moody (2013) notes, the untimely incursions of becoming-child disrupt the very idea of growing up as a linear process. Still, I suggest that there are implications for encounters with children in educational settings. I also argue that materialist research methodologies need to embrace the a-signifying, affective elements that are at play in becoming-child: these haunt qualitative ‘data’, but are still often dismissed as ‘junk’ material that distracts from truth, meaning or authenticity.

Note: I often use the pronoun ‘it’ rather than ‘he’ or ‘she’ in connection with the child, not in order to deny the humanity of children, but to invoke the critique of humanism that is central to Deleuzian thought. Children bear witness to something ‘indiscernible’ that is more and less than human, and in this resides their transformative potential to challenge the seeming ‘irreducibility of the human order’ (ATP, 273).

Language and the new materialisms

Before turning to the Deleuzian child, it is important to establish why language is an issue for new materialist thought and practice. As will already be implicit in the comments above, language holds a degraded status within the ‘material turn’.

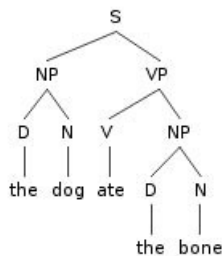
In much ‘new materialist’ work¹, it is axiomatic that language has been accorded too much privilege in the dominant paradigms of 20th century thought.² Barad, in one of the founding statements of new materialism, voiced the complaint thus:

Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every “thing” – even materiality – is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation (Barad, 2003, p. 801).

Barad is criticising here a pervasive ‘representationalism’ (see also Olkowski, 1999; Hekman, 2010) that renders material realities subordinate to the linguistic, cultural or discourse systems that supposedly represent or mediate them. For Deleuze representational thought is ‘sedentary’. It is the enemy of difference, movement, change and the emergence of the new. Pure difference, ‘difference in itself’ in

Deleuze's words, is 'crucified' by representation – trussed and held in place by its 'quadripartite fetters, under which only that which is identical, similar, analogous, or opposed can be considered difference' (1994, p. 174).

Representation bifurcates the world into signifiers and signifieds, subjects and predicates, discourse and materiality, nature and culture, words and worlds, essences and appearances, government and people, genus and species. It locks elements in place according to the position they are assigned on the forking branches of its 'arborescent' structure, as in the tree diagram below. Yet at the same time, its 'root-tree' logic ensures that everything is governed by a single, overarching or underpinning, 'eminent term' (ATP, p. 235). For Deleuze and Guattari, the tree diagrams that define grammatical sentences in Chomsky's linguistics are exemplary instances of root-tree logic or 'the law of the One', since they 'begin at a point S [sentence] and proceed by dichotomy' (ATP, p. 5). For example:



(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generative_grammar)

The dominant term at the top of the tree (S) bifurcates into two elements, Noun Phrase (NP) and Verb Phrase (VP), and each of these further divides until we get to the lowest elements.

'We're tired of trees ... they've made us suffer too much', write Deleuze and Guattari (ATP, p. 15). And it is in opposition to this prevailing 'arborescent culture' that

Deleuze and Guattari develop their concept of the rhizome, with its transversal, mobile, decentred organisation. Their earliest, much-quoted description of the rhizome in *A Thousand Plateaus* relates to language.

A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles. A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural and cognitive; there is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of dialects, patois, slangs, and specialized languages. There is no ideal speaker-listener, any more than there is a homogeneous linguistic community³... There is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language within a political multiplicity. Language stabilizes around a parish, a bishopric, a capital ... It spreads like a patch of oil. (ATP, p. 7)

Language is only one among many sign systems therefore, even if it has the power to overcode other semiotic systems. It does not spring from a root, whether historically or structurally, but springs up in different places and propagates laterally ('like a patch of oil') according to its pragmatic involvements in material and political affairs. It cannot be separated therefore from all the non-linguistic stuff that supposedly lies 'outside' it, and which is typically consigned by linguists to the 'trash-heap' of pragmatics. Language is inescapably social, but it is also impersonal: 'my' voice does not emanate from inside me, but issues from the collective assemblage of enunciation - 'the murmur from which I take my proper name, the constellation of voices, concordant or not, from which I draw my voice' (Deleuze, 2004: 93). There is no

ideal, universal ‘deep structure’ beneath the surface variations of dialects or styles. Rather, variation itself is ontologically prior. Deleuze and Guattari consider this point so important that they put it in italics, and wonder why Chomsky would ‘pretend not to understand’ it: ‘*You will never find a homogeneous system that is not still or already affected by a regulated, continuous, immanent process of variation*’ (ATP, p. 103; original emphasis).

