The Welsh-Speaking Experience: Minoritised Language and Belonging Through the Lens of Phenomenology.

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[DOI]

The notions of worlds, being-at-ease and in-betweenness have contributed substantially to minority studies in phenomenology. Owing to the group of Latina Feminist Philosophers that established these concepts, they are primarily applied in the context of race, gender and sexuality. However, little attention has been given to the experiences of minoritised language speakers, which appears to be a lacuna in the phenomenology of in-betweenness, world-travel, and belonging.

I will then claim that, although an epistemic lens could be used to chronicle the experiences of minoritised language speakers, we can expand the potential impact of speaking a minoritised language beyond failing to be heard, through the affective dimension expressed by Latina Feminist Phenomenology. This approach allows us to introduce the affective experiences of non-belonging and possible existential unease, in-betweenness, and split-subjecthood of minoritised language speakers. As such, this appears to be an 'affective' lacuna in broader minoritised language studies.

A note on style: This paper will investigate minoritised language speakers' complicated experiences from their vantage point by drawing on a range of literature, from first-person descriptive accounts to broader philosophical theory. I believe this phenomenological method of varying writing styles illuminates intricate aspects of the minoritised language experience that cannot be captured with an impersonal, observational approach to philosophy.

Latina Feminist Phenomenology (Worlds and Not-Being-At-Ease)

Worlds

Our being is tied to the world, the grand stage where our lives unfold. Each experience is specifically situated; it has a particular scene, whether a stuffy suffocating cubicle in the same old office block or alone in the isolated yet liberating natural landscape, which is equally as oblivious to our sufferings or successes. No matter how much one wishes to disappear, we are always situated and affected by spaces and their social relations.[i]

Maria Lugones blankets all spaces, with their particular social relations, with the term 'worlds'.[ii] Worlds are described as 'specific material circumstances that include particular histories'.[iii] They amount to the predominant cultures' description and construction of life. It is worth noting that the predominant culture of a world could be one deriving from subjugation. These worlds have their own rules and rituals, a particular way of life, and can vary in size, from being an insignificant pub in the valleys of South Wales to vast societies. We can go from one 'world' of sense and meaning to another; we can 'world-travel'.[iv]

Worlds are an amalgamation of physical and social space; 'social', in this case, is used to encapsulate the cultural, politico-economic, and emotional. Importantly, worlds are incomplete because they are constantly co-constructed by the acts of participants. Likewise, worlds can be idiosyncratic, meaning we can be in the same space but experience different 'worlds', and be in the same 'worlds' but experience them differently.[v]

To encapsulate the above, I will use an example: the energy of large cities momentarily transfixed me, so I decided to visit London. I went there with an open mind, prepared to absorb the surprises and diversity the London ways of life offer. The aim was to see London as a 'local', as someone who understands the physical space, norms, rituals and rules, and is sensitive to when they are enacting or even breaking them. But whilst visiting, I was baffled by the insistence on speed-walking; even on the escalators, you would get people stumbling up the stairs in a sprint. I decided against that and assumed my position on the escalator (the right side, I learned), aware that this may come with an invisible yet perceptible sign marking me as a silly tourist, an outsider. This was the 'world' of the London Underground.

From my vantage point, I noticed norms that were uncommon to me. If I were a Londoner, a veteran of the underground, those escalator runners would be just as common as the hills beside my home, but on that day, the pace of life was unfamiliar, and I did not feel at ease. I knew that any attempt to slow things down would have an insignificant impact because vast swathes of people uphold the norms, consciously or unconsciously.

Not-Being-At-Ease

I highlighted 'not being at ease' because Lugones uses the term 'ease' to designate the level of belonging subjects feel in certain worlds. According to Lugones,[vi] the non-exhaustive requirements for being-at-ease in worlds are as follows:

* Being a fluent speaker in the world (e.g. Being able to read and communicate in the world's prevailing language)
* Being normatively happy in the world (e.g. Being accustomed to the world's etiquette in various social situations)
* Being humanely bonded (e.g. Having social ties/relationships with others situated in the world)
* Having a sense of shared history (e.g. Feeling a connection towards the world, as if one has roots there)

One should view these requirements not as a checklist, but as a spectrum that alters as we navigate worlds. If one experiences a rupture in these requirements of being-at-ease, they might experience feelings of unease.

A scenario where one may feel unease in a world could go as follows: Someone travels to worlds that promise economic stability, education, and success that were impossible in their previous worlds. However, their lack of social ties, historical understanding, or grasp of the etiquette makes them feel like they are 'doing it wrong'. Combined with the possibility of facing prejudice, they are torn between ways of being and behaving, disorientating them and making them uneasy.

We can attempt to adopt the norms and expectations of the 'worlds' we inhabit to feel at ease. In the Underground example, I may be normatively adjusted and part of the pace one day, scurrying from work, sighing at any silly tourist sliding their day ticket too slowly through the turnstiles. However, for many in unwelcome worlds, it is not as simple as picking up the pace; rather, they could be seen as outsiders regardless of how much they strive to fit in. This may develop into a deep sense of non-belonging and make someone enact a 'different self' in worlds where they feel unease.

