

Applied Linguistics Redux: A Derridean Exploration of Alzheimer Lifestories

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Advocating a position of self-critique, whereby we revisit our old research sites to dis-assemble our prior thinking in relation to our current cognitions, this paper offers, among other things, a critical re-visitation and Derridean interpretation of one of my previous long-term, ethnographic endeavours: my extended work with the memories and lifestories of patients suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Gathered over the span of three and a half years, this body of research was devoted to countering several psycholinguistic strains characterizing Alzheimer speech. Revisiting that work given my current cognitions raises, among other things, Derridean questions about 'originals'. If it seemed that the scholarship first produced was the 'original', is the (present) paper produced as a result of critical re-visitation an original of a different, receding (or progressing) kind? Uncovering ways in which I, in retrospect, interpret Alzheimer's discourse from a Derridean perspective raises critical issues relating to our evolving cognitions and knowledge-making practices. In other words, what is the status of claims we make in the course of our research and how do these impact disciplinary ideologies? The paper also raises quasi-philosophical questions about the nature of 'texts', 'originals' and 'presences', and 'truths'.

Deconstructing philosophy is a matter of *working through the structured genealogy of its concepts in the most scrupulous fashion, from within but at the same time from a certain external perspective which it cannot name or describe, and of determining what this history may have concealed or forbidden*, emerging as history from this repression in which it has some stake. At this point, through this movement, both faithful and violent, back and forth between the inside and outside...there results a certain textual activity and product which gives great pleasure. (Derrida, *Positions*, 1972, as cited in Sturrock 1979: 179; my emphasis)

The 'metaphysics of presence', which these texts can be shown simultaneously to affirm and to undermine, is the only metaphysics we know and underlies all our thinking; but it can be shown to give rise to paradoxes that challenge its coherence and consistency and therefore challenge the possibility of determining or defining being as presence. (Culler 1979: 161)

What concealed and dark recesses can we uncover when we return to critically re-think our earlier bodies of research? What new ‘meanings’ might such an endeavour foster and what might this say about our discipline’s knowledge-making and texting practices? Is it possible to work through ‘structured geneologies’ ‘from within’ while retaining a ‘certain external perspective’ (à la Derrida above) and what might this look like? Unwieldy and amorphous as each of these questions is, they form the backdrop against which to understand the current partial Derridean discussion on researching and texting tensions in some strains of ethnographically-oriented applied linguistics scholarship. While self-reflexivity in such work is now par for the course (Cook 2005; Holliday 2005; Morgan 2004; Pennycook 2005; Ramanathan 2005a), and while the field has already seen researchers re-visiting their earlier work (Norton 2001; Labov 1997), its political and ethical dimensions from a Derridean point of view have thus far tended to remain in the wings.¹ This is somewhat surprising in light of the fact that Derrida’s work stems from the insights of Saussure on the arbitrariness of the link between signifier and signified. Derrida’s essays are about language, its endless play, its slipperiness, and the impossibility of finding meanings that are not innately provisional simply because meaning itself is produced by language which goes slip-sliding away, no matter how one casts the net.

While this paper cannot by any means do justice to Derrida’s complex views on language, there are strains of this philosopher’s thought that allow us to raise and consider provocative questions about some of our researching practices. I will specifically focus on Derridean notions of *originals*, *logocentricism*, *traces*, and *différance* and ways in which they allow us to uncover tensions and contradictions in our knowledge-making practices (Cook 2005; Pennycook 2001). I attempt here to highlight the importance of critiquing and dis-assembling one’s own researching practices so as to create texturized, parallel narratives that will prompt us to deliberate on our researching, thinking, languaging, and meaning-making processes. Attempting to retrospectively articulate some of the local constraints around our previous and current thinking—however artificial and contrived the endeavour might be—allows us to begin to speak and write about how these constraints and our languaging of them territorialize our thinking (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) thus sealing them with ‘boundaries’.² Drawing on our present cognitions to revisit old research sites, then, becomes a way of opening up old textual margins and making them more porous, and perhaps revealing what Derrida calls ‘an anxiety of language’ (Derrida 1978: 3).³ (The past/present, old/new binarisms inherent in such revisitations need to be problematized in Derridean terms as well.)