Although the critique of language and representation is a significant element of new materialist thought in general, the work of Deleuze-Guattari is distinctive in the amount of detailed theoretical attention given to language and its involvements with materiality, politics and the virtual. Language is intimately implicated in the production of state and social order. Its primary function is not – contrary to common wisdom - to represent, refer, inform or communicate, but rather to transmit ‘*order-words*’ (ATP, p. 79; italics added). Order-words are disciplinary, both in the sense of commanding obedience and of creating order. They carry the implicit presuppositions that produce subjects and command social obligation in a given society, and might be better translated as ‘slogans’, since this emphasizes their unavoidably political, pragmatic and collective force (ATP, p. 83).

Deleuze and Guattari say that order-words are deathly. They perform ‘a little death sentence’ (ATP, p. 107) since they arrest the movements of becoming and variation in order to separate and distinguish a body from others. Once subject to an order-word, something takes shape, at the expense of all the other unrealized potentialities that are closed off, or killed off, by the verdict. Yet it is through the order-word that the alchemy that articulates language and life is achieved. Order-words ‘pin meaning to

bodies' (Lambert, 2014, p. 39), instantaneously transforming relations between bodies and language, expression and content. These transformations are incorporeal. In a high-jacking for instance, there are corporeal acts – waving guns, shouting, shooting etc. - but the transformation of the passengers into hostages, and the 'plane-body' into a 'prison-body' is incorporeal and instantaneous (ATP, p. 81).

Order-words are strongly associated with grammaticality. Indeed, like Nietzsche, who equated the work of god and grammar, Deleuze and Guattari treat grammaticality and discipline as synonyms in terms of their function of creating/imposing structure.

Grammaticality extracts constants from inherent variation; it regulates 'all the indisciplines at work in language' (ATP, p. 79); and it always involves power.

Referring to the Chomskyan tree diagram discussed above, Deleuze and Guattari spell out the association of grammar and power.

What is grammaticality, and the sign S, the categorical symbol that dominates statements? It is a power marker before it is a syntactical marker, and Chomsky's trees establish constant relations between power variables.

Forming grammatically correct sentences is for the normal individual the prerequisite for any submission to social laws. *No-one is supposed to be ignorant of grammaticality; those who are belong in special institutions* (ATP, p. 101; emphasis added)

The a-grammatical child

And now we are coming closer to the child, since those 'special institutions' for the correction or containment of the a-grammatical referred to in the quote above would

include, in addition to the lunatic asylum, the *school*. Children are risky subjects with polymorphous interests and polysemic capabilities, whose submission to the discipline of grammar cannot be assumed. They are rhizomatic – ‘an embodied flow of pauses and rushes’ as Hickey-Moody (2013, p. 278) puts it - and therefore always a potential threat to order. Deleuze and Guattari observe that ‘linguistics can tolerate no polyvocality or rhizome traits: a child who runs around, plays, dances, and draws cannot concentrate attention on language and writing, and will never be a good subject’ (ATP, p. 180). Hickey-Moody (p. 276) describes the Deleuzian child as a ‘vector of affect’⁴ – a ‘polymorphously perverse body’ that challenges the linguistic-oedipal structures that attempt to contain its deterritorializing force. Children do not necessarily observe the etiquette that gives precedence to linguistic over non-linguistic signs, or indeed to humans over animals or objects. They are not contained within the hierarchical structures of ‘filiation and heredity’ that underpin tree-logic and the oedipal relation but consort according to the logic of the *pack*, which proliferates by alliance, contagion and epidemic (ATP, p. 241).

The child, in short, ranges over flat terrains, dancing, singing and sliding laterally, forming assemblages through ‘unnatural nuptials’ (ATP, 273) with heterogeneous entities, human and nonhuman. It is never fully in thrall to the deep structures of language, representation and the ‘Oedipal symbolic community’ (ATP, p. 274). There is always the chance, then, that children will unmoor or uproot the constants that hold the linguistic sign system together: that ‘gestural, mimetic, ludic and other semiotic systems [will] regain their freedom and extricate themselves from ... the dominant competence of the teacher’s language’ (ATP, p. 15). Pedagogy is required to produce incorporeal transformations upon children, converting them into pupils with specific

sets of social obligations and specific identities. This is a constant and all-consuming mission: as Cole (2013, p. 95) observes, '[t]he order-words "flow" around places of learning like the routing of electricity in plasterboard walls'.

