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(Im)possibility of ethical encounters in places of separation: aesthetics as a quiet applied linguistics praxis

Abstract

What is the possibility of ethical encounters in places that are historically, spatially, and morally configured to avoid them? And what can applied linguistics do to create such a possibility? This study is located in a rural community in eastern Slovakia with a history of separation between Slovak and Roma ethnic groups and the systemic spatial, economic and linguistic marginalisation of the latter. This paper draws on relational ethics to foreground the perceiving subject's ethical re- sponsibility. I take up the scholarship on semiotic repertoires and exploit their performative power to affect the perceiving subject. Advocating for aesthetics as an applied linguistics research praxis, this article both documents and invites a sensory entanglement with others through a series of aesthetic invitations. I see such an embodied engagement as a way for applied linguistics to stage the ground for ethical encounters, even if never guarantee an outcome. I discuss what this research pathway might mean for doing applied linguistics research in social and educational settings with entrenched narratives about the other and how quiet applied linguis- tics – one which privileges sensory attending and epistemological indeterminacy – might be a form of activism that disturbs the realm of the impossible.

Keywords: semiotic repertoires; relational ethics; aesthetics; perceiving subject; Slovakia

1 Setting the scene

This study began as an exploration of communication practices in several rural localities in eastern Slovakia. It has ended up probing into the possibility of human connection in deeply divided communities. It asks what, if anything, applied lin- guistics research can do to create that possibility. I propose that a combined aesthetic and sociolinguistic approach to applied linguistics inquiry which demands *attention*

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through sensory attunement to people's communication practices rather than an intellectual argument about them, might be a step in this direction.

I pursue this pathway by centring on the subject's acts of perception through senses and approach it through an aesthetic lens in two ways. The first concerns aesthetics in doing research – one which highlights the sensory dimensions of the *researcher's* involvement, from fieldwork to analysis through to dissemination. The second advocates for a turn to the body and the senses in the practices of *reading* and *engaging with* applied linguistics research. I suggest that it is through aesthetic engagement that an ethical subject of the researcher and the reader might be inaugurated, creating an opening for ethical encounters in places of separation.

The region in which this project is located has had a history of social and spatial division between Slovakia's ethnic majority and its Roma minority. This paper considers encounters in rural communities where most of its ethnic Roma members live in conditions of poverty in segregated settlements, referred to as 'osada'. Typically, osadas fall under the jurisdiction of the main village but are often separated from its vital infrastructure (roads, water, sewage system). In 2020, 62 % of Roma children and young people from such communities were educated in segregated classrooms or schools and 87 % of Roma households in osadas were at the risk of poverty, compared to 11 % in the overall population (Markovič and Plachá 2020).

Historically, the country has had a complicated relationship with diversity, especially regarding its settled ethnic minorities. Its well-documented social policies have contributed to enduring negative perceptions, narratives and images of the ethnic and linguistic other (Kubátová and Laníček 2018; Panczová 2015; Šutaj 2012) and, in the case of the Roma ethnic minority, have had a direct link to symbolic erasure (e.g., before 1991 the Roma people were legally prohibited from officially claiming their ethnic identity in census questionnaires) and spatial segregation (post-war government edicts mandated Roma communities to settle outside of towns and villages; cf. Vašečka 2003).

The questions informing this paper are therefore located in the larger moral landscape of a society's (in)capacity to grant the highest claim to dignity to those whom it struggles to imagine as "us". Such capacity, often referred to as moral imagination, continues to be one of the most pertinent challenges and its lack one of the key sources of conflict and injustice in established as well as emerging democracies (Gobodo-Madikizela 2003; Lederach 2005). Slovakia, a Central European country of 5.5 million, an independent democratic nation since 1993 and a member of the European Union since 2004, is sadly no exception. Its love of justice, indeed its very concept of it (Baldwin 1963/2017), continues to be tested in day-to-day policies and practices affecting its most marginalised citizens. Examples from recent years include a state-sanctioned denial of access to judiciary justice to Roma victims of violence (Marec and Prúšová 2021), a "lukewarm attitude" towards inclusive

education disproportionately affecting young people from segregated Roma settlements (Kusá and Juščáková 2017: 309) or language education policies intended and designed as inclusive (Hapalová and Kriglerová 2013), yet often with a practical effect in the opposite direction: a systemic erasure of Roma communities' linguistic practices from schooling and public life, further deepening social disadvantage, widening the chasm in educational outcomes and exacerbating the already fragile inter-ethnic relations (Amnesty International 2014).

Setting the scene in this way does not sit comfortably in the mainstream narratives lamenting complex causes of "the Roma predicament", routinely citing "language gaps" as one of the major obstacles to "their" integration, academic success or poverty eradication. This paper does not deny the complexity but re-frames the starting position. I use conceptual tools of semiotic repertoires and relational ethics in an attempt to recover a concern with "our" predicament: in this case, the society as a whole coming to terms with its moral responsibility. I propose that a combined aesthetic and sociolinguistic approach to applied linguistics inquiry which primarily demands sensory attention to people's communication practices rather than an argument about them, might be a step towards this recovery. The purpose of this article is to explore what the beginnings of this form of engagement might look like in the context of applied linguistics inquiry with this social change agenda in mind.

2 Relational ethics

My understanding of relational ethics is broadly informed by the work of Emmanuel Levinas, a Lithuanian-born French philosopher, known for his reinterpretation of phenomenology to foreground ethics as "first philosophy". Instead of developing a theory of ethics, Levinas was concerned with describing the "event" of encountering another being (cf. Biesta 2016). His focus was not on the moral obligations of others in general, but on the *subject's* ethical responsibility to listen to the address of the Other[1] in a face-to-face encounter (Levinas 1972/2006). This responsibility is, according to Levinas (1985: 95), "the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity". The subject's particularity is therefore best understood not as a social, cultural or biological difference *from* the other, but as its irreplaceable responsibility *for* the Other. In other words, the subject is called into being through the address of the particular embodied being, the Other, in the direct face-to-face encounter. This call cannot be taken up by anyone else and, crucially, does not rely on reciprocity.

