METAPHORICAL CONCEPTUALISATION OF 
INJURIOUS AND INJURED LANGUAGE IN HERTA MÜLLER

Introduction

Herta Müller represents physical suffering and repression in her works, often reflecting on the Ceaușescu regime, and her constant interest in language and reflexivity towards writing have led her to develop sophisticated metaphors that she uses to reason about language and its functioning in the conditions of such subjugation. There is a substantial critical literature on these facets of Müller’s work, beginning with the earliest reviews, which identified that her writing was motivated by her traumatic experiences.¹ In the 1990s, Hannes Krauss maintained that Müller’s writing also stems from her personal suffering, and Valentina Glajar observed that ‘her texts are […] literary documents […] of suffering.’² While Graziella Predoiu regards pain as a profound theme in Müller’s work: ‘Schmerz und Angst […] erscheinen im Oeuvre der rumäniendeutschen Autorin im Innersten ihrer “Topographie” als Grundbedingung menschlicher Existenz verankert’, Astrid Schau goes further, claiming that physical pain is sometimes presented by Müller as the very motivation for writing: ‘Einen Schmerz […] macht Herta Müller als Motivation ihres Schreibens aus, das sich aus einer

¹ See, for example, Peter Motzan, “Und wo man etwas berührt, wird man verwundet.” Zu Herta Müllers Niederungen’, Neue Literatur, 3 (1983), 67-72 (p. 67).

Haltung der Verweigerung gegenüber der Diktatur speist.\(^3\) Physical suffering is frequently caused by violence, whose importance to Müller’s literary works is discussed by Paola Bozzi and Katja Suren.\(^4\) Iulia-Karin Patrut argues that violence is in fact omnipresent in Müller’s texts as they offer ‘die literarische Darstellung einer Welt […] in der Gewalt stets von vornherein dazugehört.’\(^5\) There is also substantial critical reflection on Müller’s poetic use of language, of course,\(^6\) but in particular on the influence of psychological trauma on the textures of her writing,\(^7\) and Anja K. Johannsen points out the original contribution of British scholars to this field.\(^8\)

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\(^7\) This line of argument can be found in Beverley Driver Eddy, ‘Testimony and Trauma in Herta Müller’s *Herztier*’, *German Life and Letters*, 53 (2000), 56-72.

\(^8\) Anja K. Johannsen, *Kisten, Krypten, Labyrinthe: Raumfigurationen in der Gegenwartsliteratur: W.G. Sebald, Anne Duden, Herta Müller* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2008), p. 13. See, for example, Brigid Haines, “‘The Unforgettable Forgotten’: The Traces of
The scholarship on trauma in the works of Herta Müller has primarily focused on the concept of psychological trauma and Lyn Marven offers insightful analysis of the relationship between psychological trauma and the body in Müller’s prose and collages. She foregrounds the link between trauma and physical suffering: ‘Müller’s corporeal images of trauma […] are explicitly linked to physical threat,’9 and indeed it is impossible to understand psychological trauma without the implied domain of physical injury. The literary concept of trauma is not immediately grounded in sensory-motor experience, however, and has to be construed with the help of more concrete concepts such as pain or injury which relate directly to the human body.

Beverley Driver Eddy develops an unconventional metaphor for trauma as ‘a reconstructed life-story intended to overcome a troubling, recurring memory by locating that memory within its larger, historical context’.10 This conceptualisation of trauma as narrative highlights the abstract nature of psychological trauma but also its dependence upon more concrete experience. The implied autonomy of the psyche in relation to the human body enables us to construe the concept of psychological trauma metaphorically. In general, the juxtaposition of the psychological and the physical constitutes a productive but problematic dichotomy which relies on the metaphorical divide between the mind and the body. This


article, therefore, does not aim to discuss psychological trauma in Müller’s works, but focuses on injury and its metaphorical use in order to interpret language. Although physical and psychological suffering in Müller’s texts has always been in the focus of literary criticism, the relationship between language and injury has not previously been analysed through the prism of conceptual metaphor theory, a lacuna which this study seeks to fill. It will show how Müller’s complex metaphorical conceptualisation of language is both injurious and injured. With reference to Müller’s literary works, critical essays, and interviews, I will demonstrate how the concrete concept of injury, which relates directly to sensory perception, can be used in order to reason about the more abstract concept of language in the conditions of oppression.