The pedagogy of order-words is not of course confined to school situations. Consider the following snippet of talk from a mother to her two-year old in a restaurant queue, presented in Luke (1995, p. 21).⁵

We're in a long line, Jason. Aren't we? There are lots of people lined up here, waiting for a drink. Look [pointing] they're carrying a Christmas tree with lots of things on it. They're moving it. Do we have a Christmas tree like that?

Viewed from a Deleuzian materialist perspective, we can see this mundane little monologue as an exercise in grammaticality and representation. Jason's mother contours and disciplines a bit of the world for him. She names it and peoples it; invests actions with purpose and reason; establishes what is normal and meaningful, and thereby demonstrates the very possibility of pinning meaning to the body of the world, and the body of oneself. She invites Jason to consider his place within this world: to think in terms of the fixed relations of similarity and difference afforded by the logic of representation ('Do we have a Christmas tree like that?'). At the same time she indicates that it is possible to stand 'outside' this world in order to observe and comment on it. Jason is thus invited to occupy the position of the 'central point' or 'third eye' which, according to the 'law of arborescence', ranges over all space, dispensing binary oppositions: 'male-(female), adult-(child), white-(black, yellow or red); rational-(animal)' (ATP, p. 292). This central point that surveys all and dispenses binary oppositions, while installing itself as the principal term of each opposition,

constitutes the *majority*. Even when exercised by women (as here), or children or people of other ethnicities, the majority is coded male: it is the exercise of a ‘virile majoritarian agency’ (ATP, p. 293). As Luke (1995: 22) notes, albeit from a different analytic framework, Jason is constituted in this fleeting fragment as ‘a young, male Anglo-Australian’.

The language I have used here seems to assign strong agency and personal responsibility to Jason’s mother. It implies that she orchestrates and controls the disciplinary event. But from a Deleuzian perspective, Jason’s mother too is subject to the ‘verdict’ of the order-word even if, and even as she speaks from a majoritarian position. Her role and identity are drawn from the assemblage that precedes and envelops her, and which confers subjectivity and social obligation upon her.

There are no individual statements, there never are. Every statement is the product of a machinic assemblage, in other words, of collective agents of enunciation (take ‘collective agents’ to mean not peoples or societies but multiplicities). The proper name ... does not designate an individual: it is on the contrary when the individual opens up to the multiplicities pervading him or her, at the outcome of the most severe operation of *depersonalization*, that he or she acquires his or her true proper name’ (ATP, p. 37; emphasis added).

As suggested above, it is precisely because of the child’s rhizomatic, ‘minoritarian’ tendencies that it is so rigorously subject to the pedagogy of the order-word. The child in Deleuze is one of those figures – along with madmen, poets and literary giants of ‘minority’ languages – whose language has the power to unmoor or uproot the

‘constants’ of ‘public language’ and release the immanent variation that is always only provisionally held in place in the order-word. For order-words also have the potential to become *passwords* – ‘components of passage’ and deterritorialization rather than of stoppage and stratification (ATP, p. 110). As switching points in the relations of force between content and expression, order-words may flip into passwords, opening up possibilities of flight or passage in new directions by radically *un-settling* the boundaries between words and things, transforming both into one ‘common matter’. When this happens, ‘[g]estures and things, voices and sounds, are caught up in the same “opera”, swept away by the same shifting effects of stammering, vibrato, tremolo and overspilling (ATP, p. 109).

A-grammaticality consists precisely in this putting-into-variation of the constants of language, of causing language to stutter. Deleuze and Guattari discuss the work of the poet e.e.cummings, whose a-grammatical formulations such as ‘he went his did’ uproot grammatically correct forms from their status as constants, and thereby constitute a ‘cutting edge of deterritorialization of language’ (ATP, 99).⁶ Children too are a-grammatical artisans, capable of detaching words or phrases from their syntactic environment and their heavy freight of meaning and signification in order to play with them. They can, and do, get caught up in the base material that lies on the boundaries of language, body, gesture and music - noises, jingles, snatches of doggerel, rhymes, jokes.