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1 I follow conventions among some translators of Levinas (cf. Biesta 2016) to use "Other" as the personal other (autrui) as distinguished from "other" referring to otherness in general (autre).

Instead, relational ethics is asymmetrical: it neither depends on what the Other does with their responsibility, nor can it make the Other responsible (Levinas 1998).

Such an orientation to ethics highlights responsibilities of the perceiving subject. It also disrupts assumptions that typically underlie societal polarisation in this and other contexts: although the option of not responding is always there, there is no moral justification for it if the Other is calling *me*, whatever I may think *their* responsibilities are. In this paper I propose that Levinasian ethics of the first-person singular extends to its plural version. It has political consequences for how a society begins to imagine and act on its *us*, while at the same time holding *me* uniquely accountable for *my* part in this collective moral imagining (cf. Alford 2004).

Two key implications follow from this ethical stance. First, responding to the ethical call means honouring the ineradicable difference of the Other while making a contact (Levinas 1972/2006). An encounter in which I already assume knowledge of or attempt to explain the Other from where I stand is, in Levinasian terms, an ethical failure (cf. Yancy 2004). The Other's irreducibility has been reduced to familiar terms. As Løgstrup (1997: 14) warns, "Not to let the other person emerge through words, deeds, and conduct, but to hinder this instead by our suspicion and by the picture we have formed of him or her as a result of our antipathy is a denial of life".

The related injunction, and at once its major social complication in the context of this study, is that one's ethical responsibility is enacted in the material immediacy of the face-to-face encounter (Levinas 1972/2006; Tallon 2009). But how does a society come to hear the ethical call when the actual face (or for that matter, voice or body) of the Other is persistently pushed to the margins of its public spaces and thus to the periphery of the sensible? What kind of discursive or imaginative assistance might enable its effective announcement (Irom 2019) in settings in which the perceiving subject systemically refuses to connect? It is these concerns that this paper approaches through sociolinguistics and aesthetics.

3 Semiotic repertoires and the perceiving subject

I turn to sociolinguistics with its focus on people's languaging practices as a site for relating to diverse others (Bagga-Gupta 2018; Deumert 2018) and, therefore, as a site where relational ethics in theory turns to relational ethics in practice. I mobilise the concept of semiotic repertoire as the totality of communication resources that people draw on to participate in social life with one another. Kusters et al.'s (2017) retheorisation from the original verbal repertoire (Gumperz 1964) was politically driven. The aim was to make visible the totality of multilingual and multimodal communicative resources of sign language users and thus foreground the politics of D/deaf language studies. Although this study's context differs significantly, my choice

of the construct follows a similar political objective, which I see as tightly intertwined with the ethical and aesthetic ones: To make a visible, and in this context radical, shift away from language as an object of analysis and judgement to language as lived life – socially, affectively, politically – with others and in a particular materially and historically constituted space. It is in this shift within the current sociolinguistic scholarship that I also see a potential opening for ethical encounters in settings that conspire against them.

Semiotic repertoires are understood as a dynamic interaction of individuals' life trajectories within and across their speech communities, their communal embodied participation in diverse social networks, and the resources of the material and ideological spaces in which people's meaning making is located (Blackledge and Creese 2017; Busch 2017; Canagarajah 2018; Kusters 2021; Pennycook and Otsuji 2015). The oft-cited definition of languaging referring to language users employing "whatever linguistic features are at their disposal with the intention of achieving their communicative aims" (Jørgensen 2008: 169) recognises that the heterogeneity, creativity, and open-endedness (e.g. Otheguy et al. 2015) of "whatever" is also constrained by institutional regimes, epistemic injustices, historical exclusions and political absences (Angouri and Humonen 2023; Kerfoot and Bello-Nonjengele 2023; Kramsch 2018; Oostendorp 2022; Stroud and Williams 2017).

The de-centring of the individual speaking subject marks a significant move in socio- and applied linguistics to recognise larger material and historical ecologies of individuals' languaging practices (Canagarajah 2021; Kramsch 2018; Krause 2022). This temporal-spatiolinguistic emphasis in the recent scholarship sheds light on how social stigma, discrimination and asymmetries of power are materially produced (Angouri and Humonen 2023). Such de-centring is meaningful in this study. It shifts the focus from a judgement on individuals for the language that they (do not) "possess" to an appreciation of semiotic resources that become available within existing spatial configurations, in themselves a product of particular histories.

At the same time, this temporal-spatiolinguistic conceptualisation allows for approaching language as "an illuminated horizon" (Levinas 1972/2006: 11), a space of proximity, in which the face of the Other announces itself and comes into the subject's presence. This study seeks to focus attention on the ethical responsibility of the one who is there to "receive the reflection" (Levinas 1972/2006: 14), that is, the *perceiving subject*, and grapple with what it means to receive ethically instead of reductively. In addition to interactional, phenomenological, and critical approaches through which semiotic repertoires have been analysed (cf. Busch 2021), this paper places the burden on the perceiving subject's – in this case, the researcher's and the reader's – *aesthetic* engagement with them. A discourse must be heard, a face on the horizon must be seen, the creativity and the suffering of the Other must be encountered, not merely (if at all) catalogued, judged or theorised.

4 Aesthetics as a 'quiet' applied linguistics praxis

Given current understandings in the scholarship on language ideologies (cf. Inoue 2003; Lo 2021; Rosa 2019; Snell 2018; Oostendorp 2022; Williams this volume), it is naïve to assume that the hearing and seeing can be simply disentangled from the grip of ideological filters that make us "know" straight away whose language counts, whose lives are worthy of attention or even who's responsible for the mess. Such certainties are abundant (not only) in the semiotic landscape of this research. Foregrounding aesthetics as an applied linguistics research praxis attempts to disrupt and deliberately bypass this "knowing" through an appeal to senses (cf. Einarsson 2017; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015; Kubanyiova 2020; Kubanyiova and Shetty 2024; Rai 2012).