I am going to ground my discussion in some of my early research, namely my work on the discourse of patients suffering from Alzheimer’s disease (Ramanathan 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1997), and ways

in which issues around memories, personal lifehistories, and narrativizing inform identity constructions. Revisiting my 'old', 'prior' texts allows me to open up and interrogate issues around my previous meaning-making practices (discussed presently) so as to reveal 'presences,' and 'traces' (Derrida 1981; Sturrock 1979; Norris 1987) that trail all writing (and speech). The following questions inform the discussion of this paper:

- 1 In what ways does revisiting our old research sites allow us to see the 'borders' around our previous meaning-making enterprises and what does this say about the synthetic nature of our knowledge-making/researching enterprise?
- 2 In what ways does Derridean thought prod us to acknowledge our collective 'logocentrism', and what are some implications of such thinking for our discipline's researching and texting endeavours?

This discussion is an extension of my previous thinking, where, in the contexts of teacher-education, I have argued for potential teachers to be more meta-aware of their engagements with various aspects of the discipline (Ramanathan 2002), and where more recently I have engaged in unravelling, in partial Derridean fashion, some of my own knowledge-making practices (especially as they come through translations, Ramanathan 2005b). As I have explained elsewhere (Ramanathan 2005b), such cross-questioning of our researching-texting practices is not intended to take away from the first, 'original' work but to run parallel to our initial endeavours. This kind of work, then, does not so much discredit researching frameworks as much as point openly to their limits, thereby prodding an acknowledgement and discussion of (the Derridean idea of) not just our disciplinary obsession with 'presences' (more on this presently) but of what is 'absent' in our current researching practices as well, since all presences are marked by silences and absences.⁴

DERRIDA IN CRITICAL REVISITATIONS: 'ORIGINALS', LOGOCENTRICISM, TRACES, DIFFÉRANCE

How does Derrida inform our thinking in Applied Linguistics? He shows how completely we, even we linguists, take language for granted; he shows us how we use metaphors without even recognizing that they are metaphors (indeed, even those that ground this argument); he suggests that language and thought emerge from (Saussurean notions) of difference and have no solid ground; he points to the violence involved not only in the ethnographic enterprise of people such as Levi-Strauss, who are unaware of their appropriation of the other, but in all social existence. He tells us that all Western thought from Plato to Saussure is logocentric, that is, it is premised on 'presence', unable to contemplate that there may be nothing at the bottom, only traces in the air as words come

and go (for fuller discussions, see Culler 1979, 2003). Derrida's views are extreme stands. While I cannot, and do not, agree with all this, he drives me to revisit my old research sites and sift for myself the 'sand' on which those earlier 'edifices' (for want of better metaphors) were constructed.

Derrida maintains that all western existence is guilty of 'logocentrism' or the 'metaphysics of presence', a preoccupation with the various aspects of that which is 'present', *being there, being that which we think we see, hear, understand, interpret, represent, re-scribe, counter*. This concern with the 'present' orients us towards ordering our worlds and their 'meanings' in ways that run the risk of becoming foundational (a tendency that has been critiqued by post-structuralist qualitative applied linguists (cf. Pennycook 2004; Norton 2000; Pavlenko 2001; Kramsch 2000, 2003a; Menard-Warwick 2002, 2004; Holliday 2002).⁵ We must, as Derrida would have it, 'avoid having the indispensable critique of a certain naïve relationship to the signified or the referent, to sense or meaning, remain fixed in a suspension that is a pure and simple suppression, of meaning or reference' (Derrida 1981: 74).⁶ Uncovering our researching-texting tracks through revisitations allows us to interrogate our propensities towards 'naïve relationships' and to dislocate whatever meanings we once made with and in our 'original' works into another 'framework that tends to impose a different set of discursive relations and a different construction of reality' (Lewis 2004: 258; I am, at this point, using the term 'original' to refer to works we first produce, an issue that I hope to problematize by way of Derrida throughout the paper). 'Meanings' that we once made of texts and 'presences', then, from this point of view, are at once rendered porous, unstable, and changeable. The subject of 'researcher' and 'researched' (problematized in several recent publications including Ramanathan 1997, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Carspecken 1996; Kincheloe 2004; Silverman 2005; Holliday 2002), then, no longer seems unitary, and our attempts to 'fix' meanings stand out for what they are. It seemed 'true' then. But we have moved on, and our present understandings (of 'truths', 'presences') are susceptible to change. *Provisionality* is the key word that emerges in the process.