These child actions can be considered as refrains or ritornellos, which for Deleuze and Guattari are forms of organisation that precede and interrupt the workings of language and representation. I want to turn now to some examples of refrains in a corpus of

audio and video recordings of young children (aged 5-6), assembled during a study of classroom language that was conducted in the 1970s.⁷ The children involved wore radio-microphones that picked up their words and deeds as they moved around the classroom. The recordings afford rare access to the refrains, intermezzi and sound-games of children that run alongside and amongst the ‘public language’ and the officially sanctioned activities of the schooling. I am going to assume, for the purposes of the present exploration, that the a-grammatical logic of the refrains of young children in UK classrooms will not have changed substantially over the intervening decades, even though the specific contents of these refrains will undoubtedly have done so.

The refrain: excerpts from the a-grammatical songbook

For Deleuze and Guattari, the refrain is firstly a marker of territory. The refrain establishes ‘the beginnings of order in chaos’. Refrains are found in many disparate domains – in bird song, Proust, music, and the humming of the ‘housewife’ (yes, I’m afraid so...), ‘as she marshalls the antichaos forces of her work’ (1987: 311). But the famous opening paragraph to the section on the refrain in *A Thousand Plateaus* specifically starts out from the song of a child.

A child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath. He walks and halts to his song. Lost, he takes shelter, or orients himself with his little song as best he can. The song is like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilizing, calm and stable center in the heart of chaos. Perhaps the child skips as he sings, hastens or slows his pace. But the song itself is

already a skip: it jumps from chaos to the beginnings of order in chaos and is in danger of breaking apart at any moment. (ATP, p. 311)

In the classroom video recordings, refrains come and go in the repetitive sounds, movements, word games, facial expressions and gestures of children as they move through the classroom and the school day. Here is an example:

Refrain 1. 'Summer Loving'

Moving away from the teacher's desk, where he has been reading aloud, a boy heads for his book drawer and rummages in it, whistling and then humming snatches of a song from that summer's blockbuster movie, *Grease*.

(Fragments of 'Summer Loving' often floated across the surface of the project classrooms in that autumn of 1978).

Little episodes such as these seem so lightweight as to be scarcely noticeable – mere 'fillers' in a child's transitions from one educationally significant moment to the next. But they are everywhere in the recordings, and it is worth thinking further about what they might be doing, as they seem to me to have many of the characteristics of the refrain or ritornello. Through their tunes and whistles and jingles, children establish a 'portable territory' (ATP, p. 320) – a place to perch in the shapeless flux of interstitial space and time in the classroom.

The refrain is not however, or not necessarily, a closed off space of interiority.

Although it works to establish a center amidst chaos, and marks the boundaries of a 'home', the refrain also has the potential to open onto an outside, and to connect with

others. Deleuze and Guattari write: ‘one opens the circle a crack, opens it all the way, lets someone in, calls someone, or else goes out oneself... One launches forth, hazards an improvisation’ (ATP, p. 311). The improvisatory aspect of the refrain, and its capacity to call others in, can be seen in this little passage involving children who are seated in small groups around circular tables, having been assigned group-work tasks by the teacher.

Refrain 2: ‘Goody goody yum yum’

A girl leans over to tell a group at an adjacent table that ‘The Goodies [TV show] is on today’, and someone sings the first line of the theme song - ‘Goodies! Goody goody yum yum’. This is taken up by others, who preserve the tune on each iteration, while the words morph from ‘goody goody yum yum’ to ‘goody goody gum drops’ (itself a stock phrase that the theme tune echoes and therefore a refrain) to ‘goody goody gum poo’. Children laugh.

The passage of the refrain from one child to another, and their pleasure in the transition, incorporates them as confederates in a territory that is traced by its movement between them. This is pack logic, as discussed above, in which connection proceeds via contagion, affect and epidemic rather than by meaning and signification.

The refrain does not need to be a tune or melody. Deleuze and Guattari note that refrains are often ‘sonorous’, but can also be ‘optical, gestural, motor, etc.’ (ATP, p. 323). And words themselves can operate as refrains or as components of refrains, as the repetition-substitution of yum yum–gum drops–gum poo above suggests.

Rhythmic repetitions of facial expressions, laughter, body postures, movements and

words can all be mobilised in the improvisatory work of the refrain. This happens in the following extract in which two boys – both coincidentally (and felicitously) called James – spool out in counterpoint a refrain that involves word play, mirrored gestures and facial expressions, as they sit together in the sunshine spilling onto the sofa, waiting to go out at break time. James B has said to the teacher that he wants to take his jumper (sweater) off because he’s hot.

