Trauma, Language, and Trust

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Abstract: In times of emotional upheaval, one's own words and/or those of others can seem strangely hollow, somehow off the mark. In extreme cases of individual- and group-level trauma, it is sometimes said that language fails us completely or that some experiences defy articulation. This paper is concerned with why certain experiences might pose particular linguistic challenges and with what an *experience* of linguistic inadequacy consists of. I sketch a phenomenological approach that emphasizes (a) how words can be experienced *as* estranged from habitual contexts of use; and (b) how non-localized breakdowns of trust impact on the experience of communication. This aids us in understanding experiences of trauma, while also providing wider-ranging insights into the phenomenology of language and how it relates to the habitually experienced world.

Introduction

Extreme forms of traumatic experience are sometimes said to resist articulation, to be difficult or even impossible to convey to others.[1] In particular, this theme has been noted in the testimonies of Holocaust survivors, some of whom remark that what they witnessed and lived through cannot be put into words. However, first-person accounts of other harrowing events suggest that the experience of language-failure is more widespread, encompassing events that may affect a whole culture, a group, or just a single individual. For example, reflecting on her own traumatic experience, the philosopher Susan Brison (2002, xi) wonders how we can "speak about the unspeakable without attempting to render it intelligible and sayable". Even in a case where the experienced shortcomings of language are not quite so profound, a person may still struggle to convey experiences, feel that she has not been and never will be understood, or even resign herself to the impossibility of understanding on the part of others. At the same time, however, it is widely acknowledged that there are therapeutic benefits associated with being able to articulate what one endured, making this issue a practically important one (Herman, 1992/1997). Among other things, a better understanding of the struggle to articulate experience has the potential to inform clinical

[1] I use the term 'traumatic experience' to refer to how certain events, sequences of events, or temporally extended situations, which almost anyone would regard as exceptional, disruptive, and distressing, are experienced. I take 'traumatic experience' to encompass not only how those events were experienced at the time of their occurrence, but also their enduring effects on how one experiences and relates to the world.

empathy and, with this, therapeutic practices that emphasize the importance of helping someone put what has happened into words.

In what follows, I will offer an account of what experiences of *words failing* consist of. To do so, I will focus on two interdependent factors that feature in many instances, although perhaps not all. The first of these involves the disruption of projects and pastimes with which utterances are habitually associated. The second consists in a non-localized loss of what we might call 'trust', 'confidence', or 'certainty'. Together, they comprise an experience of one's words as inadequate and of certain kinds of communicative acts as impossible. My account is not intended to be exhaustive. There may be a range of other factors that interfere with articulation in any given case. Furthermore, what I describe here need not be central to every case. Even so, it will be present, to varying degrees, in all those instances where there is (a) profound disruption of life-structure, and (b) a non-localized erosion of interpersonal trust. It is consistent with a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (e.g. American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and, in more extreme cases, with the increasingly recognized diagnostic category 'complex PTSD' (as characterized by Herman, 1992/1997). However, it is also diagnostically nonspecific. Loss of trust and disengagement from contexts of habitual practice are also central to forms of experience that can be associated with diagnoses including major depressive disorder, schizophrenia, and some variants of grief (Ratcliffe, 2015; 2017). Wherever disruption of practice and loss of trust occur together, one will face the kinds of linguistic challenges identified here.[2]

Articulating Trauma

The themes of silence and the unsayable have been associated specifically with the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. In addressing the relevant literature, Martin Kusch (2017) introduces the term "linguistic despair" to capture the way in which language's failure is taken to be unavoidable and insurmountable. The phenomenon he refers to is mentioned explicitly in several well-known autobiographical accounts. For instance, here is how Elie Wiesel (2006, viii-ix) describes the linguistic challenge that one faces:

[2] See Sass and Pienkos (2015) for a discussion of linguistic experience in schizophrenia, melancholic depression, and mania, which documents phenomena that are similar to what I describe here. Although I emphasize forms of experience that arise in response to exceptional events that impact upon one's life, experiences of meaning-loss and diminished trust can be brought about in other ways too. For instance, serious illness, injury, and substance abuse can all interfere more directly with the ability to experience salient, significant possibilities in organized, situationally appropriate ways, rather than via the practices that those possibilities presuppose.