What we uncover through revisitations and reinterpretations of our 'old' work, then, is likely to be different. The articulation of this difference depends on an open acknowledgement of a 'past/present' binarism (a point Derrida would exhort us to move beyond, suggesting an infinity of 'presents') and of the fact that it is possible to revisit 'old' projects to discern what in our enunciative and discursive patterns held sway the first time the text was produced and what has changed with the revisitation.⁷ At first glance this may seem like a banal argument: of course our thinking changes with time, and of course we make sense of our 'past'

work differently in retrospect. But it is not just this truism that I am concerned with. I am specifically interested in exploring how revisitations throw up Derridean notions of (textual) 'originals' and 'logocentricism'. In other words, in what ways do alternate re-conceptualizations of our previous work complicate our notions of 'meanings' (especially ideas of fixity of and around them) and 'knowledges' in our discipline and the various ways in which we (re)produce texts? If our 'original' texts emerge from our preoccupation with 'presences' (what we see, hear, counter, re-represent, challenge, re-scribe), then surely those same concerns apply the second time around when the 'researcher' revisits the old projects, where once again she finds herself being compelled by presences? Only this time around, the 'presences' have changed. There are no identifiable pasts because the scenes she was once writing about have passed; there are no 'real' texts either because she now reads her 'original' texts differently (I am assuming here that a 'text' emerges in the reading/interpretation of it and does not really exist otherwise). What she has recourse to, then, are only *traces*, shadows, and echoes of scenes and texts once past, which as Derrida says emerge only through *différance*, a term coined by Derrida from the French verb 'différer' which means both, *to differ* and *to defer*, a complication that captures Derrida's preoccupation of meaning being both provisional (endlessly deferred), and arising from differences (in the Saussurian sense). The following quotes partially capture the complexities in and between these notions:

If the trace, arche-phenomenon of 'memory,' which must be thought before the opposition of nature and culture, animality and humanity, etc., belongs to the very movement of signification, then signification is a priori written, whether inscribed or not, in one form or another, in a 'sensible' and 'spatial' element that is called 'exterior' The outside, 'spatial' and 'objective' exteriority which we believe we know as the most familiar thing in the world, as familiarity itself, would not appear without the *grammè*, without difference as temporalization. (Derrida in Culler 2003: 114–15)

Différer . . . is to temporize, to take recourse, consciously or unconsciously, in the temporal and temporizing mediation of a detour that suspends the accomplishment or fulfillment of a 'desire' or 'will' and equally effects this suspension in a mode that annuls or tempers its own effect. And as we will see . . . this temporalization is also temporalization and spacing, the becoming-time of space and the becoming-space of time, the 'originary constitution of time and space', as metaphysics or transcendental phenomenology would say, to use the language that here is criticized and displaced. The other sense of *différer* is the more common and identifiable one: to be not identical, to be other,

discernible, etc. (Derrida 1976, reprinted in Culler 2003: 145; emphasis in the original)

Traces, then, emerge only through *difference* and *deferance*; they are what signs differ/defer from and are forever under erasure because of ceaseless differences and displacements, and thus always exceed our linguistic and textual grasps. Our attempts at languaging them or about them—indeed the present attempt to do so—fixes and bestows on them marks of entrenchments. Indeed, as Derrida would have it, the general act of languaging is the act of fixing it, since language proceeds from emptiness and only and always points away from itself (see Ramanathan 2005b for a fuller discussion of this point). Our attempt to fix meaning he attributes to our anxiety for a centre, certitude, a desire for mastery.