Refrain 3. ‘We’re boilin’

James 1: yeah, we’re boilin’, we’re boilin’ like roast on the oven aren’t we?

 we’re like roast chicken

James 2: yeah! [laughing]

James 1: we’re peas and carrots roasin’
 in a pressure cooker

James 2: we’re, we’re like a waistcoat
 burnt

James 1: yeah, warm.

 oh my sweaty! [rubs his face with both hands]

James 2: oh I’m sweatin’ I’m sweatin’ (indecipherable) [rubbing his face]

James 1: oh I’m sweatin’ hot [rubbing his face]

In this refrain, words, body postures, laughs and gestures work together in rhythmic counterpoint. It is significant that, as in the previous example, language does not seem to be operating conventionally. Although James and James are assuredly connecting

with one another, and indeed are embarked on a kind of joint experimentation out of which the refrain unfolds, they do not seem to be involved in ‘communication’, if this is understood as a transmission or exchange of meanings. Instead, the event exhibits the capacity of the refrain to effect the “‘holding together’” of heterogeneous elements’ (ATP, p. 323). Unlikely and unfamiliar objects, multisensory affects, movements, facial expressions and utterances are assembled in/by the refrain, in contrast to the ordered hierarchies of ‘families’ of entities built by representation. Linked to this, the example testifies to the element of *chance* that attends the formation and elaboration of a refrain. Peas, carrots, waistcoats, sofas, hot sweaters on a sunny day, bodies turned towards each other, and mirrored gestures are unlikely and unpredictable components of an affective assemblage, but they ‘hold together’ in the refrain of James and James. In a refrain such as this, language is again freed from its representational function, and mobilises sensations and affects.

The words used by the two Jameses here seem to operate in a manner akin to *nonsense*, which Deleuze (2004), animated by Lewis Carroll, associates with the ‘mad element’ that subsists within language, attesting to its materiality and its entanglements with bodies. Nonsense is the paradoxical element in language that exceeds propositional meaning and frustrates the laws of representation. For Deleuze nonsense is productive since it keeps language open and mobile. Williams (2008: 69) writes: ‘Nonsense works. It can wound and delight, sooth and excite. When it does so, not only are sensations and affects transmitted, but claims to corral them through proper use founder’.

A further example of nonsense can be seen in Joanna's extended riff on her 'chickenwire' below, and her attempts – rather unsuccessful - to form a 'portable territory' (ATP, p. 320) around this phrase.

Refrain 3. 'Chickenwire'

The chickenwire emerges from a conventional conversational exchange between Joanna and a boy about the aerial wire hanging from the radio microphone receiver that Joanna wears around her waist. She and the boy are aware that the microphone is transmitting sound to the receiver, and the boy urges her to 'say connecting wire' into the lapel microphone pinned to her cardigan. Joanna replies that it is 'chickenwire', and takes this phrase on a tour round the classroom, attempting to recruit classmates to an encounter – 'Look! Chickenwire!' She is intermittently successful, as children move in and out of engagement. On its travels, as Joanna attempts to draw attention to the chickenwire, it becomes, in her mouth, chickenbiker, chickenRobert, chickenruler, chickenDaniel, chickeneverything and chickenpickle. Finally, finding it difficult to secure attention and sustain a territory in the 'neighborhood' of the chickenwire, Joanna returns to her seat at her group's table and resorts to propositional language: 'look it can bend, and it's straight. It's wire'. But the phrase has (thereby) lost its magic, and she is forced to concede the point made by her tablemate, that although it's wire, it isn't *chicken* wire. Joanna subsides into her chair, silent but kicking her foot rhythmically, as the camera pulls back and reveals the teacher standing behind Joanna's group, waiting for the class to re-enter the official time and territory of the classroom.

Joanna's refrain, although ultimately unsuccessful, replays most of the characteristics that have already been identified in the refrain: its territorialising function, exercised through the use of rhythmic repetition to carve a kind of 'consistency' out of chaos; its openness to new connections through improvisation and experiment; its resistance to recuperation for conventional language, and the draining of its powers of affect when ordinary – that is, representational - language returns.