In cognitive literary studies, metaphor is not mere embellishment but serves the purpose of understanding reality and plays an important role in human reason. While Ricarda Schmidt posits an important difference between poetic and conventional metaphors and identifies unique metaphors in Müller’s writing, I argue that the metaphor for language as injury is not an idiosyncratic invention of the author. Its explanatory power is not confined to literature. For example, injury is commonly used by critical thinkers in order to reason about everyday speech. Discussing the vocabulary of theoretical works on hate speech, for example, Judith Butler explicates the metaphorical conceptualisation of language as injury.


and identifies a generic parallelism between these concepts: ‘The use of a term such as “wound” suggests that language can act in ways that parallel the infliction of physical pain and injury.’ She simultaneously problematises the distance between the concepts of injury and language by highlighting the metaphorical nature of injurious speech. For Butler, linguistic and physical injuries ‘can be compared only metaphorically. Indeed, it appears that there is no language specific to the problem of linguistic injury, which is, as it were, forced to draw its vocabulary from physical injury’ (ES, p. 4). As a result, the concept of physical injury becomes constitutive of the linguistic injury: ‘the metaphorical connection between physical and linguistic vulnerability is essential to the description of linguistic vulnerability itself’.

The theoretical background of the study is formed by conceptual metaphor theory within the framework of cognitive literary studies. The three key tenets of the theory are that human reason is embodied, often metaphorical, and largely unconscious. First, reason is embodied, and the mind cannot be abstracted from the human body: ‘what we call “mind” and what we call “body” are not two things, but rather aspects of one organic process, so that all meaning, thought, and language emerge from the aesthetic dimensions of this embodied activity.’ Hence metaphors often rely on concepts that relate directly to the human body. Second, people use metaphor to understand and conceptualise new meanings; metaphors ‘can


give meaning to our pasts, to our daily activity, and to what we know and believe’. Finally, reason is largely unconscious, and thus metaphors can appear to be literal and to describe reality as it is. According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, metaphors ‘have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it.’

When analysing the metaphors in the texts of Herta Müller, it is helpful to follow Lakoff and Johnson in their terminology and distinguish between target and source domains. The source domain is a more concrete, more ‘intersubjectively accessible’ concept, such as ‘knife’ – which is used either consciously or unconsciously to reason about the more abstract and less comprehensible target domain (such as ‘language’). In their writing and speech, authors use categories of perception and motor activity as source domains through which readers are able to understand more abstract target domains. The concept of injury is used as a source domain by Müller to reason about the influence of speech upon the characters and herself, as well as about the influence of extralinguistic phenomena upon language.

Injurious speech

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18 Ibid., p. 145.

Language as an injurious physical force\textsuperscript{20} is a repeated motif in Müller’s works. Writing about her childhood experience of rural life in the Banat and the villagers’ penchant for silence, Müller explains that speech gains the injurious tangibility of a physical force in interaction with people in the village. A question is metaphorically presented as an attack on the person to whom it is addressed: ‘Die Frage “was denkst du jetzt” wäre wie ein Überfall gewesen’.\textsuperscript{21} The word ‘Überfall’ can be analysed in terms of force dynamics. The question becomes a physical force that exerts sudden and immediate pressure on the interlocutor. While silence is the default mode of life in the village, a single question can become a threatening action which is capable of inflicting injury to the addressee. The violence and direct impact of an attack are symbolically transferred to the target domain of speech. This metaphorical conceptualisation foregrounds the prevalence of silence in the village and simultaneously presents speech as an attack which could also imply that the question is unexpected and metaphorically stuns the listener.

In the novel \textit{Herztier} (1994), a first-person narrative, injury can be inflicted with the help of a question that does not require articulation: ‘Wir mußten uns fragen ohne ein Wort, ob Edgar und Georg, wenn sie wieder in die Stadt kommen, noch lebendig sind, um zu verletzen’.\textsuperscript{22} The protagonists live in constant danger of being arrested or killed by the Romanian secret police, so asking the question about the wellbeing of friends is potentially injurious because it opens the possibility of an answer that will cause suffering to the listener.


\textsuperscript{21} Herta Müller, ‘Wenn wir schweigen, werden wir unangenehm – wenn wir reden, werden wir lächerlich’, in \textit{Der König verneigt sich und tötet} (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2010), pp. 74-105 (p. 83).

\textsuperscript{22} Herta Müller, \textit{Herztier} (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2009), p. 137 (= \textit{H}).
The possible answer is more dangerous and unpleasant than the question apparently implies. However, even the question itself causes pain to the speaker, because empathy means that the person who conceptualises the suffering of the other person may experience a similar embodied feeling of pain. Compassion and empathy are part of what makes it possible for language to be injurious, as the experience of injury and pain is activated in the human mind in order to reason about the effects of language. Hence embodied reasoning is indispensable for conceptualising injurious language.