The appeal to aesthetic perception as a way of knowing and attending to life not as a problem to be solved but as "a situation to be experienced and interacted with" (Lorde 1984: 248) has a long tradition in the scholarship of black women. The relational surrender to the intensity of experience is "a mode of recognition that does not itemize-commodify" but that instead attends to "unmeasured and unmeasurable" quality of "livingness" (McKittrick 2021:3). And "the quality of light by which we scrutinize" this livingness "has direct bearing upon the product which we live" (Lorde 1984: 248).

Approaching semiotic repertoires aesthetically takes seriously the warning that the "unnarratable other loses his face as a neighbour in narration" (Levinas 1998: 166). Analytical narration might enhance my scholarly argument, but it also removes me and those the work is meant to reach from the encounter. Crucially, approaching semiotic repertoires aesthetically is attending not to what they *mean* but to how the Other is encountering me through them, calling my subjectivity into question. This is a call to a radical openness to allowing the material traces of the Other to do their silent "affective work" (Kwon 2015: 480). Engaging with semiotic repertoires aesthetically, then, means refraining from categorising and evaluating their various layers and dimensions. Rather, I let their historicity, their spatiality, their ideological origins, their racialised nature, their material consequences and their supremely embodied nature in a person, in a community and in a physical space unravel in front of me, and do its work, so I, and the reader alongside me, can begin to hear the Other's call. This is not to equip myself or the reader with an argument, but to disarm us both (cf. Biesta 2022). We both are implicated. We both need to do "the work" (Levinas 1998).

4.1 The study

Although I have lived most of my adult life outside of Slovakia, I bring my background as an ethnic Slovak growing up, being educated, educating and researching there. I have maintained and continue to draw on my personal and professional networks in the country, the former rooted in western Slovakia, the latter predominantly in the eastern part. This article is primarily informed by a series of three ethnographic visits to a village

in eastern Slovakia over the course of eight months in 2019, followed by intense bouts of aesthetic engagement – with and without various others – with the field notes, audiorecordings and public discourse in the media and published research.

On the initial visit to the village school, I was accompanied by an established ethnic Roma academic with a prior research partnership with the school. The school management assisted with obtaining informed consent from staff members, students and their parents to observe school activities and audiorecord interactions in classes and during breaks. During the visits, I had conversations with teachers, groups of students and various community members in the main village hub and in the osada. I walked around the village and documented the locality's semiotic landscape through photographs, sound recordings and field notes. The original purpose of these visits was to develop a larger collaborative study of communication practices in the region. But the more I interacted with the potential collaborators, the deeper I soaked up the place's semiotic landscape and the longer I sat with my field notes and reflections, the blurrier the original purpose became. The noise of certainty hurtling at me from every corner of the data, including existing published research from the same context, about what "their" responsibility is and what "their" language is/ isn't/ should/ shouldn't/ must/ mustn't/ won't do became unbearable. I simply did not wish to add to it.

At the same time, a few particularly vivid images from my fieldwork encounters and the visceral acoustic counter-narrative I was hearing in the recordings of the children's interactions refused to release its grip on me. At the time, I did not understand the words. It turns out that the address of the Other does not depend on understanding. What follows documents my attempts to respond.

4.2 Aesthetics as a research engagement practice

Several people accompanied me in my subsequent listening to these recordings, most notably two local Romani-speaking ethnic Roma professionals and a Romani linguist and teacher. I developed a working relationship with them through direct encounters in the field and through recommendations in my existing networks of relevant third sector organisations. The first was a Teaching Assistant (TA), an official role designated to assist children in their reception year of the primary school (Grade Zero), as they transitioned from using their home language (Romani) to the language of instruction and the country's official language (Slovak). She had direct knowledge of the children and of the activities captured in the data of this study and assisted with the recording of interactional data during the breaks which she supervised. She is a speaker of the standard and regional varieties of Slovak and Romani, resided in the main village (as opposed to the osada where most of the children implicated in this study lived), reported not using Romani in her home and not being familiar with some of the local communication practices captured in the children's interactional

data during the breaks. The second was a bilingual Roma community worker (CW), a speaker of the same regional variety of Romani but with no direct knowledge of the research participants. I met with her regularly to listen to anonymised audio-recordings and made detailed notes of our conversations containing her interpretations of the recorded material as well as explanations of her own communication practices and life experiences. For ethical reasons, I am unable to acknowledge either of my interlocutors by names.

Concurrently with this process, I also began attending Romani language classes, primarily geared towards a standardised variety, but with an opportunity to consult the tutor, a Romani linguist Martina Horňáková, about specific regional variations as well as those linguistic features captured in my data. She was the third person who listened to the audiorecorded data. She was also the only one with the material resources to produce, with the support of the notes from the previous two Romani speakers of the local varieties, written transcriptions for me to adapt for use as an aesthetic invitation in this article. This multi-layered, labour-intensive and unfinished listening process reflects the well-known but little acknowledged complexity of local linguistic practices (cf. Kubaník 2021; Payne 2017), the systemic suppression of these practices from the public domain and the stigma associated with them. But it also speaks to the notion of aesthetics (in this case, attentive listening) as an applied linguistics praxis in studies whose purpose is animated by a desire to generate openings for ethical encounters.