> Convinced that this period in history would be judged one day, I knew that I must bear witness. I also knew that, while I had many things to say, I did not have the words to say them. Painfully aware of my limitations, I watched helplessly as language became an obstacle. It became clear that it would be necessary to invent a new language. But how was one to rehabilitate and transform words betrayed and perverted by the enemy? Hunger – thirst – fear – transport – selection – fire – chimney: these words all have intrinsic meaning, but in those times, they meant something else. (viii-ix)

Charlotte Delbo (1985 / 1990, p.3) describes the limitations of language in a complementary way, emphasizing a kind of *splitting* that encompasses language, self, and reality. There is the consensus world that one currently inhabits and there is also the world of the concentration camp.[3] As pointed out by Wiesel, words such as 'hunger' and 'chimney' had quite different connotations in that world, in a place where all that one once took for granted and that one's interpreters now take for granted was extinguished. To describe Context A to those residing in Context B, one relies upon words such as *x*, *y*, and *z*, which are familiar to interpreters situated in B. However, those words have importantly different connotations in A, which are obscured by their employment in B. Hence, in order to describe something, one must use words that someone else understands, but that same understanding eclipses the phenomenon in question. As Kusch (2017, p.142) writes, "the struggle for words is essentially the struggle to communicate the destruction of much of what in 'ordinary life' we take for granted". There is a loss of ordinarily implicit, pre-reflective certainties that the workings of language more usually presuppose.

If this is what the phenomenon consists in, then it is also something that can arise at the level of the individual, something that can happen to 'me' rather than 'us', where 'us' might be a family, a larger group, or even a whole culture. Of course, there remain important differences. Nevertheless, a particular person can similarly experience the destruction of a habitual world that others presuppose, such that words cannot be successfully exported from one context to the other. For example, Annie Rogers (2007, p.4) describes what she calls the "unsayable" in a way that seems to incorporate this (although it is not the explicit focus of her account): "It was there, as a sixteen-year-old girl, that I stopped speaking for five months, from October to February. I realized that whatever I might say could be misconstrued and used to create a version of 'reality' that would be unrecognizable, a kind of voice-over of my

[3] See also Lawrence Langer's (1991) discussion of Holocaust testimonies for descriptions of this phenomenon.

truths I could not bear." Later on, she writes, "Here is the unsayable, where words are spoken, yet fall into disconnection with what they point toward" (p.88).[4]

It should be added that the distinction between group-level and individual-level trauma is by no means straightforward. That something happened to 'us' does not imply a sense of shared understanding among those who endured it. Where we are concerned with the *phenomenology* of trauma, what happened to 'us' may still be experienced principally as 'mine' rather than 'ours'. For instance, Shay (1994, pp.205-6) reports that some Vietnam veterans did not feel solidarity with fellow traumatized soldiers but instead construed their disclosures in terms of an adversarial "pissing contest". The trauma is experienced as something that happened to 'me' - something to be endured alone, which is not to be understood by or shared with others.

We can distinguish two phenomena: (a) a struggle to find the right words oneself; (b) a failure on the part of others to understand those words. One might have the experience of conveying something in an entirely adequate way, associated with the experience of others failing to comprehend one's words due to their own contingent limitations. Conversely, one might feel that, although one's words fall flat, certain empathic individuals still manage to understand. However, (a) and (b) have a common origin and are, in practice, thoroughly entwined. One struggles to find words because something is lost when those words move between contexts, and others fail to understand because a familiar context eclipses an unfamiliar one. The communicative task of the trauma survivor is therefore doubly difficult: the profound gulf between what she endured (and perhaps continued to endure) and what an interlocutor takes as given impedes both linguistic expression and linguistic comprehension.

Importantly, the problem does not consist merely in recognizing *that* words fall short; one also *experiences* those words *as* falling short. Even as they are uttered, there is a sense or feeling of their inadequacy. With this, there is also a more pervasive experience of lack or absence. Something that once seemed integral to the world, like bedrock, is experienced as missing, perhaps altogether lost. My task here is to clarify the relevant phenomenology. Two broad types of scenario are to be distinguished: (i) one shares context B with another person and seeks to relate context A to that person, while experiencing the gulf between where one once was (A) and where both parties are now (B); (ii) one inhabits A in an enduring way,

[4] In cases of childhood trauma, the linguistic challenge I describe here may be especially pronounced and perhaps also qualitatively different, given limitations of one's ability to comprehend and express various experiences, the challenges of eliciting understanding from adults, and the possibility that phenomenological contexts for utterances do not take quite the same forms as in adulthood.

thus experiencing a gulf between where one is now (A) and where the other person is now (B). I will focus principally on (ii), on those cases that involve an enduring experience of loss, rather than something that also seems alien to oneself much of the time. However, I also concede that the distinction between A- and B-type scenarios is not clear-cut.