As noted above, 'chickenwire' seems to operate in a manner similar to Lewis Carroll's nonsense words, such as 'Snark' and 'frumious', or to the nonsense words in children's nursery rhymes which interested Deleuze, such as 'pimpanicaille'. The nonsense word, or esoteric word holds a special place in Deleuze's anti-representational theory of language and meaning as elaborated in *The Logic of Sense* (2004). The esoteric word is a 'blank word' (2004, p. 79) - a paradoxical word-thing that does not have conventional linguistic meaning or reference. Chickenwire. The esoteric word does not obey the regressive logic according to which x 'means' y, which in turns 'means' z and so on. Instead, according to Deleuze, it 'denotes exactly what it expresses and expresses what it denotes'; or more economically, it 'says its own sense' (2004, p. 79). It is productively blank, and blankly productive. Belonging to both words and things, and equally to neither, having no meaning outside of itself, the esoteric word signals both 'excess and lack, empty square and supernumerary object' (2004, p. 78). In this dual, but asymmetrical capacity, the paradoxical element in the esoteric word runs along heterogeneous series causing them to 'resonate and converge' as signifying and signified respectively; but also making them *ramify*, producing disjunctions and diversions into new territories.

Recast in the terminology of *A Thousand Plateaus*, nonsense, in its ramifications, does the same rhizomatic, a-grammatical work as the password. The Deleuzian child ramifies. It sketches and skirts the surface, where bodies and things do not confront one another as constants, but are articulated as sense. It embodies the ‘rebel becomings’ that insist in language, opening it onto the new (2004, p. 4).

Lastly, although my commentary has implied that the children are the primary agents in the initiation and ramification of refrains, the question of agency is not clear-cut. Which came first, the chickenwire or the subject? In a Deleuzian ontology, as noted above in the discussion of the example of Jason and his mother, subjects do not pre-exist the assemblages of which they are components, and do not have a privileged perspective on them. Rather, subjects are constituted in and through the assemblages in which they move, and which move them. A child may seem to exercise agency and decision in ‘quoting’ or ‘mimicking’ a song from a movie, or a line from a TV signature tune; but one could equally understand them as ‘occupied’ and animated by blocks or fragments of those refrains. Is Joanna taking the chickenwire on a territorial foray round the classroom, or is the chickenwire (also) pulling her along as she finds out what it might mean, or rather what it might do?

Ramifications

The child ‘knows’ what adults have by and large forgotten. That nonsense is not the opposite, but the confederate of sense. That there are more ways to connect than through the exchanging of messages or the deciphering of meaning. That words and sounds are bodies too, capable of being detached from their syntagmatic and

paradigmatic bonds and set in motion to draw a different line. That a-grammaticality is a force and not a failure.⁸ That a capacity for inhuman alliance lives and laughs mercilessly alongside and inside human relations. That order and disorder (territorialization and deterritorialization; order-word and password) are both at issue in the (dis)organisation of the world and of language.

This is not to suggest that children are seers or savants. Indeed Deleuze and Guattari do not consider children's refrains to be creative. Children's syntheses lack the *sobriety* and *technique* needed to wrangle the 'cosmic forces' in the heterogeneous elements of the assemblage. This requires the sober discipline and the creative *savoir-faire* of the poet, artist or composer as 'cosmic artisan' (ATP, p. 345) It is only when music 'lays hold of the refrain and deterritorializes it' (303) that its molecular forces are released. The 'becoming-child' that insists in the refrain is not therefore, as Deleuze and Guattari frequently reiterate, the becoming *of* the child.

Nevertheless, it is possible, I think, to take off from the Deleuzian child in order to think encounters with children differently, and more creatively. Some caution is needed. As Hickey-Moody (2013) notes, the image of the child as a vector of affective becoming is a romanticized and therefore a conservative one. As in many other philosophical traditions, children are asset-stripped for their conceptual value, at the expense of engagement with the material conditions of their lives. Nevertheless, like Hickey-Moody, I would argue that the figure of the child in Deleuze has the capacity to interrupt 'adultomorphic' (Gill-Peterson, 2013) developmental models that validate only one path and one end-point, and fail those children who deviate.

One way of attempting such interruptions is to interrogate the prevailing order-words that inculcate children into their adult obligations and identities. Earlier in this paper I discussed Luke's (1995) example of Jason being inducted into the 'majoritarian' logic of representation. As is well known, the collective assemblage of enunciation from which Jason's mother draws her voice is one that envelops mainstream education in the countries of the global North. According to Luke and many other critics (e.g. Gee 2004), though they would not put it in these words, it is this 'grammaticality' – this shared assumptive architecture of language, self and society – that accounts for the marked educational success of the middle classes, whose children start school already disposed to survey, parse and explain the world; to extract constants by comparing and contrasting fixed entities; to mine story for meaning. Children growing up in other situations and assemblages are immersed and disciplined in different practices. For instance there are societies such as the Black rural community described by Brice Heath (1983), that place a much higher value on the affective, performative, embodied aspects of language, and encourage children to develop skills of repartee, ritual insult, word-play and 'fussing' rather than rational argument or knowing exactly what things mean. There are indigenous societies where children are inducted into ways of knowing and being that assume that place and land have agency, and recognise relationality across human and non-human entities (Jones & Hoskins, 2013; Tuck, 2014)⁹.