In terms of the present endeavour, then, revisiting one's earlier work casts into relief the complex interplay between *logocentrism*, *presences*, *traces*, *différance*. These notions refract and cast shadows, and make us linguists pause and pay heed to how their ceaseless swirls open up ways for us to articulate the leaps in thinking/cognitions that scholars make in their individual researching journeys. Such an exercise at once destabilizes our research past and sets in motion a process that pries apart the hold that old narratives have on our thinking as we attempt to make sense of old projects by our current, altered, and nuanced understandings, a process that is at once reassuring and unsettling (the former because some of our overall questions have not changed, and the latter because the process underscores the impossibility of conceptual closures and the reduction of worlds to ultimate meanings/'truths') (Norris 1982).⁸

MY RESEARCH ON THE DIALOGIC CONSTRUCTIONS OF MEMORIES AND LIFESTORIES OF PATIENTS SUFFERING FROM ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

At the very outset, as I return to the transcripts of my earlier work, I recognize Derrida's comments on the ethnographic enterprise as violent appropriation of the other, however pure the ethnographer's intention and however attached she may be to the people in her research. Levi-Strauss experienced guilt and sadness when he saw himself as the mediator introducing the violence inherent in 'civilization' and 'writing' into the world of the Nambikwara tribe. Derrida takes issue with this and says that 'writing' (by which he means more than just graphic conventions) was always a part of social existence; that codes of ranking, naming, kinship and other systematized constraints are the 'arche-writing' of the culture, its economy of differences (Norris 1982: 8–29). No type of social existence is 'unwritten' in that sense. With the relief offered by that thought I turn to the period when the research was done and to the person that I (think) I was then.

My doctoral research

Because revisitation and reinterpretation necessitates an understanding of what the 'original' work was about (Derrida reminds us to always question 'origins'), I will in this section first engage in the contrived effort of summarizing some of my work on the lifestories and memories of 'patients' suffering from Alzheimer's disease before attempting to place it in a Derridean light.⁹

Assuming a critical gerontological position, I was concerned in my doctoral dissertation with countering several psycholinguistic metanarratives that characterized the deteriorating speech and memory functions of Alzheimer patients. Specifically I was writing against scholarship that viewed human memories in purely mentalistic, cognitive terms, that characterized Alzheimer speech as being 'meaningless' and 'incoherent', and that insisted on 'diagnosing' the 'language dysfunction' of these patients in the form of experiments. The overall aim of my dissertation was to represent Alzheimer speech humanistically and to offer a set of counternarratives to the generally positivistic understandings of memories and language (dis)fluency; it stressed, among other things, the value of interpreting Alzheimer speech not as deficient, lacking, or meaningless, but as 'normal' speech (as speech that is context bound and that varies across time, audiences, and physical environments; see Ramanathan 1995a,b,c, 1997; see Goodwin 2003 for work on patients with aphasia). Towards this end, I assumed a methodology and approach that was mixed. Based on ethnographically oriented materials gathered over three and a half years, and on an in-depth analysis of their lifestories (following among other discourse models Gee's (1990) notions of 'lines' and 'stanzas' for parsing lifestories), my project attempted to understand and represent their and my language function in relation to the numerous things in our joint 'presences': the senior day care centers I volunteered in and where some of these patients were, their families that I got to know over time, their lifehistories that I was able to hear several times across diverse contexts, and my own changing role and language use in the various spaces. Interpreting Alzheimer speech in ways that captured their 'present' speech in the rich contexts in which they occurred and doing in-depth analyses of their discourse became a way of writing against a thick strain of psycholinguistically oriented research which typically 'assessed' Alzheimer speech based on the patients' 'performance' in tests. In such tests, the person had to tell the difference between a potato and tomato, for instance, as a way of indicating whether they still 'retained' a sense of 'semantic boundaries', and did not consider a host of other contextual features to which I believed attention should be drawn: that memories and remembering are dialogical productions that are co-produced, that the immediate surroundings and day-care centers of these patients and the class-based availability or lack of facilities have a direct impact on their willingness to remember, that Alzheimer

'patients' were more likely to produce 'coherent' extended speech if they were engaged in meaningful activities, that the repetition in their speech when understood in terms of their overall lifehistories made complete sense, and that it was up to us—volunteers, caregivers, researchers—to see the connections and bridges in memories that 'patients' are able to make by getting to know them well in a variety of contexts and across time.