Disturbances of World

Traumatic experiences can involve the disturbance of something that our utterances more usually presuppose, and this 'something' has a phenomenology. Indeed, it is a central and pervasive aspect of human experience. When it is disrupted, one experiences *upheaval*, something that -in more extreme cases- involves a sense of enduring and irreversible loss. To better appreciate what is involved here, I find it helpful to draw on the phenomenological tradition of philosophy and, more specifically, on the theme of *having a world*. As conceived of by philosophers such as the later Husserl (e.g. 1954/1970) and also Merleau-Ponty (1945/1912), the 'world' is not, first and foremost, an object of experience. Our most basic sense that the world 'is' cannot be extricated from our sense of belonging to it. And our sense of belonging consists in a habitual, practical, affective immersion in our surroundings. When we have experiences and thoughts with specific contents, we already find ourselves in the world in this fashion.

Ordinarily, we experience our surroundings as imbued with a cohesive web of significant, practically engaging possibilities. For the most part, these take the more specific form of happenings that are *anticipated* with varying degrees of confidence and determinacy. The sense of belonging to a world consists in an all-pervasive 'style' of practically engaged perceptual experience, involving the confident anticipation and fulfilment of cohesively organized, significant possibilities (Ratcliffe, 2017, Chapter 5). To illustrate this, consider a concrete example of engaging in a habitual pattern of activity: getting off the bus, entering an academic department, walking up to one's office, unlocking the door, and switching on the computer to check one's email. As one goes about one's business in the absence of surprises, things show up in the usual manner: they matter in a range of mundane ways, which reflect how they actually or potentially impact upon one's projects, commitments, cares, and concerns. Similarly, the conception of belonging to the world that I draw from the phenomenological tradition takes a structured human life to involve various interlocking projects and wider concerns. In the majority of cases, these are etched into the experienced world as patterns of significant possibilities that relate, in one or another way, to potential

activities. Belonging to the world in a pre-reflective, unproblematic way consists in experiencing the holistic, confident unfolding of significant possibilities.

If something along these lines is right, then the structure of world-experience is vulnerable to different sources of disruption. The factors that together specify the experienced significance of an entity, event, or situation fall into four broad categories: (a) bodily capacities that determine what we are able and unable to do; (b) projects and wider concerns, relative to which things can matter in one or another way; (c) relations with other people, which sustain projects and may even underlie the intelligibility of projects (as when I do something 'for you' or when something only makes sense in relation to an 'us'); and (d) shared norms of various kinds that constrain, enable, and/or render intelligible patterns of activity. These factors together specify whether and how something appears (and should appear) significant to us in a given context. Hence, interference with one or more of them will affect how things appear significant (at least insofar as our experience takes account of what has changed). The effect could be fairly specific or more diffuse. Where an event profoundly affects capacities, projects, interpersonal relations, and/or entrenched norms, its impact will be all-pervasive. Consider, for instance, the effects of serious illness or injury, of losing a job that was central to one's life projects, of losing the spouse with whom one shared a life, or of living through the unravelling of a culture. The experiences associated with these diverse forms of upheaval may well differ in important ways. Nevertheless, there remains a structural similarity: one experiences the loss of patterns of significant possibilities that were once taken for granted, patterns that were presupposed by one's experiences, thoughts, activities, and words.

This type of loss is integral to (although not exhaustive of) 'traumatic' experience. And it is also one reason why traumatic experiences can be difficult to communicate. They involve disturbance of something that is more usually pre-reflectively given, something that one's interlocutors may continue to presuppose. Given this, a struggle for words is inevitable. However, there is more to it than that. Disruption of one's world also incorporates a more specific disruption of language. Like patterns of purposive activities, our utterances ordinarily presuppose certain things. When world-experience is disturbed, the disturbance can also envelop what we might call an 'experience of meaning'. The point applies to life-upheavals in general and is not exclusive to those life-events associated with clinically significant trauma. Nevertheless, it is an important contributor to the linguistic phenomenology of trauma.

