

VOICING THE MULTILINGUAL SELF IN THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA'S *DICTÉE*

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This study focuses on specific linguistic markers in the chief prose work of American poet and artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée*, that display commitment in utterance. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* is an autobiographical work which explores the protagonist's identity in relation to the author's personal family history as well as historical events as well as numerous references to female mythological figures. In it, layers of the self are further articulated through a specific relationship to the audience, and through a fragmentary form that resists genre classification. By focusing on the linguistic concept of commitment in speech act, the present study explores how in *Dictée* Cha develops the multilingual subject through voicing. By focusing on the pronoun use, the role of gerund in altering the syntax and the passage between French and English languages, this study exposes the link between the crafting of the speech act and of the multilingual self. We conclude that textual fragmentation in *Dictée* should not be read as disintegration or inability to attain utterance or a questioning of the woman's multilingual identity. Not only is fragmentary expression necessary for capturing the various elements of the multilingual self, but it also helps underscore the link between writing and speech as the site of the multilingual subject.

Клучни зборови: enunciation, subjectivity, commitment, speech act.

ИЗРАЗУВАЊЕ НА ПОВЕЌЕЈАЗИЧНОТО СЕБСТВО ВО ДИКТАТ НА ТЕРЕЗА ХАК КУНГ ЧА

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Оваа студија се фокусира на специфичните лингвистички обележја коишто означуваат обврзување на вистинитост во исказот во делото *Дикџајл*, најпознатото прозно остварување на американската поетеса и уметница Тереза Хак Кунг Ча.

Дикџајл на Тереза Хак Кунг Ча е автобиографско дело, во кое се истражува идентитетот на протагонистката низ врската со личната семејна историја на авторката, како и со историските настани и со многубројните упатувања на женски митолошки фигури. Во делото, слевите на себството се дополнително искажани преку специфичниот однос кон публиката и преку фрагментираната форма, којашто тешко може жанровски да се определи. Фокусирајќи се на лингвистичкиот концепт обврзување на вистинитост во говорниот чин, студијата истражува како Ча го развива повеќејазичниот субјект преку искажувањето. Фокусирајќи се на употребата на заменките, на улогата на глаголската именка во менувањето на синтаксата и на преминот од француски на англиски јазик и обратно, студијата ја открива врската помеѓу вообличувањето на говорниот чин и повеќејазичното себство. Може да се заклучи дека текстуалната фрагментација во *Дикџајл* не треба да се чита како дезинтеграција или неспособност да се вообличи искажувањето, или како сомнеж во однос на женскиот повеќејазичен идентитет. Фрагментираниот израз не само што е неопходен за опфаќање на различните елементи на повеќејазичното себство туку и помага да се нагласи врската помеѓу напишаното и говорниот чин, како седиште на повеќејазичниот субјект.

Key words: изразување, субјективност, обврзување на вистинитост, говорен чин

1 Introduction

American poet, visual and performance artist Theresa H. K. Cha published her seminal work, *Dictée*, in 1982. The book is written in English and French, while containing references to the author's mother tongue, Korean. The text also includes a number of references to female figures, both real and mythological, used to organize its chapters, as well as visual images. Scholars generally agree on the difficulty of qualifying *Dictée* in terms of genre. Some scholars (Galú, 2004) have insisted on the text's ekphrastic nature and have explored the relationship between the text and the visual images that it contains, while others have attempted to characterize it as auto-fiction and auto-ethnography (Stone-Richards, 2009). Recently, it has become increasingly clear that the debates around the genre of *Dictée* are dominated by the question of reception, as the text resists genre classification, most notably in relation to autoethnography. According to Maréchal (2010: 43), "*autoethnography* is a form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing." A well-known autoethnographer, Carolyn Ellis (2004) defines it as "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (Ellis 2004: xix). However, it is not easy to reach a consensus on the term's definition. For instance, in the 1970s, autoethnography was more narrowly defined as "insider ethnography", referring to studies of the (culture of) a group of which the researcher is a member (Hayano 1979). Recently, however, as Ellingson and Ellis (2008: 449) point out, "the meanings and applications of autoethnography have evolved in a manner that makes precise definition difficult."