It is against this conceptual background that I locate my revisitation to two of the 'patients'—Tina and Ellie—that I had followed and got to know over three years. Tina lived in an upper-middle-class neighbourhood and operated in a rich, stimulating home and senior center. In my chapters devoted to her, I attempted, among other things, to understand some reasons for the obvious variations in her language fluency (she was clearly more 'coherent' and able to engage in more extensive and 'meaningful' talk with some audiences and in some contexts than in others). I had chosen to parse her (indeed all Alzheimer) narratives into 'lines' and 'stanzas' (Gee 1990), since 'lines', I had argued, captured the prosody of the speech and the 'stanzas' provided a way of discerning how lines clustered together, thereby affording one a sense of the speaker's overall coherence (see Ramanathan 1997 for a detailed discussion). I had argued that one reason why Tina was not able to engage in extended narratives with her husband was because of his extensive repair turns in which he both interrupted her talk and then recast her memories for her. The following are representative samples of interactions between Tina and her husband:

N:	What's been happening at CAPS (the day-care center) lately?	1
T:	Oh not much, I uh we did we sort of did, [...]	2
N:	<i>What's happening with Francis? Is she still bothering you?</i>	3
T:	Ya she did, she took away my my... she's horrible,	4
N:	<i>is she still taking away your stuff? She's always taking away your things, I wonder if she took away your coat, remember you'd lost your coat at the center?</i>	7
T:	ya and and ah she tore she tore my paper/ I ah I was	8
N:	<i>What paper? were y'all drawing?</i>	9
T:	no no we we were using sticks (crayons?) and the paper ah was in,	10
N:	<i>What's her problem? I spoke to C (the manager of CAPS) about her and...</i>	11

(Ramanathan 1997: 77)

N:	do you recall how you joined the Red Cross right after college wasn't it?	59
T:	ya ya I was I ah I wanted to go, I always wanted to go and be part of the Red Cross. and so I I joined the Red Cross.	60 61 62
N:	<i>you enjoyed it? You know they almost did not let you join remember Tina how hard it was to get in?</i>	63 64
T:	Well ah I do, they thought ah ah they thought I ah I wouldn't ah ah [...] I think they thought I was just all for the uniform.	65 66
N:	<i>no that might have been part of it, they were also concerned, that you'd gone to an all girl's school, that you'd been raised by your mother and your two other sisters, your father died when you were very very young, so you'd never lived with anybody but women, and you'd gone to school an all girls' school.</i>	67 68 69 70 71 72
T:	that's right	73 74

(Ramanathan 1997: 80)

In Ramanathan (1997), I maintained that because of their extensive and conjoined past—a marriage of 35 years or so—and because of his perception of her 'failing memory', Nick, Tina's husband, in both of the above instances (and many others) recasts Tina's memories and to some extent, inadvertently, hinders her efforts at recalling key events. Because Tina and I did not have such an extensive past/history, she was able to narrate to me quite easily (partially evident in the stanza parsing), as in the following representative example when Tina recounts her father's death:

V:	how old were you?	
T:	ah [...] I'd say seven or so, and ah [...] when daddy died I didn't believe it, didn't believe it was real, that he died and ah [...].	44
	and ah I said I wanted to go to, the funeral, I insisted and pretty soon my mother gave in, and ah but she was right, because we got to the funeral, an ah [...] ah [...] ah [...] ah [...].	45
V:	what happened at the funeral?	46
T:	ah she said ah, she didn't want me to go to the funeral,	

and I insisted and ah she,
 until then ah she knew I was upset,
 and she didn't want to make too much of it and ah she,
 [...]