The legitimacy of such embodied and affective practices is precisely what is withheld in hegemonic assemblages that prioritize the abstracting and generalizing logics of representation. However Deleuze and Guattari insist that 'major' and 'minor' are not two different languages, but two different modes or tendencies that subsist within

language, one tending towards the extraction of constants; the other towards continuous variation. Order-word and password. The importance that some communities accord to the a-grammatical and asignifying tendencies that are immanent in all language testify to the presence of ‘seeds, crystals of becoming whose value is to trigger uncontrollable movements and deterritorializations of the majority’ (ATP, p. 106). The problem, and the political project, lies in discovering where the trigger is and how to release it.

There are also implications for educational encounters in the classroom. Deleuze and Guattari describe the refrain as the *a priori* or pure form of time, a ‘prism [or] crystal of space-time’ (ATP, p. 348) from which ordinary time is fabricated. Similarly, sense/nonsense can be understood as the *a priori* of language: as that which mobilises and provides the conditions of emergence of ordinary language, and grants it sense (as opposed to purely linguistic meaning). Child refrains such as those that I have explored here might be, and often have been, considered ‘junk’ material. They represent the kind of activity that registers in classroom observation protocols or teacher assessments (if noted at all) as ‘off-task’ and therefore educationally worthless. At best they might be recognized and sanctioned as ‘play’ – as a form of heterotopic activity that, within conventional early childhood practice, is nevertheless seen as a form of preparation of children for entry into the creative aspects of humanism.

But these seemingly trivial and mundane classroom episodes are worthy of attention in early years education, if we are to understand more about how the stable achievements of language and learning are indebted to, and emerge out of, the

movements and rhythms of bodies, in the struggle with formlessness and chaos. The refrains of children attest to the interconnections of mind and body, of sounds, matter, affects, words and thoughts. Yet one of the main projects of early years education is often precisely to disconnect mind and body: to teach children to render their bodies immobile so that the mind can be freed to go about its business in Cartesian autonomy. This explains why rhythmic, rhizomatic bodily refrains such as fidgeting, wandering, doodling, rocking, humming and haptic liaisons with objects are problematic from the perspective of adults in the classroom (see MacLure et. al., 2012).

The wider question is how education can be sensitive to the potential that all children have for experiment, improvisation, in order to enhance their capacity to affect and be affected. This potential can be glimpsed in the mundane creativity of children's refrains. But it is necessary first to be able to 'see' them. The difficulty in 'seeing' differently is partly a problem of speed and scale. Perhaps children and adults are caught up in events that move at different speeds, and are sometimes imperceptible to one another. From the perspective of the purposeful, ordered and orderly time of the teacher, the refrains of children may look like fooling around or wasteful expenditure. Or they may even look like nothing at all, remaining below the threshold of visibility set by the categorizing gaze that already 'knows' what is and is not significant. Mullarkey (2008) suggests that there is an ethical obligation to try to see the events of others. 'Our event, our time, needs the patience of others, just as their time, their event, needs our patience and respect'. This is hard to achieve. But early years researchers and practitioners, working with new materialist concepts, are beginning to

develop experimental practices that are attuned to the a-grammatical sense-making capacities of young children (e.g. Olsson, 2012; Seigworth, 2003; Holmes 2012).

