BROKEN ENGLISH: DEVIANT LANGUAGE AND THE PARA-POETIC

CLARK LUNBERRY

Uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

You don't yourself until now from tomorrow.

The sentence above, part of a paragraph describing a dream, is an example of the kind of writing frequently encountered in the teaching of English as a foreign language. Non-native students of English will often speak and write in ways that, in addition to being technically incorrect, seem both peculiar and provocative to the native speaker. The individual words are generally recognized but the awkward manner in which they have been combined creates obstacles that render their meaning anywhere from interesting to incomprehensible. The native speaker, possessing a seemingly instinctive awareness of conventional boundaries and the limits of language, detects linguistic disruptions almost immediately, like a tongue exploring the roof of its own mouth that quickly fastens upon abnormalities. However, regardless of the errors, regardless of the awkwardness, the mind of the native speaker may experience a fleeting moment when, caught off-guard, it finds that the words and sentences register and resonate with potential meaning. The words join together and form an obscure, opaque pattern. You don't yourself. . . .

Though vague and unsettled, the sentence incites fragile possibilities and strange suggestions". . . until now from tomorrow.

Like Wittgenstein's keyboard of the imagination, language possesses rich musical qualities of tone and texture, resonance and rhythm.¹ These more mysterious, less quantifiable elements of language are key factors in determining everything from nuance to nonsense. However, textbooks and dictionaries, language classes and language teachers generally present only the most contrived and standardized forms of English. They ignore, perhaps inescapably, the more subtle and intangible qualities of cultural context and linguistic diversity.² In the process, students receive
a decontextualized, abstract language which, in their eyes, is primarily an intricate and obscure web of words and phrases, rules and regulations. They fail to hear the music of language, the visceral quality of words to strike and resonate within the imagination.

Imagine trying to teach students to swim by using textbooks, diagrams, explanations on the blackboard, and various other classroom methods. The students may understand all that has been said, scoring high on essays and examinations. This manner of teaching might become so institutionalized and accepted that the action of swimming in water is nearly forgotten. But then the day comes for the students to be thrown into the pool—the real test! Will they sink or swim?

Non-native students of English may find themselves in a similar though perhaps less dramatic or dangerous situation. They are suddenly thrown into the cold water of English. The lower-level student may attempt various maneuvers—a preposition thrown here, a modifier added there, articles and adjectives tossed about everywhere. When written out as an essay or examination, the words may seem random, the grammar all but arbitrary, tone and rhythm nearly nonexistent. And yet, mysteriously, paradoxically, they remain afloat. Against all odds, the words and sentences, however mangled and distorted, still manage somehow to convey traces of meaning and fragments of image.

The native speaker reads the writing of such students with a combination of horror and fascination. Perched on the very edge of nonsense and incomprehensibility, the student has, alarmingly, pulled off a remarkable feat of language. Unknown to the student who created it, the deviant English possesses a power that shakes the foundations of the native speaker’s carefully constructed house of language. The writing unexpectedly demonstrates that in spite of the formalized and contrived English that was taught, in spite of the errors and irregularities that the students employ, the language itself cannot be extinguished and rendered meaningless. The inherent power of individual words and fragments to mean—to strike a note on the keyboard of the imagination—reveals the limits and fallibility of linguistic rules, and testifies to the latent power and vitality of an expanded, outlaw language.