V: what happened then? 47

T: and so [...] ah
 when they had an open casket sometimes,
 they have a closed casket,
 they had an open casket for daddy.

and ah [...] when I saw him, 48
 I ah ah got very upset and said,
 "not my daddy, he's not my daddy,"
 'cause he was you know,
 he was so cold in the casket.

(Ramanathan 1997: 56)

Ellie, the second patient, seemed to operate in contexts vastly different from Tina. She spent most of her days in a low-income day-care center in downtown Los Angeles, lived in a poor, federally funded housing project (for a detailed ethnographic account of her background and living conditions, see Ramanathan 1997). I first met and got to know Ellie when she had just been diagnosed as being in the 'mild-to-moderate' stages of the disease, and by the end of the three years her condition had progressed to the more 'severe' stages. Because a lot of my time in this day-care center was devoted to being around her, I had been able to record her lifestories (with permission from her family) in a variety of contexts and 'presences' across the three years. In my chapter devoted to tracing various aspects of Ellie's lifestories, I was countering a strong psycholinguistic idea that characterized Alzheimer speech as being disfluent, devoid of meaning, and of repetition as being a discourse feature that contributed to overall 'incoherence'. Based on an in-depth schematic discourse analysis of her lifestories recorded across this three-year span and on thick, ethnographic descriptions of the contexts she operated in, my chapter was devoted to showing how Ellie had still retained her overall meaning-making schemas even in the 'severe' stages of her condition, and that the repetition that so marked her discourse was 'bound' chunks of talk of the kind that also characterizes the talk of all of us who are 'normal', since all of us have frozen episodes and memories in our lifestories. The following narrative interaction between Ellie and me, recorded when she was in the 'mild' stages of her condition, has 'explanatory statements' that are echoed in varying forms three and half years later when her condition has worsened to the 'severe' stage.

V: what's your boyfriend like?
 E: Which one?
 V: oh, how many do you have?
 E: [laughs]
 V: maybe that's the question I need to ask,

E: well it depends on what day,
 one of them has Saturday off,
 and the other has Wednesday off,
 I told them I'd go with both,
 he says "both of us?"
 I say "*yes, I'm not interested in one.*" [laughs].

Ah, one called me a bigamist,
 and the other said I was man crazy,
 I say "I don't think so/other wise I would be married otherwise."

I said "*you could ask me to go to bed with you,*
but ask somebody else,
 I'm not the type."

and if they were vulgar,
 "*go away ask somebody else/I don't go for*
that stuff,"
 and they say "what do you think, you are better than the rest?"
 I says "I don't/I'm just worried about me *I don't*
wanna end up like that,"
 They thought I was kinda snooty,
 I says "not really."

(Ramanathan 1997: 107-108)

In my chapter on how repetition in Alzheimer narratives were not 'incoherent' but pointed to underlying sense-making schemas despite the ravages of the disease, I showed how certain phrases (such as those italicized above)—the repeated, frozen, bound nature of them—emerged in varying forms across the three-year span, and how they became a fluid crux by which Ellie laminates a host of other tensions, including those around men, dating, her childhood, and marriages. Figures 1 and 2 are intended to show how the repetition in Ellie's speech, especially those that were recorded when she was in the 'severe' stages of the disease, harks back to her earlier sense-making schemas. Figure 1 captures some of the key events in her life and the larger explanatory themes by which her sense of her past held together, while Figure 2 lays out in columns some of Ellie's speech captured in the early stages of her condition, and some later.

Figure 1 highlights the key explanatory statements by which Ellie makes sense of her lifeworld, all of which connects to themes around 'distance' that dominate her lifeworld (being apart from her sister, separation from her parents, marriages breaking up, keeping a distance from men, not committing to anyone; for a detailed analysis of her overall schemas across the three-year span see chapter 6 of Ramanathan 1997); the two columns in Figure 2 partially demonstrate how this notion of distance is still evident despite her deteriorated condition three years later, a point among others that I used to counter a psycholinguistic notion that Alzheimer speech is 'meaningless' and devoid of content (in the later stages).