It was particularly during the sessions with CW that I became aware of the power of sensory perception as a research engagement practice that differs from traditional analytical expectations of applied linguistics, but which nevertheless benefits from its theorising. Initial meetings were marked by our own struggles to build our relationship: my clumsy invitation to "share with me whatever you can hear" as if my assurance could at a stroke rid the "whatever" of enduring societal licence to judgement; and CW's effort to guard against it by correcting, smoothing out, apologising for, even erasing language ("I changed this into a proper Romani"). Our sessions gradually evolved into a sensory engagement with the voices in the recordings that demanded our full attention. We were puzzled, astounded, and often broke into fits of laughter or fell into quiet anticipation as we attuned to the children's cadence, urgency and fluidity in navigating their interactions with peers and more powerful others, observing language rules, making them and subverting them as they went. Many of these engagements released our own personal recollections (mine from the fieldwork, CW's from her past and present experience in similar contexts).

In the end, there were written up fragments of what was discerned but remained epistemologically fragile and gaps filled with crosses where lived life was acutely sensed but could not be grasped. In short, there was no neatly ordered transcript ready for linguistic analysis. Instead there was silence. It had nothing to do with the absence of the transcript and everything to do with the presence of the Other. And although its traces reverberated across all my "data", as an applied linguist, I felt

utterly silenced in this presence. How does one begin to name that which evades naming? How does one share moments of proximity, which question me but carry no possibility of generalisation (cf. Rapport 2019)? And might the impossibility never-theless become an opening for others' ethical encounters in places of separation?

4.3 Aesthetic invitations as a dissemination practice

To attempt to respond to these questions, I do not offer findings but a series of aesthetic invitations. These resituate applied linguistics concerns with the indexical, symbolic and analytical and place it on a perceptual (i.e. aesthetic) plane. Aspects of this approach broadly align with debates on sensory, multimodal, and embodied approaches to doing and reporting ethnographic research (Elliott and Culhane 2017; Pink 2015). Arts feature in these debates for a good reason, whether in applied linguistics specifically (cf. Ahlgren 2021; Blackledge and Creese 2021) or anthropology more generally (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015). The term "aesthetic" is in this paper not intended to assign an artistic value to the texts I have assembled to construct each invitation. Instead, "aesthetic" signals an invited (and hoped for) sensory engagement with it.

As the previous discussion on relational ethics and on the research process makes obvious, I cannot remove myself from these invitations. I have drawn on, experimented with and tried out with different audiences and in different modes a range of semiotic resources available to me to attempt to do justice to the traces of the Other as I began to attune to them. The texts in these pages make use of varied sources of data (field notes, recordings, loose paraphrases from published research and even direct quotes from existing research knowledge) and experiment with different juxtapositions, layouts, font types (e.g. to distinguish different voices), narrative styles, visuals and (sometimes withheld) translations (for further notes, see Appendix 1) to achieve my communicative purpose: to attempt to place the reader in particular moments of proximity and epistemological disorientation. Yes, it is me who experienced and was interrupted in those moments. But while the writing attests to those ruptures, it does so quietly, inviting the reader's accompaniment in this imaginative affective attunement rather than imposing a conclusion.

There is no guarantee of encounters through these invitations. My own ethical failures, inadequate communication repertoires for the task and, most of all, the unpredictability of the Other's call, all heighten the risk that the openings will remain closed for readers to forge their own ethical relations. Yet a research stance that invites a quiet pause and attention to the material traces of people's communication practices rather than their analysis might be a useful starting point for applied linguistics inquiry in this setting.

What follows, then, are the four aesthetic invitations to walk with me around the village, hear the ideological density of this semiotic landscape, sit with me in the classroom and then try to imagine and immerse yourself in the soundscape of the

school children's lived life. The aesthetic invitations do not promise understandings or clarity of conclusions. Yet the experience of disorientation might offer traces of the Other that stop you in your tracks and demand your own response.

Invitation 1: Walking in the place

The study is located in a rural community in eastern Slovakia. Although its location and history may be unique, it is what it shares with other places in this region that matters for this study. It is a relatively large village in the context of rural municipalities in this region with a central hub comprising *a local municipality office   a school   a church,   a stately manor house with echoes to the region's Austrian, Hungarian and German past.   The streets of detached family houses,   many newly painted   with neat front gardens   full of   roses and greenery. Obvious signs of money being spent.   On roofs   on cars   on new roads   on conserving the glories of the past.   Not on the building of   the special school   whose rusty bars guard the ground-   the first-   and the second-floor windows   but do nothing to protect the building's crumbling render   leaving sprawling mouldy maps   the colour and texture of   long abandoned potato harvest.   The black and white ATTENTION poster in one of the ground floor windows REQUESTS parents   DO NOT DISTURB WITH YOUR VISITS! On an adjacent street   in front of a freshly painted municipality office building   colourful flyers in glass display boxes announce EU funded projects from its   STRUCTURAL FUNDS TO SUPPORT MARGINALISED ROMA COMMUNITIES. Turn around   and the warm ochre walls of the main village school I'm visiting   peer through   the treetops of a   pleasant woodland park.*

And then there's the   osada

        Not in sight, of course not.

           You reach it   as the smooth asphalt

                under your feet

                  turns to   gravel

                    turns to   dust.

                    A gentle stream

                      announcing

                        the borderland.

A mother vigorously scrubbing a rug on the bank of the stream in the spring sunshine. Almost in the same tempo as the Romani song emanating from a small cassette player balancing on the rock beside the stream. Three small kids run around her squealing with delight, one of them attempting to push a half-filled bucket that feels twice her weight. They see me. We all stop in our tracks. I say hello. She smiles. They whisper, 'Gadži.' In front of me, the land of the colour of long forgotten harvests. Obvious signs of money being stopped. Sometimes halfway through a roof building job. But mostly before sturdy floor surfaces could even be conceived. Only a few clickety, crunching, soundless steps from the village hub in distance. Could well be centuries apart in sight.

            One village.

        One Us.   *One Them.*

Invitation 2: "How can they live like that?"