To illustrate what the experience consists of and to further clarify *how* words relate to the habitual wold, I will focus on one type of case in detail, that of bereavement and -more specifically- losing a partner. A prominent theme in first-person accounts of grief and bereavement is the erosion of practical meaning: things that were once taken as given cease to be intelligible. Almost all of one's projects, commitments, cares, concerns, and habitual activities may have come to depend on a particular individual in one or another way. In the case of a partner, it could be that 'I cook meals for us'; 'we enjoy walking in the park together'; 'we are saving money for a house in which to spend our lives together'; 'we are concerned about climate change': 'when I finish work, I go home to her'; 'I work to support our life together'; and so forth. Sometimes, cares, commitments, and projects are attributed to a 'we' and may only be sustainable given that 'we'. However, even where 'I' do something, it may similarly draw some or all of its practical meaning from how it relates to 'her', even if one merely anticipates telling her about it afterwards or coming home to her when it is finished.

This loss of practical meanings is sometimes referred to in terms of engrained assumptions: "When somebody dies a whole set of assumptions about the world that relied upon the other person for their validity are suddenly invalidated" (Parkes, 1996, p.90). However, it is important to distinguish these 'assumptions' from propositions that were once endorsed without question and are no longer endorsed. Following C's death, one might explicitly assent to propositions such as 'C is no longer alive'; 'I will never see C again'; and 'I will never walk in the park with C again'. However, despite recognizing the truth of these propositions, one retains -to varying degrees- a conflicting set of habitual expectations that permeate experience, thought, and activity. For instance, one might anticipate seeing C when one arrives home, even though one at the same time 'knows' that one will not, and various things continue to appear significant insofar as they point to C's potential presence or involvement. It is not simply that conceptual thought gets updated while unthinking bodily dispositions lag behind. Recalcitrant 'assumptions' include habitual ways of talking and thinking. So, however we might draw the distinction between what is explicitly recognized and what runs counter to it, language does not feature only on one side of the divide; our utterances can be just as habitual as our 'thoughtless' activities.

One of the ways in which this disturbance is *experienced* is that, although habitual patterns of experience, thought, and activity may endure, they are at the same time associated with a pervasive feeling of incongruity and tension. For instance, a sofa in one's lounge might continue to offer certain possibilities that imply the potential presence of one's spouse,

as in ‘we could snuggle up here and watch a film tonight’. Yet, at the same time, those possibilities present themselves *as* unrealizable. Such experiences of conflict are not merely occasional and localized. Bereavement can also involve a more diffuse experience of things as no longer offering what they used to offer, as strangely unfamiliar and bereft of meaning: “The act of living is different all through. Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything” (Lewis, 1966, p.12)

For current purposes, the important thing to note is that disturbance of the habitual world also impacts more specifically on language and linguistic thought. Upheavals such as bereavement make salient a subtle kind of *self-referentiality* that is integral to much of our everyday talk. Take the thought ‘I am going home now’. Home could be conceived of in a generic way, as something that possesses the properties *x*, *y*, and *z*. Whatever those properties might be (and regardless of whether or not they amount to necessary or sufficient conditions for home-hood), they can be stated in a way that applies to homes in general. However, when I refer to *my home*, those properties take a more particular, concrete form. In saying ‘I am going home’, the most salient aspect of doing so might be going back to a particular person and immersing myself in activities that imply this person’s actual or potential presence.

When habitually thinking or uttering ‘time to go home now’, the bereaved person may be struck by the recognition that this is impossible, in much the same way that she embarks on a pattern of habitual activity and then recognizes that it is no longer intelligible. It need not be that she first thinks or utters *p* and only *then* remembers that *p* is no longer possible. A feeling of alienation from the utterance may arise even as it occurs. In some respects, going home still makes sense: I can still return to my private residence. In thinking ‘I am going home’, that thought points both to this and to other possibilities that no longer apply. Hence, there is an experience of tension, conflict, even contradiction. In a way, one is going home. In another way, one cannot go home anymore. Thoughts of ‘home’ that once harmoniously integrated these ways of going home are now oddly decoupled from the world, pointing to possibilities that no longer have a place.