Turning finally to the implications for qualitative inquiry: it is clear that conventional qualitative method continues to be ‘grammatically’ inclined. Analysis, at least as presented in textbooks and courses (St. Pierre, 2013) is dedicated to finding order and reducing variation through the application of coding schemes or the extraction of themes (MacLure, 2013a). Methods for engaging with qualitative data are still preoccupied with depth (as truth, generalization, authenticity or meaning) and intent on disciplining the diversions of the surface (jokes, pretense, false fronts, irony, irrelevance or double meanings). Analysis still does not really know what to do with the matter that lies on the borders of language, body and the virtual - tears, laughter, hiccups, fidgeting, silence - to which it makes little sense to respond: *what does this mean?* Or to insist on responding only in this way. It does not handle well those moments when affect raises the carefully maintained temper of the relation between researcher and ‘subject’, and disgust, fear, surprise or un-nameable sensations infect the cool rationality of the encounter. (MacLure, 2013b). Despite many good intentions, qualitative research continues to perpetrate an essentially colonial relation of mastery over its ‘subjects’, and will do so as long as inquiry is regulated by that central point or third eye that flies or floats over the binary distinctions that it dispenses. It is only by forgetting the continuous variation from which order emerges that we are able to think ourselves as separate from the “data’ that afford us our interpretive mastery.

If qualitative methodology were to acknowledge and mobilize its a-grammatical tendencies, its own ‘becoming-child’, this would involve becoming more attentive to such ‘troublesome’ moments, as indicators of the potential for creation and escape that is the other face of order and pattern. This would not mean giving up a commitment to order in favour of an ‘armchair anarchism’ that impotently urges anomie and disorder (McClure, 2001, p. 191). Instead, as I have argued elsewhere, we could think of qualitative research as ‘*an experiment with order and disorder*, in which provisional and partial taxonomies are formed, but are always subject to change and metamorphosis, as new connections spark among words, bodies, objects and ideas (MacLure, 2013a, p. 181; emphasis added).

The experiment with order and disorder is a risky one, and Deleuze and Guattari are at pains to point out the risk as well as the promise of the deterritorializing refrain - of ‘cosmic force gone *bad*’ (ATP, p. 350; original emphasis). Instead of the creativity of new connections, there is always the danger of the collapse of meaning and self into a black hole, when the ‘mad element’ that subsists in language is released. But as Deleuze argues, the attempt to unleash it is a political and ethical imperative, and I will conclude with his challenge, which is of relevance not only to the schooling of children, but also to qualitative methodology.

Well then, there’s something like silence, or like stammering, or screaming, something slipping through underneath the redundancies and information, letting language slip through, and making itself heard, in spite of everything... So how can we manage to speak without giving orders, without claiming to represent something or someone, how can we get people without the right to

speaking, to speak; and how can we restore to sounds their part in the struggle against power? I suppose that's what it means to be like a foreigner in one's own language (1995, p. 41).

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Notes

1 Key collections which give a flavor of the range of approaches contributing to the new materialisms include: Dolphijn & Van der Tuin (2012); Alaimo and Hekman (2008); Gregg & Seigworth (2010); Barrett & Bolt (2012); Coole & Frost (2010).

2 The Deleuzian critique of representation goes much further back than this, as part of a critique of the 'majoritarian' traditions of Western philosophy since Plato (e.g. Deleuze, 2004).

3 Deleuze and Guattari are directly referencing here Chomsky's famous statement: 'Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-communication, who know its (the speech community's) language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of this language in actual performance. (Chomsky, 1965, p. 3).

4 Hickey-Moody, in her important discussion of 'Deleuze's children', which has greatly influenced my account here, identifies multiple images of the child in Deleuze, including the 'psychoanalytic girl', the 'rhizomatic child', and the 'tuber baby'. I do not engage, except in passing, with the differences amongst these figures, focusing instead on those points where Deleuze (and Guattari) bring the child into productive encounter with questions of language and representation. These points traverse, and partially fragment, the distinct child figures identified by Hickey-Moody.

5 In MacLure (2003) I discuss this example from a broadly discourse-based perspective. The present discussion draws on that prior account, though it takes a more materialist slant.

6 See MacLure (2013a) for a discussion of agrammaticality in a poem by Meredith Quartermain, in relation to the 'grammatical' logic of coding in qualitative research.

7 The classroom recordings were made between 1977 and 1979 as part of a project funded by the Nuffield Foundation and the (then) Social Science Research Council, entitled 'Language in the Transition from Home to School'. This project was the final phase of the influential Bristol

longitudinal language development research program (see Wells, 1981 for a description of the project methodology and its findings). 32 children, attending different infant schools, were video- and audio-recorded over the course of one morning in their first, second and sixth terms at school. I was a researcher on the project.

8 This is not to say that a-grammaticality is necessarily, or always, a positive force. I return to this issue later in this concluding section.

9 Tuck (2014) notes that indigenous scholarship is seldom acknowledged in new materialist writing. Indigenous work would therefore contest the legitimacy of claims to be ‘new’.