TA: I would never live here. When I first came here, I didn't sleep at night. I always had [the osada] in front of me. How can they live like that? That was my first impression. How can they live like that in God's name. That's what I tell myself: These are young parents, my peers. If I could do it, why not them? T: *They don't trust us. Their mums did not want us to teach them, they were like, they won't understand you. And we are coping somehow. Lenka didn't speak. Not at all. And now, she is beginning to communicate beautifully. At the beginning, they knew nothing and now they are beginning to participate. Even the children from the settlement.* A (to the teacher): YOU SHOULD SPEAK TO THEM IN ROMANI. T: *It's not my job to teach them Romani, it's my job to teach them Slovak.* TA: I use very little Romani because I want the children to adapt. Because when the teacher is on her own with them, I want them to be able to communicate with her. A: A TEACHER IS A TEACHER. AN ASSISTANT IS AN ASSISTANT. EACH SHOULD DO WHAT IS REQUIRED OF THEM. AR: Apart from the fact that the children are not proficient in the language of the majority, they are often unable to use their own mother tongue. Instead, they communicate by using a local Romani dialect, which is less complex and often contaminated with local dialects of the ethnic majority. A: (to pupils in Grade 8, without other members of staff present): YOU SHOULD TEACH HIM OUR SONGS, NOT GADŽO SONG. TA: If he doesn't learn Slovak, well, what can become of him? HT: MY MAIN CONCERN? HOW DO WE MOTIVATE THEM TO GET TO GRADE 9? A: (with HT present): GOOD MORNING, KIDDIES. T: *They understand nothing, these kids.* AR: Because of the crucial interconnectedness of language development and cognitive development, deficits in the former will inevitably lead to deficits in the latter. A: IF THEY [THE TEACHERS] EXERTED MORE EFFORT TO COOPERATE WITH FAMILIES, THE SITUATION WOULD BE BETTER. THERE ARE STEPS THAT THEY CAN TAKE, BUT THEY DON'T. THE SITUATION CAN BE IMPROVED BY THE INITIATIVE FROM THE PARENTS, EHM, FROM THE TEACHERS TO COOPERATE WITH THE PARENTS. HT: IF THEY [THE PARENTS] COLLABORATED WITH THE SCHOOL, THE SITUATION WOULD BE BETTER. AR: The issues are caused by the following facts: non-stimulating and often pathological home environment, perception of school as a repressive institution, lack of personal responsibility; prejudice, and also possibly other circumstances, e.g. the Roma child is in mixed classes perceived as unpopular. These can lead to a decrease in con- centration and weakening of the resolve in eradicating the language handicap. CW: There's no motivation from the majority. I teach the kids to be polite. But whatever they do, they will always just be gypsies, dirty thieves, never to be trusted. The majority knows nothing about the lives of Roma. They do not want to see the goodness. AR: Significant issues with articulating Slovak phonemes are caused

primarily by the Romani mother tongue. The Roma pupils' linguistic profile demonstrates limited complexity and range of linguistic features caused by high reliance on spoken colloquial language. The Roma child is unable to use the language of instruction (Slovak) or even their mother tongue to the extent required, because the vocabulary in Romani is insufficient and their linguistic code is limited. Roma groups that persistently maintain their Romani language in their general intra-group communication are those in the marginalised communities. It is clear that the Roma children who are least successful in the Slovak education system are those who come from these marginalized and socially disadvantaged communities. Yet, the reliance on the Romani language does not contribute to the strengthening of some sort of a self-determined and effective Romani identity.

Invitation 3: Drawn to the Other

The gravel crunches under our feet as we hurry down the gentle slope to a small outbuilding a few yards away from the main school. "Next year, we'll go to the big school!", the TA tells me about last year's kids' excitement and apprehension as they were nearing the end of their "Year Zero." This year, they joined others in the main building. It used to be a mixed school, though the numbers of non-Roma pupils dwindle year on year. This year's fresh cohort of six-year-olds, all Roma, will gain their compulsory nine years of schooling before reaching the final Grade 9, before completing their primary education. "If all goes well", they will take an option to carry on to Grade 9 regardless. If it doesn't, they will remain "unqualified" for further education or for a decent job. Unqualified for life. Earlier in the week when I call the head teacher to arrange a meeting with eight-graders from last year, I am told there's no one to meet. None of them "decided" to continue.

In the corridor, we squeeze past a couple of kids from another Year Zero class, smiling widely at us, heading to their tiny lockers on a hasty mission to swap their unlaced shoes for school slippers before running back to their classroom. We wave them off as we turn to our classroom. The TA opens the door and waits for me to enter first. Studious silence greets us. Most pupils are sat in pairs, in rows of double desks, with a white sheet of A4 paper on each half and coloured pencils in the middle.

I'm swiftly slotted into the scene, invited to sit at the front as the least disruptive option, the T completely unfazed by our late arrival or my presence. I merge into what has become a semi-circle of three adults, enveloping the entire class of eleven pupils in a kind of protective embrace. The middle-aged teacher on my right exudes years of experience as she stands in front of the blackboard, my chair barely a meter

away from her. The TA takes up a position that reminds me of a side referee, supervising from an imaginary side line. A few pupils raise their heads momentarily, to silently acknowledge the commotion of our arrival. But most simply continue, absorbed in what I now see is their task of drawing a house. A neatly hand-drawn image adorns the blackboard. The T uses coloured chalk to trace bit by bit, as her ringing voice announces each part of the house in Slovak and then lets them draw on their sheet of paper as she walks along the two short aisles to check their progress. "Teraz si nakreslíme hnedé steny." [Now we'll draw the brown walls]. "A teraz žlté slnko." [And now the yellow sun].

Some have filled their sheets already; perfect little houses with rainbow windows, chimneys, grass, the lot. Most look busy drawing and the teacher walks to the desk at the back whose young occupants appear confused. My eyes travel in their direction to witness some sort of negotiation.

"Elena, how do you say window?," the T turns to the referee.

"I've already told them," Elena announces for her and I suspect for my benefit, but instantly turns to the far corner of the room where the pupil is sitting: "E blaka."

No more is said.

The job is done.

The teacher moves on.