In Müller’s autobiographical essay from the collection *Barfüssiger Februar*, the cry of the mourning woman causes physical suffering to the public: ‘Sie stellt sich auf den letzten Streifen Gras, neben den Hagebuttenstrauch, meidet die Wartenden und quält sie doch mit ihrem Schrei.’23 The mourning cry is conceptualised as an instrument with which the speaker causes suffering to the people who are waiting for the train. In the above quotation, it is difficult to distinguish between the literal and the metaphorical. On the one hand, the voice cannot literally cause physical harm to the person, and the conceptualisation appears to be metaphorical, where the concepts of voice and physical pain belong to two different domains of experience. Hence it is possible to speak about the metaphorical construal of the target concept of speech through the frame of injury. However, speech is a physical action, and sound on its own can literally inflict injury and cause pain to humans. Perhaps the cry of the woman caused physical discomfort to the listeners. That renders the use of the verb *quälen* literal. While it is difficult to identify whether the association between injury and language is metaphorical here, the conceptual integration process, which involves the blending of the two concepts, is at work in this passage. Speech is a physical act, but it would be an oversimplification to take literally the connection between injury and language.

In the below quotation from the novel *Heute wär ich mir lieber nicht begegnet*, the negative effects of a conversation between the characters are construed by Müller as an invisible injury. While on her way to meet the secret service officer, the protagonist recollects a conversation with her best friend Lilli. The interlocutors are said to harm one another via language, and the resulting injury is not visible to the outside observer: ‘Wir hätten uns verletzt, ich sie und sie mich. Aber, von außen gesehen, hätten wir gemütlich im Café gesessen. Oder wir wären spaziert.’ As a result of this metaphorical conceptualisation, the perils of speech are subjectively tangible and yet invisible in the eye of the observer. The protagonist’s conversations in the novel have injurious potential because she readily engages in confrontation and endows language with metaphorical meaning. Moreover, the narration takes place before the meeting with the secret police officer, and the context of interrogation influences the protagonist’s perception of speech which is thus construed as an injurious activity.

The act of interrogation is experienced by the characters in Müller’s novel as a physical act of injury to the human body. In the office of the secret agent Pjele, the protagonist of the novel *Herztier* is forced to undress and sing. The narrator shares her experience of this intimidation: ‘Ich stand ganz nackt in der Ecke, sagte ich. Ich mußte das Lied singen. Ich sang wie Wasser, es kränkte mich nichts mehr, ich hatte auf einmal fingerdicke Haut’ (p. 145). Singing is conceptualised here as the movement of the subject; the source domain of water is used to demonstrate the effortless nature of the motion. The act of singing metaphorically flows without tripping over anything and produces an impression of continuous motion. Singing is simultaneously a distraction from the interrogation process. The negation of the injurious effect of interrogation at the end of the passage – ‘ich hatte auf

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einmal fingerdicke Haut’ (p. 43) – helps the reader understand the conditions of subjugation. The process of interrogation is understood through the source domain of pain, for in contrast to *verletzen*, the verb *kränken* does not automatically evoke the frame of injury but conveys the experience of physical pain which may or may not be caused by injury. The language of oppression causes physical pain to the character, and her enforced singing actually diverts her from her predicament and metaphorically makes her skin so thick that she is no longer vulnerable to the injurious language of interrogation. Conceptualising the language of oppression as physical injury, the protagonist conveys through embodied experience the interrogator’s power to subjugate. The injurious effects of interrogation are frequently implicitly mapped onto other forms of verbal interaction between the characters in Müller’s literary works in this way.

*Adding injury to insult*

The injurious power of swearing is a theme in several of Müller’s literary works. Swearing is conventionally understood as hostile conduct and injurious speech, and it is commonly perceived as capable of hurting other people’s feelings – physical injury is used as a source domain to supply a meaningful relation for the negative effects of swearing.

Inflicting injury upon one another with offensive words becomes a necessity for the narrator and her close friends in the novel *Herztier*. They loathe each other but their common resistance to the dictatorial regime and free thinking bring them together: ‘Wir konnten uns oft nicht ertragen, weil wir aufeinander angewiesen waren. Wir mußten uns kränken’ (p. 83). The characters pierce each other with injurious language, and do so effectively because they know each other well, and understand how to inflict pain: ‘Das Lachen war hart, wir bohrten den Schmerz an. Es ging schnell, denn wir kannten uns von innen. Wir wußten genau, was den anderen verletzt’ (p. 83). Injurious language is conceptualised as an instrument that can
pierce the bodies of the characters. The narrator enables the readers to see the mechanism of injurious language and its effects through concrete concepts, highlighting the physicality and tangibility of injurious language by pointing out that it also aroused feelings in the speaker: ‘Es reizte uns, wenn er litt’ (p. 83). The reader is alerted to the essential role of language in personal relationships between the protagonists and made aware that the ultimate effect of injurious language in this passage is not mere pain, but unequivocal damage done to the victim of mockery: ‘Er sollte unter der rohen Liebe zusammenbrechen und spüren, wie wenig er aushielt. Jede Beleidigung fädelte die nächste ein, bis der Getroffene schwieg’ (pp. 83-84). The idea of psychological damage is conveyed through the source domain of structural destruction. The victim is conceptualised as a container with a hard shell subjected to physical force until it breaks apart. Moreover, injurious speech is conceptualised as a process of sewing in order to show its fluidity and cohesion and its end result is the silence of the victim. This final state implies that speech is a symptom of the person still resisting the forces of injurious language, and as long as the characters speak and react to mockery, they still bear the brunt of heavy injury. When the pressure is too great, the characters break into silence.