We can account for the experience of linguistic meaning-erosion, then, by acknowledging that, when words relate to patterns of significant activities, they can be *experienced as* pointing to certain possibilities. In much the same way that a cup or a computer may be experienced as mattering, as harbouring significant possibilities, spoken and written words can similarly point to variably specific contexts of practice. We can also elaborate on the earlier observation that there is a gulf between two contexts, A and B, in which words are employed. As illustrated by the example of grief, an experience of

disruption and meaning-loss is not constituted merely by the experienced gulf between those contexts but also by the tension-riddled interplay between them. As one utters the words, one is struck by their failure to apply.

An author who conveys this aspect of experience very well is Joyce Carol Oates, in her memoir *A Widow's Story*. At one point, Oates reflects on the sense of impossibility attached to thoughts of collecting her husband's 'belongings' from the hospital where he has just died and taking them 'home':

> Someone must have instructed me to undertake this task. I am not certain that I would have thought of it myself. The word *belongings* is not my word, I think it is a curious word that sticks to me like a burr.
>
> *Belongings. To take home.*
>
> And *home*, too – this is a curious word. (2011, p.64)
>
> These toiletry things – that they were *his*, but are now no longer *his*, seems to me very strange.
>
> Now they are *belongings*.
>
> *Your husband's belongings*.
>
> One of the reasons I am moving slowly – perhaps it has nothing to do with being struck on the head by a sledgehammer – is that, with these *belongings*, I have nowhere to go except *home*. This *home* without my husband – is not possible for me to consider. (2011, p.65)

Importantly, this kind of *self-referentiality* is not exclusive to explicitly indexical words such as 'home'. In principal, it can extend to almost any utterance. Take the example of going to the cinema. In contrast to thinking 'it is possible for an unspecified person to go to the cinema', when one thinks 'I could go to the cinema', the prospect of doing so may also point to that of going with C, of sharing popcorn, of laughing together. Similarly, as one thinks about 'the cinema', affirms that one will go, or responds to an invitation to go, such possibilities may be experienced *as* absent; the thought or utterance is seemingly negated as it arises. Yes, one can still go to the cinema; the proposition makes sense and also happens to be true. But doing so no longer relates to one's life in the manner it once did; a certain *way* of going to the cinema is no longer possible.[5] There is, we might say, a *clash of worlds*. The full

[5] I think this is what Rupert Read (2018, p.181) has in mind in an interesting paper on grief, where he makes the following claim: "What 'denial' really means is the profound difficulty of marrying one's beliefs with the facts *even as one assents to them*". A kind of 'denial', he adds, is integral to a longer-term process of acceptance, of adjusting to the new circumstances.

meaning of the sentence, as uttered by a particular individual is pragmatically oriented. And words like 'cinema' have self-referential connotations; they point to a specific, concrete, habitual relationship with the world. This comes into tension with other aspects of experience, thought, and activity that accommodate the bereavement. The gulf between the two worlds, past and present, is experienced, and so too is the inapplicability of words and utterances to a current situation.

Such experiences comprise only one aspect of grief and they are not specific to grief. The example is intended to illustrate a more general way in which words can be experienced as somehow lacking, at odds with a situation in a way that does not amount to straightforward falsehood.[6] This, I suggest, can be one of the reasons why a traumatic experience is difficult to put into words. Utterances are imbued with significant possibilities that relate to one 'world' and not another. This, in turn, is compounded by others' failure to recognize that traumatic experience can amount to a profound disturbance of world, as opposed to a salient and unpleasant sequence of events that are experienced as arising within an intact, shared world.

I will now suggest that this kind of linguistic disturbance can be exacerbated by an additional factor, one that operates alongside and also intensifies the experience of meaning-loss: a pervasive loss of trust. Where the two occur together, there is a more profound erosion of the ability and also the inclination to convey one's experiences to others. While 'emotional upheaval' is not exclusive to trauma and not always clinically significant, the two factors combined (comprising, as they do, a profound disturbance of one's relationship with the social world) would be consistent with a diagnosis of severe psychiatric illness. Again, however, I do not wish to suggest that they are exhaustive of traumatic experiences or, more specifically, of the linguistic challenges that such experiences might pose.[7]

Loss of Trust

Disturbances of the habitual world also impact, in various ways, on one's relations with other people. A traumatic event can be inextricable from one's relations with a specific person: his death might render certain practices unintelligible, or something he did might be responsible

[6] For example, see Kirmayer (2007) for an account of how traumatized refugees are faced with something structurally similar, a gulf between "disparate worlds" that the imagination is tasked with bridging and also conveying to others.

