

Language/Lyrics Innovation Annotation

We have talked about the value of experimenting and innovating with language, and the role of such experimentation/innovation in the growth of language over time. This assignment asks you to find an example of language experimentation that you particularly like or find interesting, and to explore what's going on with this language.

Directions: Find any short piece of writing (song lyrics, a poem, anything) in which you think language is used in a playful and interesting way. The piece should be one that would not be as effective without breaking "the rules" of Standard English. This could mean....

- Writing that code-switches or switches between dialects or languages
- Writing that mimics the ways that people speak in a written form
- Writing that uses language in a playful, innovative way

STEP 1. Annotate: Paste the author's words/ lyrics into a Google Doc or MSWord document and comment on several places (min of 3 annotations which come to 300 words TOTAL) where the writer breaks a "rule," switches codes or languages, etc. Comment in the margins using MS Word (Review>New Comment/Insert Comment) or Google Docs (Highlight>Plus in the Comment Bubble>Type Comment>Click COMMENT). Your comments should describe what you see the writer doing and why you think it is interesting, cool, beautiful, original, effective in getting a message across – whatever qualities appeal to you in that specific passage.

Questions to consider in your annotations: Write your annotations on what you want others to understand and appreciate about what this writer is doing TO and WITH language in this piece of writing.

- What patterns or themes do you notice in how the writer experiments with language? Does the writer break down words or expressions? How?
- What different kinds of languages show up in this writing? (If they are not official languages, you may have to come up with a name for them.)
- What impact does this experimentation have on you as a reader? How might it impact different readers differently?
- How does this writer's experimentation with language relate to what you see as the message of this piece?

NOTE: It is fine to bring in ideas from other sources, but you MUST CITE THEM in a way that makes it clear where you are getting your information.

Step 2. Hyperlink: After annotating it, include a link/URL to this piece being read or sung online, if one is available.

Step 3: Reflection. Reflect on how you first heard or read this piece. How was it first shared with people? How is it continuing to be shared? Who is listening to it/reading it, and responding?

- What community/ies is/are listening to/reading this? How does the use of language/vernacular/dialect invoke (or alienate) any particular communities)? What kind of technology is used to give people access to this writing? How does the form of technology used impact how people listen to/read this piece of writing? (I.e., do people listen in groups? On what kind of devices? Do they interact with the poem, as with comments or annotations? Have readers/viewers/listeners taken the language in this piece of writing into other contexts?) Consider posting links to examples of readers interacting with a text online: Genius links with highlighted

commentary or Youtube videos responding to the texts, parodies, spin-offs, remixes created by fans, comments, retweeting, etc.)

- Why do you like this piece of writing? What is powerful, interesting, funny, beautiful to you about this writing?
- Why do you think *other* people like this language? What new meanings has this community given to this piece of writing as they share it? How have they done it? New postings? Comments? Parodies?

Save your document in .docx format and upload it to Blackboard before noon on Wednesday.

NOTE: In my sample response below, I have included a poem from a well-known poet, but I could have easily chosen from popular music to find an example of language innovation. For example, take a look at this essay on Rhianna’s “Work”—it’s easy to imagine how the author of this analysis could have written the analytical insights as marginal comments instead of in essay form:

<https://languagesinconflict.wordpress.com/2018/05/14/rihannas-code-switching/>

LANGUAGE ANNOTATION SAMPLE RESPONSE:

STEP 1.

Discourse on the logic of language

NourbeSe Philip

English is my mother tongue

A mother tongue is not a foreign

lang lang lang language

languish anguish

a foreign anguish

English is my father tongue

a father tongue is a foreign language

therefore English is a foreign language

not a mother tongue

what is my mother tongue

my mammy tongue

my mummy tongue

my momsy tongue

my modder tongue

my ma tongue

I have no mother tongue

no mother to tongue

no tongue to mother tongue me

I must therefore be tongue-dumb

dumb tongued

dub tongued

damn dumb tongue

Commented [MOU1]: Here, Philip breaks down the word “language” itself, and this does a couple of different things. First, she draws attention to the word language, and I had to think about it as a word, not just read it for its meaning, but stop and really think about it. It became strange. The speaker here seems to be almost stuttering, unable to call upon the right words since the right words have been stolen. Then, having broken it down, she starts to rebuild it, but with a game of kinds, she turns it into another word – anguish. All of a sudden, the meaning shifts and language becomes a source of anguish.

Commented [MOU2]: All these translations of “mother” carry different racial and cultural connotations. “Mammy” reminds me of the stereotype from African American slavery, “mummy” reminds me of England, “Momsy” sounds both childish and a bit British, “modder” sounds like it might come from a form of creole, “ma” breaks the rhythm and makes me think of another vernacular – maybe from the American South or the Caribbean? Most of these forms of the word mother invoke sites of the African diaspora.

but I have a dumb tongue
tongue dumb
father tongue
and English is my mother tongue

is my father tongue
is a foreign lan lang lang language
languish anguish
a foreign anguish is English
Edict I.

Every owner of slaves shall wherever possible shall ensure that the slaves belong to as many ethno-linguistic groups as possible. If they cannot speak to each other, they cannot then ferment rebellion and revolution.

Step 2.

[Click here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=424yF9eqBsE) to hear M. NourbeSe Philip read the full poem.
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=424yF9eqBsE>)

Step 3.

As Philip points out in her video (link above), a poem like this might not have a very wide audience. She is a well-known poet and obviously has an audience—I suspect it’s an audience of poets, poetry lovers, and academics. I think this for a few reasons: the first time I heard this poem, I heard her read it at a public lecture at a university. Also, when I search for the poem online, I come up with two categories of hits: videos of her reading the poem and academic course blogs where a student has written a comment about the poem in response to an instructor’s assignment. The poem invokes communities of people interested in and affected by colonialism and enslavement. The language play in this piece expresses the way that colonialism silences. She labels English as a “father tongue,” which is a move that calls out language as a tool of colonialism—English is the language of patriarchy, both English and patriarchy were imported colonialist/imperialist tools. In very few words, Philip expresses a long history of oppression. I like this piece not only because it points out this idea (language-as-oppressor) in an innovative way, but also because it draws on different dialects (“mummy” “mommy” “mudder”) and creates new ways of expressing the pain and silence of colonialism. Even though the poem argues that speaker has no mother tongue, the speaker also makes attempts to invent one; therefore, the poem also shows that language can liberate. There is some optimism here: the invented language is incipient (“lang lang lang”), but it shows re-birth, something new, something innovative.

Commented [MOU3]: After her experimental word-breaking, this passage sounds describes history. She goes from this personal rule-breaking poetry to complete sentences and present-tense writing about historical practices of alienating slaves from each other by keeping them apart from other speakers of their mother tongues. It sounds harsh, formal and legalistic. Very different from her personal, experimental description of an infant learning language. She uses this contrast to show how enslavement works linguistically, historically, and personally. (I think also that there may be a play on fermenting and fomenting rebellion here, but I’m not sure what to make of it.)