Later in the text, the narrator rethinks her language use with her friends and qualifies the effects of friends mocking each other, denying that this criticism can injure the listener, because the words lacked hatred and the intention to injure: ‘Wir überraschten uns damit, daß wir noch böse, lange Wörter erfinden konnten. Aber den Worten fehlte der Haß, sie konnten nicht verletzen’ (p. 137). The experience of suffering from oppression and persecution has changed the friends’ perception of injurious language.

Language also becomes an instrument of injury when Müller discusses the role of kitsch as an offensive literary term in her poetological essay ‘Gelber Mais und keine Zeit’.
Recounting her discussion of kitsch with Oskar Pastior, Müller juxtaposes the positive aspects of kitsch as a creative writing style with its conventional use as an insult, taking the view that kitsch is generally perceived as a derogatory term, used intentionally to injure the person whose work is thus described: ‘Das Wort KITSCH ist ein Schimpfwort, ein Begriff, den wir anwenden, um absichtlich zu verletzen.’ Kitsch writing can therefore be seen as a deliberate challenge, and Müller shows that the conventional use of the word fails to do justice to its ambiguous meaning.

*Cuts and stab wounds*

The capacity of language to harm is conceptualised by Müller as the process of cutting, wielding a sharp object or piercing. Cutting involves a subject who cuts an object that is fragmented or otherwise loses its integrity. The cut itself, made by a sharp object, is a division into two surfaces of something that used to be whole. Furthermore, the concept of the cut relates to the embodied experience of injury and fragmentation, for it can irreversibly change the human body. The schema for the action of cutting is concrete and is based on human motor activity and sensory perception, but at the same time, it can be enriched with social and cultural context and be used to interpret not only language but the human condition.

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25 Oskar Pastior was a Romanian-born German poet with whom Müller initially collaborated on the novel about the deportation and forced labour of ethnic Germans from Romania in the Soviet labour camps. After Pastior’s sudden death in 2006, Müller completed the project on her own, publishing the novel *Atemschaukel* in 2009. See in this context Pavlo Shopin, ‘Unpacking the Suitcases: Autofiction and Metaphor in Herta Müller’s *Atemschaukel*’, *Seminar*, 50 (2014), 197-215.

in general. The source domain of cutting is also related to creating collages, although Müller’s collages are closely associated with cutting as creative destruction and merit a separate discussion.

The narrator of the novel Heute wär ich mir lieber nicht begegnet tells the reader how the factory engineer who supervised the work of her future husband Paul tried to dissuade Paul from marrying the protagonist, saying that the engineer’s sarcastic comments did not bother her: ‘Was der sagte, scherte mich nicht.’ The primary meaning of the verb scheren is to cut with scissors, and in the text the (failed) act of cutting is used as a source domain to show the reader that the words of the engineer did not cause any harm to the protagonist. When the protagonist witnesses a heated quarrel between an old couple, she describes it using the source concept of sharpness: ‘So ging das von vorn, wie ein Wirbel im Wasser, der Ton wurde schärfer […]. Gift stach ihnen aus den Augen.’ The conversation is first conceptualised as a vortex in the water, which explains the return of the conversation to the starting point and its repetition; then the tone of the conversation becomes sharper, and soon it turns into a heated quarrel in which the speakers are hurling insults at each other. The sharpness of the conversation relates to its potential to cause harm: the narrator says that poison came ‘stabbing’ from the interlocutors’ eyes. By missing out the concept of the instrument itself – a knife, perhaps – this extended metaphor is able to map the source image of Wirbel onto the idea of an instrument. The same strategy of constructing extended metaphors is identified by Schmidt with reference to the source images of Blechschafe and


28 Heute wär ich mir lieber nicht begegnet, p. 103.

29 Ibid., p. 185.
Holzmelone in the novel Herztier. Thus, the argument is construed as a physical struggle where the speakers can stab each other with sharp and poisonous objects. Müller uses the source concepts of cutting, stabbing, and sharpness to construe speech as an extremely dangerous and injurious action.