In the case of Cha's work, less has been said about *how* the text's reception may be conditioned, if not determined, by the specific rhetorical fabric of *Dictée* itself, or, *how* these features keep the text beyond the framework of a single genre. Focusing on the chapter "ERATO LOVE POETRY" as a case study, this study explores *Dictée's* ability to represent a commitment to the multilingual subject through the relationship between utterance and writing that the text unfolds. Using Culioli's (1984) definition of commitment [*prise en charge*] as the act of "saying what one thinks [is real]"¹ the present study traces the multiple instances in *Dictée* in which Cha exposes utterance as a complex process, or even a struggle. By insisting on the process of crafting of utterance, the text submits, we argue, the

¹Quoted in Laurendeau, Paul (2009). « Préassertion, réassertion, désassertion: construction et déconstruction de l'opération de prise en charge », *Langue française*, 2009/2 no.162, 55–70. Our translation from French to English of the quotations taken from the works published in French.

written word to voicing. That is, taking Chafe's (1982: 35–53) distinction between integration and involvement in speaking as a starting point, our study explores features of the temporal relationship between speaking and writing in *Dictée*. Chafe's theory further proposes that written language contains integrated qualities, while the spoken language is marked by fragmented language. In *Dictée*, however, the distinction between the spoken and the written is far more complex. In it, fragmentation occurs precisely through the process of construction of utterance, further adding to the text's formal complexity. Looking closely at these features of the text, my goal is to show how Cha arrives at a commitment [*prise en charge*] through a shifting position of the audience and a singular view of the distinction between silence and speech, in order to capture her multicultural identity.

2 Theoretical Underpinnings

Scholars have highlighted the presence of assertion as a category of speech act in literature (Stainton 2016). Asserting a proposition involves undertaking some commitment [*prise en charge*] to the truth of that proposition. (Laurendeau 2009; Marsili 2023). Culioli's (1980) theory on enunciative operations has included, as key elements of assertion, commitment ["I value, I want"], materialization ["to say, write, in short to make exist in a noticeable way"], an instance of representation (depending on context, "I think", "I believe", "I know"), and representation as notional occurrence that the enunciator situates in relation to a space of reference (that he has accepted is the case). (Culioli 1997; quoted in Coltier et al. 2009) Building on Culioli's work, Laurendeau adds to the act of a commitment the three stages of preassertion, desassertion and reassertion. Laurendeau concludes that, "in commitment [*prise en charge*], the enunciator preasserts, disasserts or reasserts without the fluctuation of these three fundamentals of assertion having any special effect on the intensity of engagement." (Laurendeau, 2009: 58) Through the study of pronoun use, the role of gerund and past participles, and the shift from English to French, this paper shows how in *Dictée*, reiteration, as a key feature of reassertion, occurs in the passage between English and French languages. Specifically, we focus on the ways in which the interplay of impersonal pronouns "one" and "you" ultimately sets the stage for utterance, while the gerunds and past participles interrupt any linear progression through the text and insist on its fragmented nature as the site of a multilingual self.

3 Pronouns of the Multilingual Self

In the first paragraph, the woman, who we assume is at once the object of the gaze and the acting subject of this prose, is notably absent. Cha insists on the woman's

uniqueness and evokes her name and her looks yet fails to fully disclose them. Cha writes:

One expects her to be beautiful. The title which carries her name is not one that would make her anonymous or plain. "The portrait of ..." One seems to be able to see her. One imagines her, already. Already before the title. She is not seen right away. Her image, yet anonymous suspends in one's mind. With the music on the sound track you are prepared for her entrance. More and more. You are shown the house in which she lives, from the outside. (Cha: 98)

This opening paragraph might at first glance convey the disjointed nature of Cha's text, which, indeed, is an overall feature of her writing: as a deficiency, or a limitation in her expression. Yet, here, Cha is setting up a particular representation, a particular access to the female character in the text. Cha frames the depicted women through the eyes of the viewer, but the author, as we will argue, attributes commitment to the woman serving as the object of the viewer's gaze. That is, here Cha is carefully controlling the audience's position, their access to the woman's identity, and is preparing them for the woman's multilingual and multicultural distinctiveness.