[7] For instance, another important consideration in some cases is cultural and linguistic difference. In fleeing one's country, undertaking a hazardous journey, and seeking refugee status in an unfamiliar place, one faces the further challenges of negotiating a new language, an alien culture, and responses from interlocutors that may appear strange and unpredictable.

for the disruption of one's world. Concrete relations with others are also influenced by their responses to what has happened. However, changing relations with particular individuals, whatever form these might take, need to be distinguished from a shift in the overarching 'style' of one's relations with other people in general, something that might occur during or after the events in which traumatic experiences originate.

Traumatic events, of the kinds that people often struggle to articulate, tend to involve suffering inflicted by other people, often deliberately and with the intention to cause harm. The most extreme scenario involves the deliberate, comprehensive, institutionalized destruction of a world. Primo Levi (1987, pp.32-3) describes this vividly in his memoir of Auschwitz, and I will quote him at length:

> Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man. In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so. Nothing belongs to us any more; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we were, still remains.
>
> We know that we will have difficulty in being understood, and this is as it should be. But consider what value, what meaning is enclosed even in the smallest of our daily habits, in the hundred possessions which even the poorest beggar owns: a handkerchief, an old letter, the photo of a cherished person. These things are part of us, almost like limbs of our body; nor is it conceivable that we can be deprived of them in our world, for we immediately find others to substitute the old ones, other objects which are ours in their personification and evocation of our memories.
>
> Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, of everything he possesses: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself.

As well involving the loss of a context within which words more usually operate, having one's world systematically and comprehensively dismantled in such a way amounts to

a subversion of habitual expectations concerning other people.[8] It challenges a pre-reflective orientation towards other people in general, which we might refer to as a form of 'trust', 'confidence', or practical 'certainty'.[9] Although we do not always anticipate the actions of others to exactly the same degree of precision and in exactly the same way, for most of us, most of the time, the default expectation is that others -in their various different roles- will be mostly benevolent and dependable: they won't beat you up for no reason; they won't give you false directions for fun; they will offer at least some support in times of great need, and so forth. This 'style' of anticipation is the glue that is needed to hold together any configuration of cares, concerns, commitments, projects, and pastimes, any kind of world. Without the prospect of certain types of relations with others, one's own capacities to act are greatly reduced, many of one's projects become unintelligible, and other projects appear futile or doomed from the outset, give that nobody can be relied upon to help see them through. There is thus a loss of habitual 'certainty' that is not reducible to the collapse of however many specific pastimes. The shift in what one anticipates from other people shapes all experience, thought, and activity. Herman (1992/1997, p.51) describes this loss of non-localized, "basic trust" as follows:

> Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis.

This theme arises frequently in studies of trauma, and also in autobiographical accounts. For instance, Jean Améry (1999) describes how a non-localized feeling of trust, of being safe in the world, is extinguished by the first blow of the torturer, never to return. In a study of combat trauma, Shay (1994) describes the experiences of Vietnam veterans, whose relationship with the army was akin to that between parent and child. A consistent theme in their accounts is that of being betrayed by one's superiors, being left abandoned in an immoral way. With this, Shay remarks, combat trauma destroys not merely trust in however

[8] Elaine Scarry (1985) offers a complementary account of the structure of torture, which similarly emphasizes the way in which familiar items, of kinds that are ordinarily integrated into habitual patterns of activity, are subverted, turned against the person.

[9] For philosophical discussions that support the notion of a basic, non-localized form of trust, see Baier (1986), Jones (2004), Bernstein (2011), and Ratcliffe, Ruddell and Smith (2014).

many individuals but, with this, a "*capacity* for social trust" (1994, p.33).[10] Here is another example, this time concerning the predicament of traumatized refugees:

> Before being forced to flee, refugees may experience imprisonment, torture, loss of property, malnutrition, physical assault, extreme fear, rape and loss of livelihood. The flight process can last days or years. During flight, refugees are frequently separated from family members, robbed, forced to inflict pain or kill, witness torture or killing, and/or lose close family members or friends and endure extremely harsh environmental conditions. Perhaps the most significant effect from all of the experiences refugees endure is having been betrayed, either by their own people, by enemy forces, or by the politics of their world in general. Having misanthropic actions of others become a major factor controlling the lives of refugees has significant implications for health and for their ability to develop trusting interpersonal relationships, which are critical to resettlement and healing.[11]