In the novel Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger (1992), language in sound form is also conceptualised as injurious via the concept of sharpness. One of the minor characters, an unnamed fisher, describes a dream in which he sees his wife at the river bank plucking unripe hazelnuts and crushing them with a stone, while he is saying a prayer. First, the force of speech is understood as the force of natural world, when words are implied to produce the same sound as the stone crushing nuts. Speech is conceptualised as something more dangerous than just sound waves: ‘Vater unser, der du bist im Himmel und auf Erden, sagte ich. Ich hörte bei jedem Wort den Stein klopfen aus meinem Mund. Ich konnte nicht weiterbeten, ich fühlte mich vernarrt.’ Paradoxically, the prayer that is supposed to provide relief and help is perceived as the ominous sound of the stone hitting nuts and crushing them. The speaker’s decision to stop praying and his feelings of confusion reinforce the intuitive reading of the sound of the stone as something negative. The sound of the character’s voice becomes an injurious force in the next instance when he turns around and shouts: ‘Ich drehte mich zu ihr und schrie so laut, daß mir die Stimme in den Augen stach.’ Here the shout, while theoretically merely offensive for the listener, is unequivocally harmful to the speaker.

In her Berliner Literaturpreis speech, Müller recollects her childhood in the Banat and describes a moment when she gave away a petty secret of her father’s which had the potential

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31 Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2009), p. 45.

32 Ibid., p. 46.
to send him to prison, realizing that her father could actually be put behind bars: ‘Gefängnis –
dieses Wort traf mich so klar wie ein Messer, mir pochte in der Dürre meines Verrats das
Herz bis in die Stirn’. Müller construes the effect of the word as stabbing with a knife; a
concrete bodily experience of pain is used to interpret the effects of language. The knife
metaphorically pierces the author, inflicting more damage than a mere cut, which is only a
peripheral meaning in this context. The piercing of the human body with a knife is an
unambiguous metaphorical description of language. The same power can be exercised not
only by words but also by paralinguistic aspects of human interaction.

The concept of the sharp object as a source domain of experience that informs the
reader about the target domain of speech is employed by Müller throughout her literary
works. The metaphorical relationship between sharp objects and language is established in
the novel *Herztier*, when the tailor’s tools are conceptualised as language: ‘Die Nadeln hatten
wie die Sätze nacheinander im Mund der Schneiderin gesteckt, bevor sie neben ihrem Arm
auf der Maschine lagen’ (p. 201). Language informs readers about the use of needles by
serving as a source domain in this quotation. Because the sentence is a more abstract concept
than the needle, it is possible to reverse the logic of the text and consider the needle to be the
source concept. The tailor and the hairdresser engage with sharp objects used by Müller as
source domains to explain the effects of language and perhaps also serve as metaphors for
writing itself. In the following example, words are conceptualised as the fabric cut by the
tailor: ‘Wörter sind zugeschnitten auf Reden, vielleicht sogar präzise zugeschnitten.’

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33 ‘Immer derselbe Schnee und immer derselbe Onkel’ in *Immer derselbe Schnee*, pp. 96-109
(p. 105).

34 ‘In jeder Sprache sitzen andere Augen’ in *Der König verneigt sich und tötet*, pp. 7-39 (p.
20).
Language can be both a sharp object used to injure and the object shaped with sharp tools or weapons.

Literature and pain

Pain is used by Müller in her non-fictional works as a vehicle for thinking about her personal experience of creative writing. When the author discusses writing one of the chapters of the autofictional novel Herztier, she conceptualises the creative process through the sensory experience of pain, calling it ‘[das] schmerzhafteste, weil persönlichste Kapitel des Buches’.\(^{35}\) The implication is that the writing of the whole book was a painful experience for Müller, and the more personal the writing, the more the author will have had to suffer while engaged in the creative process. In order to recollect her past suffering, the author has to return to the emotions and feelings she experienced in the past. Cognitive science provides evidence that memory and imagination trigger essentially the same cognitive processes as the original experience: ‘the same parts of the brain are activated (though not identically activated) in imagining or describing a situation as would be involved in perceiving and experiencing such a situation’.\(^ {36}\) Hence creative writing is associated with the experience itself and becomes understandable through the metaphors which use this experience as the source domain.

One may be left wondering whether reading can likewise become a painful experience, as empathy enables human beings to feel something of what other people do. Empathy as simulation of experience is essential for reading because the reader’s involvement is necessary for her understanding of the message. Consequently, the concept of

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\(^{35}\) ‘Welt, Welt, Schwester Welt’ in *Immer derselbe Schnee*, pp. 231-43 (p. 231).