Yet if the woman's *name* does not take away from her individuality, this particular description *does*. Through the negation and the roundabout way of referencing the woman's name, Cha seems to wish to keep the woman's identity anonymous, or, at the very least, deliberately inaccessible. At this point, her voice is muted, and her face, her looks, even her name, are all unreachable to the assumed viewer and the reader. In fact, as I argue, here Cha is setting up for the woman's utterance by directing the implied audience's perception of her. We see that particularly through the use of personal pronouns in this segment. In the first sentence, the impersonal pronoun *one* and, the indirect ways of characterizing the woman: / *one expects...* / *One seems to be able to see her* / *One imagines her...* all lead *away* from the woman's identity and point towards the viewer's and reader's faculties. The passive voice and the imprecise imagery – "She is not seen right away/ Her image suspends in one's mind" – open up the referential terrain here in a deliberately ambiguous way. While it might seem like the text subjugates the woman to the gaze of the other, it actually provides, we argue, a carefully delineated, limited framework for the audience through which they are to see the woman. We can note this in the change from the impersonal pronoun *one* to the second-person pronoun *you*. The text reads as follows: "Her image, yet anonymous suspends in *one's* mind. With the music on the sound track *you* are prepared for her entrance." Here, the *you* is not designating the impersonal pronoun often interchangeable with *one* in English. In fact, the insistence on *you* now introduces the specific angle through which the viewer – and the reader – are supposed to see the woman.

By the next paragraph, it becomes clear that the *you* refers to the viewer. Cha openly writes: "Then *you*, as a viewer and guest, enter the house. *It is you* who are entering to see her". The direct address to the audience and the emphatic structure,

it is you who are entering to see her openly draw the viewer in. From this moment on, the viewer is a participant in the scene, an assumed actor, a character alongside the woman, as well as an observer. Cha undoes the audience's assumed authority or command over the complex female character by inserting them into the narrative. By the end of this excerpt, it is possible to note these steps in the woman's expression and the author's framing of it. As Culioli tells us, "To say is an act, to assert is an act" (cited in Coltier et al. 2009: 12, our translation). We thus note the theatrics of such an act in its induction into the narrative.

This carefully crafted mode of accessing the female figure in the text embraces her multilingual identity and insists on the woman's existence between languages. Once Cha indeed introduces a direct description of the woman, she does so through a reference to utterance. Rather, through attempts at utterance, as descriptions of sound-making gestures follow: "She forms the words with her mouth as the other utter across from her. She shapes her lips accordingly, gently she blows whos and whys and whats." (Cha, 99)

Utterance is a struggle for the woman, it seems, but she is presented as an interlocutor, an active participant in the assumed conversation. By now, Cha has made sure she is perceived as such, and not as a mere object of a gaze or a mere listener. The woman's commitment in speech has been established despite her fragmented speech and the apparent effort involved in the production of the *whos*, the *whats* and the *whys*.

Yet, instead of being an obstacle or a shortcoming, the speaker's multilingualism is embraced as an essential strength of utterance, as she moves back and forth from English to French and back to English. The appearance of French serves to underscore enunciation as a craft, a process. The text continues as follows: "On verra. O-n. Ver-rah. Verre. Ah. On verra-h. Si. S-i. She hears, we will see. We will see- If we will have to see if. We would wait. Wait to see, We would have to wait to see, Wait and see. If." (Cha, 99) The passage between French and English emphasizes utterance. Syllable by syllable, sound by sound, Cha announces the space of the multilingual subject. Chafe (1982: 36) proposes that speaking is faster than writing and slower than reading. In the case of Cha's prose, that might not be entirely true. Here, writing seems to carry the fastest pace, and the acts of speaking and reading seem to require more time.

If we take this moment as one that, instead weakening expression, represents an *empowering moment* that asserts and legitimizes the protagonist as a speaker in the text, then, it is possible to evoke Paul Laurendeau's understanding of commitment. We recall that Laurendeau includes preassertion, disassertion and reassertion within the speech act, noting their limited impact upon the intensity of commitment in speech act. (Laurendeau, 2009: 58) In that sense, we can note a similar dynamic inside Cha's text, where, even through the careful set up for enunciation, through a back-and-forth between French and English, and despite all the repetitions, the speaking subject is in command of its seemingly uncontrollable expression.