Calibration
"Deaf people engaging in international mobilities align in communication by what they call 'calibrating.' In this process, mobile deaf people quickly adopt new semiotic resources by engaging in rapid, immersive and informal (sign) language learning, acquiring (bits of) new sign languages, mouthing, written words, and fingerspelling alphabets, and including them in their practice of calibrating." (Moriarty and Kusters 2021, p. 1)

But what if they don't.
So what if they don't.
Me na **rušav.** *Me na* **rušav**[2]

I'm sat directly facing a boy in the first row of desks, his A4 sheet placed in front of him, a touch too high for him to reach without strain. His body pays no homage to us, the latecomers, or anyone else. For a fraction of a second, a good few moments after I have settled into my chair, he gently lifts his gaze from his drawing project. There's no sign of newness or surprise at meeting my face right in front of his. The gaze, resting on me fleetingly, more by accident than intent, returns to the drawing sheet. Pale grey pencil marks dotted around the white surface multiply before my eyes. New linear ones begin to crop up through soft, rhythmic, barely landing caresses of

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2 "I'm not angry. I'm not angry."

the brown pencil which the wrist is commanding from the air. Now a pause. The pencil lands. The determined little fist tightens its grip. A grand tour commences. The pencil presses down the paper, never losing touch with its drawing surface as it glides along an invisible circular shape, envisaged much larger than the confines of the white sheet allow. The emerging line travels smoothly beyond the margins of the paper. On to the pale oak desk, to trace the circle's intended size. And back onto the paper again, to bring its shape to completion before gliding on, without rest, to start a new shape. The pencil's movement stops. The fingers release their grip and the freed palm hovers over the drawing as the pencil drops. The picture freezes. As if the drawing project suddenly stopped making sense and some other impulse is awaited. "And now the red chimney", the teacher's voice re-emerges through my own absorption. It is only now that I realise the limits of my imagination. I search in vain for her careful and phased instructions in this boundary-less masterpiece, now frozen in time below the tiny hand still hovering in the air, pencil-less.

"What colour are you after?"

"Come on, what colour are you after?"

"What's in the picture? Well, what is it?"

"S'oda hin?"

I watch as the alternating sound of the teacher's and the teacher assistant's questions land, causing no disturbance to the still image. And as the teacher's silhouette begins to retreat from the frame, interrupting the dramatic pause, the boy's entire Face suddenly appears in front of mine, meeting Me for the very first time. With his intent furrowed gaze, he scans all three of us and lets out a soft but not to be debated:

"Pelo."

The Counterword

"When speech is released into a state of suspension between the audible and the inaudible, the heard and the unheard of, it releases additional energy – at least for a moment. IN that moment, the force of a single cry is enough to turn deathly emptiness into hope, or hope into deathly emptiness… [The actor] risks the bareness of existence without calculating the effect, not showing off her virtuosity, not following a particular method… [The counterword is] a call to beauty that appears suddenly, a moment of extreme vulnerability and porosity. [But it] needs counterparts, a face vis-à-vis. It needs the Other, the others. [It needs] shared corporeal presence" (Valerie 2016, pp. 83-4.)

But what if there isn't.
So what if there isn't.
Me na **rušav.** *Me na* **rušav**[2]

The teacher looks at Elena: "Is it what I think it is?" She didn't hear and asks the boy again. He offers the same answer, in the same manner of utter indisputability. No baggage that comes with repetition.

"Pelo."

The teacher assistant bursts out laughing: "Yes, it is." She turns to me, pink ornaments rising in her cheeks: "Not sure how to explain it in an appropriate manner. It's a man's genitals." The three of us laugh. He doesn't. He simply carries on with his drawing project, oblivious to our conversation, the furrowed brow unsoftened. Fully recovered from all hilarity, the teacher announces she's used to it.

No more is said.

The job is done.

The teacher moves on. Leaving the two of us with the task of suppressing our giggles.

Invitation 4: "Hej, imar čit, more! Phenava tumenge vareso."[3]

((Towards the end of the lunch break, T and TA temporarily leave the children on their own.))

PP: Hej, Mari, xxxxxxxxxx **čak** ola love xxxxxxxxx e daj khere xxx la da kameha pre choľi **čač**es xxxxxx xxx xxxxxavri xxx avela xxxxxxxxxx – Me mišľinďom xxx – Me na bi džavavas xxx – Kaha? – Me na bi džavavas. Džanes? – Man bi džava xxxxxxxxxxx tu mukhľa, geľa het – kadarig sar oda stromos o baro xxx me avav kade. So tuke? xxxxxx na aves? – Hej xxxxx mi džal! Hej xxx sigeder me somas urdži. – ta phen! – pre kada – Me som koda xxxxxxxxx Me koda xxxxxxxx Me džav xxx Hej, t´avela xxxxxxxx sigeder abo leskri daj avela sigeder, t´avela sigeder andre, ta tu xxxxxxxx he ma, he les, ta savore hin odoj xxx dikhava xxxxxx **č**hivela tele botaska chudena late – Ale koja botaska oda la**č**hi tumende? – Hi! ♫ Haluški, haluški taven ♫ – Hej tu! Tu na avel **č**i andre škola xxxxxx xxx – xxxxxxx e daj o muj het xxxx – avka me khejre xxx te sigeder avla xxxxxxxxxxxx – Hej! Oda xxx Ko tut upre thovadžal? – Ko? – Ko tut upre thovadžal? Na, tu xxxxxxx – xxxxxxx upre thovadžal, me imar xxxx oda imar pa**č**a mange xxxxx hej oda, oda xxxxxxx – **č**a**č**es, **č**a**č**es, **č**a**č**es – Oda hin xxx – Hi! …mare, – A me na **ruš**av, me na **ruš**av. – Kavka xxx prindžares xxx – Me na **ruš**av, me na **ruš**av. xxx Me tuke phenďom, hoj xxx – xxx, man upre! – So? xxxxxxxxxx ma maren tumen, ma maren, ma maren tumen! – Sar? – So? xxx hej, hej, hej, me na **ruš**av. Andro muj xxxxxxxxx kavka murš – kavka nane svali xxx – **Č**i**č**a, **č**i**č**a – Tu pametines pre koda, koda, koda xxxxxxxxxx Hej, imar **č**it, more! Phenava tumenge vareso. – xxxxxxx baba