\(^{36}\) Barbara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser, *Figurative Language*, p. 2.
pain is not a hermetic and inaccessible source domain for the reader, and its metaphorical use corroborates the argument that pain in literature can be conceptually reconstructed in the process of reading. The very title of Müller’s collection of poetological essays *In der Falle* can also be read as a reference to the injurious nature of language and literature. The public are caught in the trap when they read literature: ‘Es ist Schreiben so eng und ausweglos wie die Gefahr selber. Beim Lesen schnappt die Falle wieder zu. Die Bewunderung vor diesen Texten tut weh. Es ist beim Lesen Angst im Spiel.’ Reading becomes a painful process, which brings fear into play. Both the concrete concept of the trap and the sensory experience of pain and the feeling of fear are vehicles for the author’s thinking about creative writing. Literature is implicitly conceptualised with the help of the frame of hunting, where the writer is the hunter using her texts as traps in order to catch readers who are her prey, implying ultimately the detrimental influence of literature upon the reader through the source concepts of pain, fear, and danger.

The pain of reading emerges again when Müller discusses the poetry of Theodor Kramer: ‘Den ersten Schmerz, den Theodor Kramers Gedichte in meinem Schädel aufrissen, war der, daß mein Vater ein SS-Soldat war.’ The injuriousness of Müller’s reading is conveyed through a graphic and corporeal image that transforms poems into subjects who tear open the reader’s skull. Müller construes reading as an injurious experience in other poetological essays. Kramer’s poems, she suggests, were unequivocal and allowed no possible interpretations which would make them less injurious, and that is why they were shunned by the public for so long: ‘Bei Kramer sind die behelfsmäßigen Fluchtwege nicht vorhanden. Man konnte die Gedichte nicht angehen, ohne sich dem Thema direkt zu stellen.

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37 ‘In der Falle’ in *In der Falle* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 1996), pp. 5-24 (p. 16).

38 Ibid., p. 8.
Um sich zu schonen, wurden die Verfolgungs- und Exilgedichte Kramers gemieden.’\textsuperscript{39} The nature of the potential harm can be inferred from the metaphors used to explain the reasons for avoiding the poems, and alternative interpretations are metaphorically conceptualised as escape routes. This metaphor entails construing reading as motion through the space of the poem, which is in its turn presented as a spatial entity. Motion (reading) causes harm to the traveller (reader) as she encounters objects (poems and their themes) on her way without any escape routes (alternative interpretations which would help eschew the harmful themes).

\textit{Injury and death}

Müller expresses the belief that language in its omnipotence is capable of killing people: ‘Sie kann sich mit allem verbünden. Sie kann auch töten, sie kann retten, in einer Situation, in der es auf das richtige Wort ankommt.’\textsuperscript{40} Language is presented as an active agent and its power is said to straddle the poles of survival and murder. Language is the focus of the writer’s attention, and the writer develops an overwhelming sense of the omnipotence of language through approaching experience via literature. The statement that language can connect to anything attests to the writer’s belief that the abstract concept of language can be interpreted using any other domains of experience. As a result, the power of language is its ability to


make sense of lived experience and employ embodied experience to make literature meaningful. The wealth of metaphorical associations and ensuing meanings figuratively endows language with omnipotence, while the ultimate injurious power of language is construed as the act of killing in Müller’s work. In *Herztier*, for example, the narrator understands speech as a virus that can cause death: ‘Auch wir gaben die Gerüchte weiter, als wäre der Schleichvirus des Todes drin, der den Diktator zuletzt doch erreicht: Lungenkrebs, Rachenkrebs flüsterten wir, Darmkrebs, Gehirnschwund, Lähmung, Blutkrebs’ (p. 69). Language becomes a biological weapon to eliminate the dictator.

The language of the dictatorial state is seen by Müller as both injurious and injured. On the one hand, it is a deadly ‘Mördersprache’ and has adverse effects because of oppression and ideology: ‘Ich war gezwungen zu sehen, daß die Landessprache und meine Muttersprache, auch wenn sie die Welt noch so verschieden ansehen, zur Mördersprache taugen. Und bin gezwungen zuzusehen, daß alle Sprachen in allen Ecken der Welt dazu taugen.’ On the other hand, this language is itself a dead language, ‘[eine] tote Sprache’, so the language of the dominant party and of the dictatorial state becomes both deadly and dead. Reading Müller’s texts, it is possible to infer that the death of murderous language

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41 For a discussion of the relationship between dictatorship and language in Müller’s texts, see Jenny Watson, “‘Reden ist Silber, Schweigen ist Gold”: German as a site of fascist nostalgia and Romanian as the language of dictatorship in the work of Herta Müller’ in *New Literary and Linguistic Perspectives on the German Language, National Socialism, and the Shoah*, ed. by Peter Davies and Andrea Hammel (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2014), pp. 143-58.