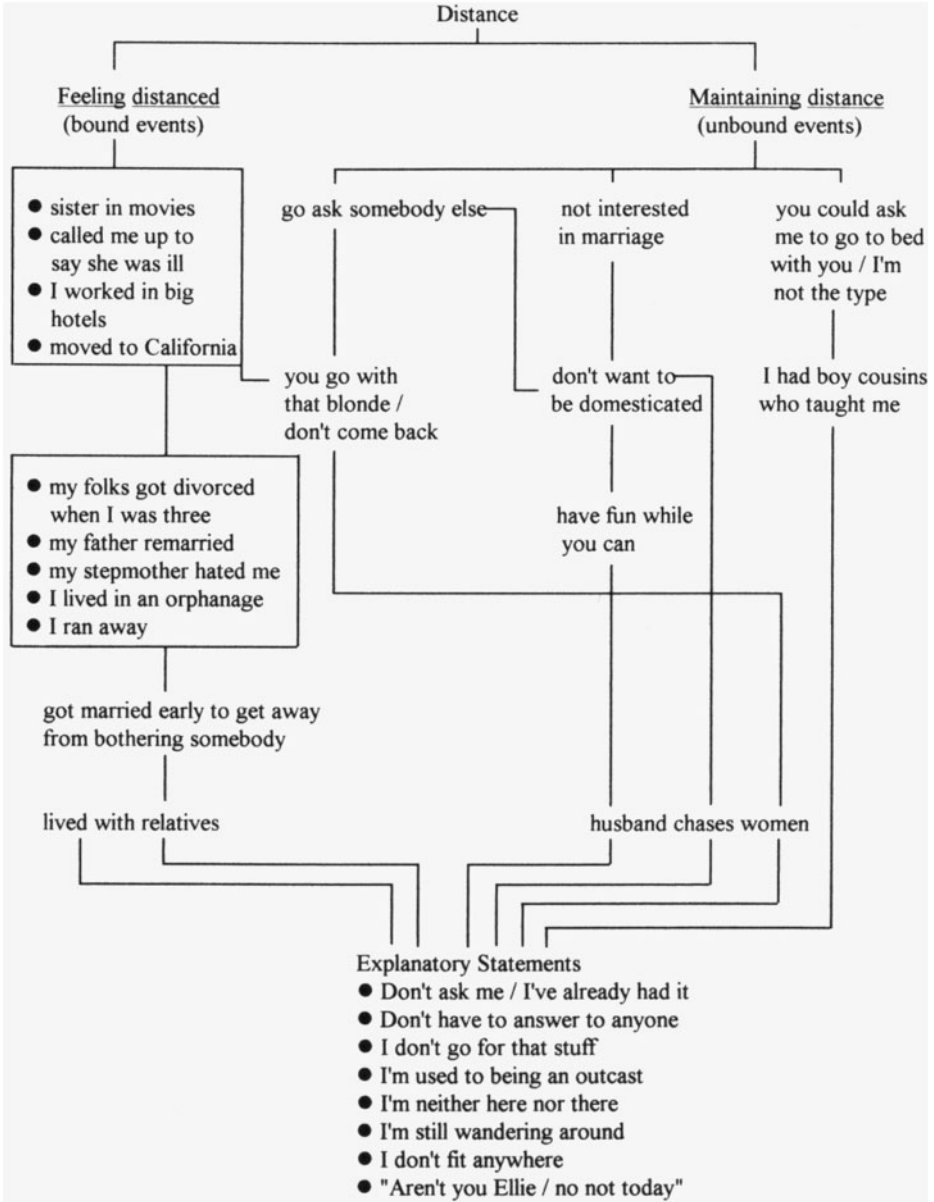


Figure 1: A partial schematic map of Ellie's life story
 Source: Ramanathan (1997: 110)