Language and Worlds

Language and Worlds

Languages play a pivotal role in the formation and development of 'worlds'. Languages convey rules and rituals, describe and construct expectations, and allow worlds to evolve. Each language (and variance of) also highlights a nuanced cultural inheritance, a way of thinking, acting, and feeling in their world.[vii] Therefore, in worlds, being at ease requires an intimate understanding of how the specific language of the world works.

As an example of a world impacted by varying languages, we could use Welsh. One example Mererid Hopwood uses to highlight the differences in outlook between English and Welsh is the relationship with property.[viii] Take the English

sentence 'I have a dog'; in Welsh, we would say 'mae ci gyda fi', which translates to 'a dog is with me'. In English, one would also say, 'I have a cold', whereas in Welsh, we would say 'mae salwch arnaf', which upon translation relays, 'There is a sickness with me'. Additionally, as opposed to the English 'I, Welsh does not capitalise this pronoun.

These differences in outlooks may seem minuscule on paper, but they hint at different ways of being in the world. In a peculiarly 'Welsh world', the role of the individual, their capacity to 'own' other beings, and whether sicknesses can be entangled with the individual would make this 'world' different. If we were to see an English visitor enter this world, and the Welsh inhabitants speak English to accommodate him, the different linguistic perspectives could still be felt.

The Welsh Language Philosopher J.R. Jones believed these outlooks were not pedantic differences in translation but rather reflected an intimate bond between languages, the communities, and the land on which they are spoken and crafted.[ix] He called this a 'bychanfyd ieithyddol' ('Linguistic Microcosm').[x] Failing to recognise the different outlooks that derive from the languages and the worlds they help paint could hinder connections between people and ourselves from our identities.[xi]

Linguistic Unease in The Case of Welsh Speakers

In situations where language is the cause of unease, we could call this 'linguistic unease'. You may remember that being a 'fluent speaker' was one requirement for ease in the 'world'. However, I am not claiming that this requirement alone has been ruptured; 'linguistic unease' may influence all other requirements and affect norms, shared history, and interpersonal connections.

However, when we think about Welsh, it is a minoritised language often subsumed into Anglophone worlds, and the speakers are bilingual. This complicates 'linguistic unease' because Welsh speakers carry their languages with them. Therefore, they may find themselves trapped in the 'uncomfortable border region' between the differing world outlooks that competing languages present.[xii] They may also carry remnants of worlds as they enter other ones.

Imagine a Welsh speaker called Gwen, who moved to London to take up specialist work. Now distanced from the Welsh language, she has severed the tie with an intimate part of herself, how she sees the world. She may feel less fluent than others in the office, and even if she is not, her accent could be enough to label her otherwise. Additionally, she does not know the norms of speech, like things she should and should not say, because her sense of shared history is very much that of peculiar Welsh worlds and customs. Finally, this prevents her from becoming

bonded with others as she is busy negotiating ways of fitting in. However, the solution is not as simple as learning to be at ease in this world. Why?

Firstly, learning to be at ease in this world may harm her ease in the Welsh 'worlds' because languages sometimes coalesce but often contradict. Secondly, because languages live within us, it is difficult to sever ties; '[the] script of words moving in the body is as concrete as flesh.'[xiii] This leaves Gwen in-between languages and the worlds they help construct, and between potential oppositional identities that languages may promote.

Further Implications: Welsh Split Subjects and Linguistic In-betweenness

We could borrow from Mariana Ortega and call Gwen a 'split subject'.[xiv] A subject is split when norms and practices from different worlds are not cross-compatible and compete inside one body. An example of this is Du Bois' concept of 'double consciousness', where an African American in unwelcoming White worlds...

> "ever feels his twoness- an American, a negro, two thoughts...two unreconciled strivings: two warring ideals in one dark body."[xv]

Having left some 'worlds' constructed through Welsh (albeit Welsh still clings to her) and uneasy in another, she is now stuck in a state of non-belonging on the borders of languages; she is in-between.

Welsh speakers may be familiar with Gwen's in-betweenness. We even have a historical (albeit apocryphal) figure named 'Dic Sion Dafydd', colloquially used to denote someone who quickly negotiates this tension by 'forgetting' how to speak Welsh.

A Novel Approach

Adopting the Epistemic Lens of Language Use

The question herein lies: What is the Latina Feminist Phenomenology contributing to the discussion of minoritised language experience that other accounts fail to capture? An effective way to display this is to adopt the epistemic lens used by thinkers such as Lisa Bergin, Kristie Dotson, and others, who discuss languages' role in transferring knowledge and belonging in social spaces. This will allow us to see aspects of minoritised language experience not captured in this epistemic approach.