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3 "Hey, shut up already, man! I'll tell you something!"

xxxxxx – So? Kaj? – Mange me kavka, me kavka narodeniny mange – Me kavka, šun, šun, me kavka Dado, a de mange sto evra. Xxxxxx koja xxxxxxx mange cin! Varekana del man dvasto koda, koda xxx mange cinel. Xxxxxxxxx Me tut dikhľom tire dadeha salas andro motoris. – Hi! Xxxxxxxxxxxx dži rači khere xxxxxxxxxx tajsa džal andro foros, koda mange cinel, so labol, so ča kavka – xxxxxxxxxxx keci mol? – Keci? – Na šunav. So? – More! Prastaha. Xxxxxxxxxxx fackinel či prastaha – Dikhaha, či prastaha. O facki džal, čhaje! – xxxxxxxxx ola manuša xxxxxxxxx – čhaje! – Paľis tuke phenava, paľis tuke. He lačhes xxxx – xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx tuke horčica, leske salama xxx – Čit!

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((T and TA return to the classroom. There's still time before the next class begins. T and TA talk to one of the pupils who was absent yesterday because he went to a passport office with his family so they can visit their relatives abroad.))

ORIGINAL	TRANSLATION
TA: A kedy idete do Anglicka. (3) No vieš, [rozprávaj so mnou].	TA: And when are you going to England. (3) You know it, [talk to me].
T: [Šak kedy] idete?=	T: [So when] are you going?=
TA: =Kedy idete? (2)	TA: =When are you going? (2)

P2: xxx

T: No kedy? (2) Pred vianocami? (1) A kedy? (1) Zajtra?

TA: Ta kedy?

P: **Karačoňa.**

T: No to je na Via[noce] (1), no však sa pýtam, nie?

TA: [No tak vieš, to je na Vianoce, nie?]

P: Na Vianoce

T: A kto ide? Ty?

P2: Ešte má [aj sestru.]

T: [A kto ide]? (2) Ty ideš? (1) Nerozumejú nič tie deti.

P2: xxx

T: Well, when? (2) Before Christmas? (1) And when? (1) Tomorrow?

TA: So when?

P: **Karačoňa.**

T: Well that's at Christ[mas] (1) that's what I'm asking, aren't I?

TA: [So you know it, it's at Christmas, no?]

P: At Christmas.

T: And who's going? You?

P2: He's got [a sister too].

T: [And who's going]? (2) You're going? (1) They understand nothing, these kids.

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5 Leaving the scene

In her reflection in the aftermath of horrific acts of violence near her university, Bucholtz (2016: 3) talks about her refusal to write about the details, "fearing the performative power of language to summon bogeymen." Texts are not simply words but "visceral sensory realities". I must admit that I, too, could not bring myself to

reproduce much of the discourse surrounding this project's context for the same fear. Yet I have written this article in the belief that the performative power of language can also flow in the opposite direction: to summon the perceiving subject – me, you – into the Other's presence.

Busch's (2017, 2021) phenomenological approach to semiotic repertoires calls for attending to people's bodily experience of language as part of theorizing. The approach I have advocated here, that of aesthetics as an applied linguistics praxis, explores the potential for an ethical encounter that springs from the perceiving subject's affective attunement to the semiotic repertoires of the Other. Rather than a dimension of the studied phenomenon, then, I take up aesthetics as the research process itself.

I have pursued two pathways to aesthetics. One documents the researcher's, i.e. my own, sensory attending. The other invites the reader to do the same through accompaniment rather than analysis. This, I admit, is unsettling in a research domain that relies for its knowledge building on naming, categorising and evaluating. The knowing that I wish to generate through this paper, however, is of an unsettling rather than cumulative character. It is meant to disturb the process of signification and prompt the subject to forge attachments at the level of sensory perception. As argued in Kubanyiova and Creese (this volume), it is from this kind of encounter that ethical relations might be inaugurated and possibilities for a shared political future imagined and acted upon.

Applied linguistics has a long history of engaged research informed by social change agendas focusing on linguistically minoritised, racialised and marginalised groups (Avineri and Martinez 2021; Hogan-Brun and O'Rourke 2019). Yet ideas about what this transformation should entail are never neutral or uncontested (De Fina et al. 2023). Thinking with Levinas and approaching research aesthetically is a call for attuning to the complex, unpredictable, irreducible, elusive and unknowable. The silence that ensues, however, is not the silence of powerlessness but of quiet activism (Kazubowski-Houston 2018).

To search for openings for ethical encounters in a setting that is historically, spatially, structurally and morally configured to avoid them may mean having to create them through inquiry. An applied linguistics paper cannot produce responsible subjects, let alone bring about justice. What it can do is "keep open the possibility for [the reader] to really respond" (Biesta 2003: 67), knowing that "possibility is neither forever nor instant" (Lorde 1984: 249). This means that the researcher, with their ideas, experiences, conclusions or recommendations, must eventually leave the scene to make space for the reader. I fully sympathise with Oostendorp (2022) who writes about her discomfort to use the data on racialised bodies simply to make a theoretical point. Recalling her chilling experience of reading data snippets containing racial abuse, she joins the field's advocacy for embodied forms of writing about discrimination as a way of charting different futures. Her plea for "a return of

the body into academic writing" (p. 83) resonates strongly. And I join in with a plea to also bring the body into academic reading. It is through sensing what is being asked of me the reader, rather than sense-making of the I, that an ethical encounter might be forged.