4 Fragmented Syntax and Gerund

Yet in between the two moments depicted here, – in between a representation of the woman's utterance and the careful preparation of the audience for it, there exists a *third* moment, and intermediary step. Cha inserts a fragment, an excerpt from the end of a sentence otherwise unknown and uses it as transition between the two pages – and the two scenes. Here the transition between the two pages reads as follows: “ing the words”. While this might look like a typographical error, or a random publishing error, this fragment, we argue, fully embodies the nature of the entire text *Dictée*. The intended reaction solicited from the reader here is that of pause, interruption, and disorientation, which ultimately yields a lack of command over the text, – and, therefore the lack of command over the woman's identity. Right before we encounter this moment, the woman is being referenced through physical space and material objects. The text literally reads: “Her portrait is seen through her things, that are hers.” (Cha, 99) Once again, Cha introduces the passive voice and repetition of the possessive, which together seem to withhold the woman's identity and reduce it to features of her home. Cha attributes the same traits to the woman as she does to the material space around her: we are to conclude that like her house, the woman herself is *spare*, and “delicate, subtly accentuating” (ibidem).

Indeed, it is the reference to speech reinforced by the English language gerund ending *-ing* on the following page (ibidem) that fully affirms, we propose, the woman as an engaged speaker in the scene, and, an active agent in the narrative, undoing any passive role that she may have been associated with before. Such effect is conveyed by the ambiguity of the gerund ending *-ing*. At once, woman's speech is evoked directly, and, through the implied gerund, bares both nominal and verbal characteristics. Expression, marked here by the gerund ending, could further be modified, could designate a noun in the possessive case, or an adjective. It could further allude to the present participle, suggestive of possible adjectival or adverbial functions that the voided action could be assuming. In any event, the *-ing* marks the moment of passage from silence to utterance and sets up for the woman's speech. Referencing both verbal and deverbal nouns, the gerund is communicating a state of both being and doing. The break in syntax is quickly filled by a new moment of ambiguity in expression, as the phrase shifts to a more precise use of the gerund. The unit *-ing the words* reveals that the absent gerund is that of a transitive verb, taking *the words* as its direct object. This further invites a reconstruction of the assumed sentence, as it is even possible to ponder upon possible adverbs that could modify the absent gerund.

According to Laralynn Weiss, instance such as this one introduces a particular rhythm that mimics that of a single breath. Weiss sees in Cha's prose the dynamic of “anticipation-breath-hold-release before resolution. The pause ends.” (Weiss, 2024)

Utterance *is* of the utmost importance in the text, and breath and sound production are its key elements. At numerous instances in the book, Cha describes

the struggle to speak, the production of words in detail, in its literal, corporeal sense (rather than in any abstract, intellectual sense) and even includes, among the text's various visual images, a picture of the body's respiratory system and the organs comprising the speech apparatus. One scholar, Michael Stone-Richards (2009) suggests that moments such as this one, where the syntax breaks down, call attention to the text's readability, or the lack thereof, its fragmentary and incomplete nature that radically resists interpretation. Referencing the Korean characters from the book's frontispiece, Stone-Richards proposes that the example here suggests that *Dictée* should not, and even *cannot*, be read sequentially, from left to right. Instead, the form of the text imposes a reading that, much like the protagonist herself, is multifaceted, layered, and multiple in meanings. We would additionally like to underscore the relevance of such fragmentary interruptions for the crafting and the affirmation of the woman's identity in the text. We suggest that moments like this should not be read as ruptures that put into question the woman's identity or mark an inability to speak. Rather, we read them as intermediary, and, in this text, necessary stages through which the author *empowers* the protagonist. Instances such as this one slow down the narrative in order to call attention to the multilingual and multicultural crafting of expression attributed to the protagonist.

5 Conclusion

The hybrid and fragmented nature of *Dictée*, introduces an exploration of female identity through a collectivity of women, both real and mythological, from both personal and collective histories. These various figures all serve as the foundation from which the author draws elements for the exploration of the multilingual and multicultural self. As such it *necessitates*, even calls for a mediated access to the self, access through the crafting of a commitment in speech act. The fact that, to this day, Cha's *Dictée* fundamentally resists interpretation and can only be best qualified as auto-fiction or auto-ethnography, implies a particular kind of self-study that combines lived and observed experiences. In that sense, it is possible to understand the author's choice of pronouns, fragments and fragmented repetitions as directed access to the woman's identity, one that takes her struggle with utterance not as a shortcoming but as her idiosyncrasy. Finally, through an inclusion of the audience into the narrative, Cha also implies that, much like the female protagonist, the audience itself becomes a character in auto-fiction, and, we suggest, a subject of auto-ethnography.

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