43 ‘Männer und Frauen im Alltag’ in *Hunger und Seide*, pp. 65-87 (p. 77).
comes when this language loses its relationship to the sensory domain of experience.

Moreover, the senses of sight and sound as human faculties are obliterated in a language, ‘in der es nie ums Riechen und Schmecken ging, nie ums Hören und Sehen’.\(^\text{44}\) The language that has nothing to do with human physical experience is devoid of human body and hence of life itself.

In contrast to the living nature of offensive words in public use, the language of the regime is construed by Müller as a dead entity. She also presents to the reader a metaphorical image of language as a spatial object which can be identified as a cover or a veil: ‘wenn sie ihre tote Sprache über das Land legten’.\(^\text{45}\) That metaphorical description of the use of language rests upon several source domain concepts. First, language is conceptualised as an entity with a large surface. Secondly, language is construed as a dead entity, with the rulers seen as those who manipulate it, and the country (society) understood as a surface. Such a figurative conceptualisation activates the metaphorical mapping between control and verticality.\(^\text{46}\) Language is laid as a cover over the land, and its superior position evokes power and control: the language of dictatorship oppresses people and controls their lives. These inferences are possible because of the particular metaphorical conceptualisation of power and verticality that makes sense of language use in the dictatorship. This metaphorical conceptualisation creates a vivid image to which the reader can relate through embodied experience and basic concepts such that the power of language becomes corporeal and tangible for those who think in terms of these metaphors. On the other hand, the intellectual nature of such language is denied because it is construed as a dead body, lacking meaning.

\(^{44}\) *Heute wär ich mir lieber nicht begegnet*, p. 100.

\(^{45}\) ‘Männer und Frauen im Alltag’, p. 77.

\(^{46}\) For a discussion of power as verticality, see Barbara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser, *Figurative Language*, p. 166.
communicative message and creativity. While oppressive and powerful in its subjugation of people, the dead language of the regime also contrasts with the language of the people who want to be free. The oppressive language of the state is both deadly in its subjugating power and dead in its meaninglessness and inauthenticity.

Müller’s focus on the power of language, and her overt sensitivity to it, make her especially attentive to the effects of speech. In this context, the metaphorical force of the threat is of interest because the threat may strongly influence the person, often as a performative speech act, which means that the action of threatening is realised through speech and does not necessarily entail any further action. The performative nature of the threat lies in the fact that by pronouncing it, humans purposefully commit an action, a speech act. Speaking about her friends who committed suicide as a result of death threats issued by the Romanian secret service, Müller says that the ‘Todesdrohungen zerrten sie in den Suizid’. Death threats are the agent, and Müller’s friends become victims of language. This scenario is fully consonant with Butler’s explanation of the process of conceptualising injurious speech: ‘We ascribe an agency to language, a power to injure, and position ourselves as the objects of its injurious trajectory’ (ES, p. 1). In order to show the causative power of language and the direct link between life threats and later suicides, Müller metaphorically presents causation as object manipulation. In her utterance, death threats, acting as powerful agentive forces, drag people against their will into the act of suicide, construed as a kind of container.

Injured and vulnerable language

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In addition to being injurious and deadly, language is understood by Müller as itself a vulnerable entity. Speaking about one’s native language, Müller metaphorically interprets its immediate presence and directness through the source domain of skin: ‘Die Muttersprache ist momentan und bedingungslos da wie die eigene Haut’. Skin is an organ of the human body that is regulated unconsciously. More importantly, skin is responsible for communicating a variety of sense impressions, including pressure and heat. This is implicitly mapped on to language in Müller’s metaphor, presenting to the reader the image of immediacy and directness of language. The source domain for such a metaphorical interpretation is the human body because it is concrete and directly accessible to the reader. While language is a physical process itself, its reimagining as an organ of the human body helps to convey the concrete image of language that the writer develops.

Skin is also a common trope in Müller for the boundary of objects. Müller elaborates the metaphor for ‘language as skin’ when she observes that one’s native language is like skin in its susceptibility to injury: ‘Und genauso verletzbar wie diese, wenn sie von anderen geringgeschätzt, mißachtet oder gar verboten wird’. The mother tongue is metaphorically injured through underestimation, contempt or a ban on its use, and such actions are construed as inflicting injury on one’s native language. The vulnerability of language becomes a tangible image open to embodied conceptualisation by the reader. Significantly, language is no longer in the subject position when it is discussed as something vulnerable; it becomes an object under the harmful influence of society.