Appendix 1: Aesthetic invitations – the reader's notes

General

All names in the Invitations are pseudonyms. The bold font is reserved for Romani utterances across all Invitations regardless of whether they have been translated for the benefit of non-Romani speaking readers or left in the original form. I have also kept the same font (underlined) for excerpts from published research, whether attributed (Invitation 3) or unattributed (Invitation 2). Decisions about what, when or whether to translate have been guided by my overarching communicative purpose to place the reader in moments of proximity and epistemological vulnerability.

Invitation 2

Different fonts represent different voices. There is no intended additional meaning in the font choice. The original language of all utterances presented in this Invitation was Slovak.

TA: Roma teacher assistant; T: Slovak teacher; A: Roma academic; CW: Roma community worker; AR: loose reconstructions of conclusions from published academic research by Slovak and Roma academics; HT: Slovak head teacher.

Invitation 3

As an integral part of this invitation, attributed published research is put into a conversation with the field notes and the multiple voices from the fieldwork to create intended communicative effect.

Invitation 4

The text in bold is not an accurate transcript (see the earlier discussion on aesthetics as a research engagement practice). Its layout aims to recreate the sensory quality of children's unsupervised conversation during the break. The translation of this extract is not necessary in order to engage with it aesthetically. Yet, I also recognise that I myself had access to these translations (not to mention the acoustic quality of the actual voices portrayed here) which have no doubt enhanced my aesthetic engagement. This is why I share the loose translation combined with field notes in Appendix 2.

    The following conventions have been used in this invitation:

bold font	Romani utterances
PP	several pupils participating in group interactions
–	used in PP segment to indicate change of speaker
xxx	clearly audible speech but beyond the transcriber's reach
♪♫	singing
T	teacher
TA	teaching assistant
P	pupil
P2	another pupil (i.e. not the one being addressed)
(.)	pause, less than a second
(4)	pause in seconds
(( ))	field notes, transcriber's comments
=	no gap between turns
You're going?	stress

    In addition to the three language and community experts who listened to the data with me, I similarly engaged with a poet and artist, Sophie Herxheimer, who has responded through her own arts practice. The two paintings offered here come from this collaboration (published in Herxheimer et al. 2023, a book of poems and paintings which can be read as an extension to this article) and have been chosen because they capture the experience this Invitation is attempting to generate.

Appendix 2: Invitation 4 – loose translation/ interpretation

PP: Hey, Mari xxxxxx only the money xxx your mum at home xxx when you want to make your mum angry xxx she'll come xxxxx – I thought xxx I wouldn't go xxx –Who with? – I wouldn't go. You know? – I wouldn't go xxxx he/she left you there – where the big tree is xxx I'm going there. What's wrong with you? Xxxx You're not going? Hey! Let (him/her) go! – Hey xxx I would have gone earlier, but I wasn't dressed yet – so tell! – about that – I am that xxx I that xxx I am going xxx. Hey, if he/she comes xxx earlier, or his mum comes earlier, if he comes in earlier, then you xxx me too, him too, so everyone is here xxx I'll see xxxxxx he'll take off his trainer, let's see who can take off their trainers more quickly, but the trainer, does it fit you? One is bigger than the other – Yes!-♪ Dumplings, dumplings, they're cooking dumplings ♪ – Hey, you! You're not going to school! Xxx xxx Mum will (smack) you on your face/mouth xxx – I (can't go) home like this xxx if she comes earlier xxx Hey! That one xxx Who told on me? – Who? – Who told on me? No, you xxxxxxx – xxxxx told on me, xxx you can bet on it xxx hey, that one, that one xxxx – really, really, really – It's xxx – Yes! ...(Let's) fight – And I'm not angry, I'm not angry. – Like this xxx do you know this xxx. I'm not angry, I'm not angry – Don't pretend! you are angry! it shows (on your face) – I told you, don't piss me off! What? Xxxx don't fight, don't fight, don't fight! – How? What? Xxx Hey, hey, hey, I'm not angry. (I'll slap you) on your face xxxx look I'm a big man like this – you don't have any muscles – ((he's demonstrating how he'd fight the others, how he'd attack them from this side; lots of sounds and probably gestures to demonstrate – he's telling them a story. She interrupts)) – Be quiet, be quiet – you remember how, how, how xxxxxx Hey, shut up already, man! I'll tell you something! – xxxxx my nan xxx – What? Where? = I (got/did) this on my birthday. I, this, listen, listen, I asked dad like this, dad, give me 100 euros xxx. Sometimes he'll give me

200 like that, he'll buy me xxx that. One day I want to ask for 1,000 euros. ((and now they're talking about who gets how much money on their birthday; he has many different cars and someone bought a bigger car)) xxxx I saw you with your dad, you were in the car. – Yes! Xxxx ((He now mocks Mari's dad and imitates him how he was leaning out of the car)), 'like this'!; ((Now they're talking about whose parents will buy what)) – my parents are going to get me Samsung 9 ((they discuss which phone is better, who has the best phone at home; I'd buy such and such and I'd buy that one)) – Stop bragging! My parents will buy me the kind of phone where you can see which buses are coming. We'll see whose phone will be better – mine or yours. When my mum goes to town,

she'll buy me a phone like that. The one that lights up like that. You know how much it is? How much? 100 euro. I can't hear. Don't pretend. What? Man! Who did you speak to like that? Man! Who did she speak to like that? You'll run! I'll see how you'll run, slaps are coming your way! You'll run for your dear life! – We'll see, we'll see. You know. – No, I won't run. – Girl, the slaps are coming your way! ((He dropped his sandwich on the floor. They sound alarmed, after a slight tense pause, they giggle)) Girl! – ((Mari whispers)) I'll tell you afterwards. I'll tell you later. Serves him right, he's been naughty. ((He picked up the sandwich and started eating)) – Yes, it's good. I'll give you the mustard, and to him the salami. ((T and TA's voices approaching)) – Quiet!

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