The common theme is an enduring, non-localized loss of ordinarily pre-reflective trust, a sense of betrayal and unfathomability that overturns engrained patterns of expectation. If one cannot depend on others, then one cannot depend on anything, as almost all of our expectations concerning the world in general depend in one or another way on our expectations concerning other people. Loss of trust is therefore inextricable from a wider loss of confidence or certainty. Because one cannot depend on anything, one can no longer assemble meaningful life projects, in terms of which past events are deemed significant in ways that are malleable, open to re-contextualization and reappraisal. Consequently, one cannot 'move on'. Loss of trust thus consolidates practical disengagement by interfering with the ability to retain, repair, or replace any kind of meaningful life-structure. But how, one might ask, does this additional factor contribute more specifically to the experience of language?

Communication and Trust

[10] Elsewhere, I have argued that this aspect of experience, which we might refer to as 'trust', 'confidence', or 'certainty' is something that Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein all seek to describe, albeit in different ways. Ultimately, I suggest, their conceptions of it are largely consistent. In all cases, our most fundamental sense of certainty amounts to the non-localized, confident anticipation and fulfilment of an integrated system of significant possibilities (Ratcliffe, 2007, Chapters 5 and 6). See also Kusch (2017) for the claim that the linguistic difficulties of Holocaust survivors can be construed in terms of losing what Wittgenstein, in *On Certainty*, calls "hinges".

[11] From the website of the Refugee Health Technical Assistance Centre in Boston, Massachusetts: http://refugeehealthta.org/physical-mental-health/mental-health/adult-mental-health/traumatic-experiences-of-refugees/ Last accessed 16th July 2019.

Loss of trust adds to the experience of linguistic inadequacy in two ways. First of all, it contributes to a pervasive sense of impossibility and futility, of a future devoid of any potential for positive development. The world appears bereft of all those possibilities associated with trusting relations with others, which include sustaining, repairing, and revising projects, and relating to people in ways that open up new possibilities. With no prospect of such relations, the future lacks openness, spontaneity, the potential for meaningful and positive alternatives to one's current predicament - for growth (Ratcliffe, Ruddell, and Smith, 2014). With this, the more specific potential of language is also curtailed. It is not just that words currently fall short. Given that the future will not deviate in meaningful ways from the present, linguistic shortcomings are inescapable; there is no prospect of overcoming them or of opening up new communicative possibilities. In its most extreme form, loss of trust freeze-frames the linguistic predicament I have described; words are not just hollow; they are irrevocably hollow.

However, there is a further way in which loss of trust contributes to an experience of linguistic failure. In addition, to exacerbating the experience of meaning-loss, it undermines the conditions under which utterances are more usually produced, understood, and recognized as successful. In *How to do Things with Words*, J. L. Austin (1962) addresses how utterances can 'misfire', fail to have their intended effects. The experience of meaning-loss already described constitutes a sense of words somehow missing their targets, veering off course even as they are uttered.[12] In its most extreme form, this 'misfiring' can amount to a seemingly inescapable form of *silencing*: you can say whatever you like, but you will still be unable to say what you strive to say.[13] However, also important for current purposes is Austin's discussion of "illocutionary acts", where we do something by saying something. Examples include the likes of announcing, pronouncing, questioning, answering, advising, suggesting, ordering, promising, warning, and informing. Like all acts, these can be successfully or unsuccessfully performed: "unless a certain effect is achieved, the illocutionary act will not have been happily, successfully performed" (Austin, 1962, p.15). Various factors contribute

[12] See also Brison (2002) for application of themes in Austin's work to the topic of trauma. She makes the point that words can 'do' things, which include somehow altering traumatic memories: "*saying* something about the memory *does* something to it" (x-xi).