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Once the vulnerability of native language is presented to the reader in the vivid image of the skin, Müller elaborates the metaphor by applying it to set the limitations of language vulnerability: ‘Es tut keiner Muttersprache weh, wenn ihre Zufälligkeiten im Geschau anderer Sprachen sichtbar werden’. Languages in general are metaphorically construed as embodied visible entities; in this particular case, though, one’s native language is construed not just as an organ of the body but as an agent that can be hurt and can feel pain. Instead of causing pain to the native language, other languages confirm one’s relation to – and affection for – the native language. Hence Romanian, which is Müller’s second language, is not alien to her and helps to relate to her native German.

Literature is understood by Müller as vulnerable and fragile, and hence both animate and inanimate in its susceptibility to injury and damage, as is evident from the essay ‘Der König verneigt sich und tötet’. That its sound is susceptible to damage emerges from her consideration of Theodor Kramer’s and Inge Müller’s poetry: ‘Erst später las ich die spröden Reime von Theodor Kramer und Inge Müller. Ich spürte behutsame, verletzbare Takte darin, als würde einem der Atem in der Schachtel der Schläfen klopfen bei dieser Art zu reimen.’ The rhymes of poems are conceptualised as fragile objects; their articulation can destroy form and cause harm to the poem, which is conceived as an animate entity. The source concepts of entities – fragility and vulnerability are used in these metaphors – collate the animate with the inanimate to convey to the reader the qualities of poetry that Müller cherishes. Since language is often seen as deformed in times of oppression, she attributes high value to the poetry that is fragile and yet intact. Poetry conceptualised metaphorically as a fragile and vulnerable entity appeals to Müller because it contrasts starkly with the experience of oppression and persecution, which she construes as destructive of language. The vulnerability

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51 Ibid., p. 27.

52 ‘Der König verneigt sich und tötet’ in Der König verneigt sich und tötet, pp. 40-73 (p. 55).
of creative writing is also mentioned in Müller’s discussion of Jürgen Fuchs’ novel *Fassonschnitt* (1984), which she interprets through the schema of creating a vulnerable being in the nexus of sentences as Fuchs ‘erzeugt das Verletzbare im Zusammenhalt der Sätze’. 53

The literary work becomes an animate being that the author makes in the process of creative writing. The work can be wounded, harmed, or damaged, but as it is presented to the public it is whole even if its fragility is revealed to the reader.

Speaking about her own poetic language, Müller states that poor translation into Romanian crippled her spied-on private discussions with friends: ‘Was mich innerlich störte, unsere Geschichten waren durch die schlechte Übersetzung ins Rumänische politisch zwar nicht ungefährlicher geworden, aber literarisch verstümmelt. […] Das Poetische war wie weggeblasen.’ 54 Translation becomes physical violence, causing corporeal damage from which poetic language, understood as a living body, cannot fully recuperate. The secretly recorded conversations remained dangerous because they were critical of the regime and could be used to persecute Müller and her friends, and while the disappearance of the poetic nature of speech is conceptualised as an act of blowing away an object, the source domain of breath and a physical force associated with it evoke a vivid image for understanding the detrimental influence of poor translation. Through concrete experience, the author makes sense of the harm caused to language.

Concluding

In her insightful commentary on the complex issue of injurious language, Judith Butler asks the reader: ‘Could language injure us if we were not, in some sense, linguistic beings, beings


54 ‘Der König verneigt sich und tötet’, p. 66.
who require language in order to be?’ (ES, pp. 1-2). Human beings are linguistic beings, and our language faculty is embodied and developed after millions of years of evolution; language can physically affect people. Yet words cannot ‘enter the limbs, craft the gesture, bend the spine’ (ES, p. 159) without metaphor. Injurious language is possible because human beings are capable of metaphorical thinking, which can be considered an integral part of our language faculty. Through an analysis of metaphors for language in Herta Müller’s literary works, critical essays, and interviews, this study has demonstrated how the concept of physical injury can be used to reason about language. The metaphorical conceptualisation of injurious language is associated by Müller with suffering and oppression, where the terminal effect of injurious language is the death of the person. Injurious language becomes a subject which manipulates people as objects. Moreover, it is understood as a force or a weapon that can be employed to inflict injury or even bring death to the author, narrator or characters. At the same time, construing language as an injured body highlights its failure under conditions of subjugation. In the most extreme scenario, the injury inflicted upon language metaphorically kills it and silences the speaker, where silence is construed as a symptom of a lethal injury to language. While injurious language can bring about the death of the human being, injury is conceptualised by Müller as a possible factor in the metaphorical death of language, leading to silence. Ultimately, the metaphorical conceptualisation of injurious and injured language allows Herta Müller to convey to the reader the dangers and limitations of art and communication in the condition of oppression.

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