Some multilingual speakers may feel that their languages or dialects possess an Epistemic Difference; a gulf caused by 'differing social situations [...] differing knowledges of reality'.[xvi] These differences could vary from concepts that are not cross-translatable to subtle differences in language customs. An example of the latter could be that the speaker carries over their native language's tendency to

use flat imperatives when learning English, which is misconstrued as rude. The speaker could persistently experience failed linguistic exchanges due to these epistemic differences. A failed exchange may mean that the audience does not discern or comprehend words as the speaker intended, or that the speaker fails to deliver their meaning as intended.[xvii]

This could lead to a testimonial smothering,[xviii] as they tailor their testimony to suit the audience's understanding. It could be seen as self-silencing, as they continually prevent themselves from saying what they wish, knowing that any endeavour will result in trying to bridge a language barrier. There may also be instances of testimonial quieting,[xix] where owing to the multilingual speaker's less confident demeanour and inability to express intellectual depth in this unfamiliar language (and other features like accent), the audience fails to consider the subject a knower, meaning that they value their views less in discussion.

From an epistemic viewpoint, a multilingual speaker's ability to speak and be heard fails in a linguistic exchange because of a lack of communicable reciprocation from the audience and self-silencing on their part. Because knowledge fails to be transferred, the speaker may feel peripheral and excluded because they cannot contribute to a knowledge-sharing practice.

What the Latina Feminist Phenomenology Contributes

I believe epistemic transfer and 'failing to be heard' is just one chapter of the minoritised language story. Languages are vital to conveying information, but they also play an emotional role in our experiences. Therefore, speaking a language entangles both the epistemic and affective as we strive to feel a sense of belonging.

Utilising Latina Feminist Phenomenology, namely the concept of 'worlds,' could facilitate and scaffold the nuanced and often internalised affective elements of being a minoritised language speaker. These elements, like being in-between languages, linguistic unease, and being a split subject, are all areas that 'worlds' help bring to life that the epistemic approach alone cannot reach.

A Welsh Experience

Welsh is integral to my being. How the words roll off the tongue emulates the hills before my eyes; they sound exactly how they feel. Even the tragic words, like 'Dychrynllyd' ('Terrifying'), fight with my throat; the delivery reminds me of the moments that warrant the use of its terrifying sound. Finding the right word in Welsh is like satisfying an itch. Such fluency made me feel at ease in 'worlds' where Welsh is present.

As with most relationships, things between Welsh and I changed. Starting

university, English was a bridge to another world; its opportunities were a temptation only a fool would reject. It seemed any reverence one has for the prestige of Welsh should quickly dissipate when glancing at Welsh giants like Dylan Thomas and Richard Burton, who became successful by leaving the language behind. Like most educated through the Welsh medium, I was taught that 'the dragon speaks two tongues',[xx] so when faced with the promises of the English-speaking social scene, it was acceptable, even standard procedure, to let your Welsh (just about) survive and to travel to English-speaking worlds. Carrying the remnants I have of the Welsh language today, I feel torn and in-between, like a tortoise who cannot decide whether the Welsh shell is a home or the coffin I will eventually get buried in.

However, I felt further unease as I fully adopted the successful, sleek, and smart English language, with its networks that seem to be a prerequisite for modern success. English was hardly there when I made friends or had feelings for the first time. Its conclusions were hollow because we did not have the same shared history. English felt like a distant bystander who suddenly started giving me advice. Regardless of the level of mastery, it still fails to feel fluent or homely; it is just a requirement for success. Each sentence sounds like walking to a song I dislike, but one I cannot turn off because I am in those 'worlds' now.

I am a Welsh split subject stuck between languages, at the borderlands of words and the conflicting worlds and selves they encourage. The memories tied to words are like an ambient, almost forgotten smell in either language. I retreat into silence because of my unease in English and Welsh, like a surfer trying to go unnoticed by the waves. I smother my testimony in worlds to try and get through in either language without 'making a mistake'. Welsh interrupts me as I speak English, and I stutter as English infiltrates my Welsh. I keep bumping against the border, against the limits of language, and I am unsure where I belong.

Conclusion

This piece brought minoritised language speakers' experiences into the foreground of phenomenology and belonging by using notions prominent in Latina Feminist Phenomenology, such as worlds, not-being-at-ease and in-betweenness. With these terms, we introduced the role of languages in forming worlds and multilingual split subjects who may not feel-at-ease in certain worlds due primarily to clashing languages. Little attention had been given to the experiences of minoritised language speakers, which appeared to be a lacuna in the phenomenology of in-betweenness, world-travel, and belonging.

We also highlighted a second 'affective' lacuna in broader language studies beyond phenomenology by utilising approaches that consider language's role in

subjects navigating social spaces that emphasise the epistemic element. Although the transfer of knowledge and 'being heard' play an essential part in belonging in social spaces, we can expand the potential impact of speaking a minoritised language to the affective dimension by utilising Latina Feminist Phenomenology. By introducing 'worlds' and the affective elements like unease, split subjects, and in-betweenness that derive from it, we expand and enrich the scope of language studies.

This piece aimed to facilitate and scaffold a discussion on the affective elements of being a minoritised language speaker that both Latina Feminist Phenomenology and broader language studies have underrepresented. By utilising these terms, we can enrich our understanding of Minoritised Language experiences and the concepts we use to describe them. Still, doing justice to such wide-ranging experiences requires doing philosophy differently. If our relationships with languages are personal and intimate, so should the philosophy attempting to explain and describe them. Words, after all, can feel as concrete as flesh.