[13] See also Langton (1993) for discussion of something similar: a form of silencing that does not depend on actively preventing someone from saying certain things or punishing them for doing so.

to whether or not an illocutionary act is successful, and it is not just a matter of what the speaker does. Success also requires "uptake" on the part of others (Austin, 1962, p.116).[14]

We have seen that, where words seek to convey one context but remain, for the interpreter, anchored in another, there is lack of uptake. However, Austin's discussion of illocutionary acts also points to a further impediment. The sense of one's words being taken up by others depends not just on how one's own speech is experienced, but also on how their responses are interpreted. Consider the impact of a pervasive loss of trust on the extent to which one anticipates and experiences understanding on the part of others. Where there is distrust, one does not anticipate empathy, support, concern, or guidance but, rather, the likes of threat, condemnation, misunderstanding, derision, and indifference. This affects the experience of communication.

It is not uncommon for philosophers to assume that the practice of interpreting others depends principally on ascribing two classes of mental states to them, beliefs (which are informational) and desires (which are motivational).[15] However, when interpreting the behaviour and, more specifically the linguistic behaviour, especially in the context of interaction, Austin rightly observes that our utterances and hers do not take the form of bare statements of fact or expressions of desire. The task of understanding one another involves recognizing a vast array of subtly different illocutionary acts, such as appealing, encouraging, dismissing, inquiring, or challenging. Austin (1962, Lecture XII) classifies these into five broad types:

- verdictives: giving a verdict
- exercitives: exercising powers
- commissives: committing oneself to doing something
- behabitives: a more heterogeneous group that concern social behaviour (e.g. congratulating, apologizing, cursing)
- expositives: specifying how utterances fit into arguments (e.g. I argue, I concede, I assume)

Once this complexity is acknowledged, it becomes clearer how loss of trust can interfere with the sense of being understood by another person, and equally upon the

[14] Thanks to Nancy Potter (personal correspondence) for drawing my attention to Austin's relevance here and, in particular, to the importance of "uptake". For an interesting discussion of uptake in psychiatry, see her *The Virtue of Defiance and Psychiatric Engagement* (2016).
[15] See Ratcliffe (2007) for a detailed critique of this tendency.

anticipation of being understood. To anticipate and experience other people as taking up one's utterances in certain ways requires trust. Where trust is absent, a respondent's words and deeds will be taken to involve only certain kinds of illocutionary acts. The prospect of that person's sincerely promising, encouraging, advising out of concern, or questioning out of well-meaning curiosity does not arise; the interpersonal world is bereft of such possibilities. An experience of communicative failure or even futility may also be further exacerbated by an interlocutor's genuine failure to recognize the person's predicament, to recognize illocutionary acts such as pleading for understanding and respond accordingly. Hence, the *feeling of being understood* will be lacking and gestures that might be taken to signal understanding and concern will be experienced as indicating otherwise. As Shay (1994, p.181) remarks in his discussion of traumatized Vietnam veterans:

> The moral dimension of severe trauma, the betrayal of 'what's right', obliterates the capacity for trust. The customary meanings of words are exchanged for new ones; fair offers from opponents are scrutinized for traps; every smile conceals a dagger.

One inhabits a damaged world, which, in the absence of trust, no longer incorporates the prospect of rebuilding. And integral to this is a way of anticipating and experiencing other people that renders many kinds of illocutionary acts seemingly futile, destined from the outset to fail.

An understanding of first-person linguistic experience in trauma and emotional upheaval (where the latter is taken to be necessary but not sufficient for the former) therefore has the potential to inform clinical empathy, where 'empathy' is to be construed in a permissive way as *understanding experiences had by a particular individual*. In seeking to comprehend the relevant aspect of experience, we come to see that the first step in an empathic process will not be that of developing a positive understanding of what someone else experiences but, rather, recognizing the nature and extent of the potential gulf between one's own world and hers (Ratcliffe, 2015; 2018). What is disrupted is something ordinarily taken for granted as shared by interpreter and interpreted, in the guise of a world that 'we' inhabit and in which our differing experiences and thoughts arise. Hence, appreciating the phenomenology of language in trauma requires acknowledging how someone might be uprooted from a world that is more usually presupposed as 'ours'. Failures of empathy will occur when that person's experiences are interpreted against the backdrop of this world, when those experiences are actually symptomatic of its disturbance. When recognized as such,

these failures have the potential to exacerbate a sense of distrust, estrangement, and misunderstanding. Hence, in addition to being of philosophical interest, the task of better understanding how language can be experienced as inadequate to the realities of trauma has the potential to inform therapeutic practice.

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