<p>Excerpts from Ellie's life history (when she was in the mild stages of the disease): overall themes of distance</p> <p><u>Her move to California</u> <i>My sister was in the movies for 21 years and when they called me up and said she was dying, and I had to hurry up here, she died within two days after I got here, but she was the only relative I had left, so I didn't like it too much, because she was in the movies, and I worked in big hotels in Chicago, [...] so we didn't see each other too much.</i></p> <p><u>Her childhood</u> <i>I was 3 years old, when they got divorced, so I went to an orphanage, stayed there for a while, couple years. [...] then my father got remarried, and my stepmother took one look at me and she could kill me, first thing I talked to she hated me, so I stayed out of her way, I ran away when I was thirteen,</i></p> <p><u>Her marriage:</u> <i>Tall and slim, [her husband]... always in uniform, ladies went wild over him. I was married twice, [...] he had 3-4 wives all at the same time as me. [...] so anybody asks me to get married, "Oh go ask somebody else/don't ask me I've already had it." [...] Don't have to answer to anyone,</i></p> <p>(Ramanathan 1997: 104-106)</p>	<p>Excerpts of conversations with Ellie (recorded in later stages of her ailment; still evidence of persistent themes of distance)</p> <p><u>Her move to California and her childhood</u> <i>V: tell me about yourself Ellie how did you come to California? E: sometimes, V: how did you come? have you always been here? E: well, my mother and father don't live together anymore, so I just take it as it comes along. V: ya E: I carry on by myself.</i></p> <p><u>Her marriage:</u> <i>V: you have a lot of friends here Ellie E: ya not too much, V: quite a few people coming up to see how you are doing and how you are feeling, E: oh I think they come to ask me about my husband, they don't care about me</i></p> <p>ME (male elderly) to E: <i>ME: did you get married in between since I last saw you? E: Oh, no, no, no, no, I'm not looking for trouble.</i></p> <p>(Ramanathan 1997: 112-113)</p>
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Figure 2: Excerpts from Ellie's life history and excerpts of conversations with Ellie

Revisiting this work: A Derridean interpretation

Revisiting this work for the present paper has been both reassuring and destabilizing in several ways. A reassuring aspect is that I still agree with my overall orientation to the project, namely that it is important to counter psycholinguistic interpretations of ('failing') memories, and 'incoherent' speech. First, my thinking at the time of my 'original' texts was governed by several local 'presences' and issues that promoted psycholinguistically oriented approaches to Alzheimer's discourse: not only where they were stressed as 'givens' in the classes on aging and gerontology that I took, but were heavily underscored by the psycholinguists in my department, and others with whom I had worked. My self-reflexive, critical-gerontological, sociolinguistic approach which countered the basic tenets of their scholarship, needless to say, did not sit well. In fact, the incongruities between the psycholinguistic viewpoints of Alzheimer discourse and the viewpoints I had established through personal observation and close engagements with

'patients' and their families were so intense that my dissertation committee refused to go ahead with my qualifying exam because they found my approach to the topic too humanistic and not experimental enough. This event led me to stop doing this research, and I began to invent myself in ESL. I bring this up now because these local events, like the psycholinguistic scholarship I was countering, impacted parts of my thinking, and prompted me to seal borders around it.¹⁰ The process of revisiting and reinterpreting this work for the purposes of this paper allows me to uncover how the borders around this work were locally circumscribed partially by my countering psycholinguistic scholarship, and partially by the enormous ideological rift between my more humanistic approach to understanding memories and lifestories and the more prevalent experimental approach favoured by my dissertation committee. While what happened in my case is an extreme example, the larger point about our locally circumscribed thinking serving as borders and the general relevance of opening up our prior research to 'redress' it, as it were, is central here.

Revisiting this work also set me thinking about the research itself and about what I would do differently now. Given the Derridean line of thinking that I am assuming here, I would probably now counter the charge of 'meaninglessness' in Alzheimer speech in Derridean terms. The perceived 'incoherence' of Alzheimer speech by experimental psycholinguists is partially because of a tendency to interpret language literally (that if Ellie and Tina's speech does not map onto a reality 'out there,' then it is not 'coherent'). Derrida reminds us of the Saussurean point about language always pointing away from its signifieds, not to them; meaning emerges partly from differentiation (a point built into his *différance*; more on this presently). 'Pit' means what it does because it is not 'pot'—meaning is possible through difference, phonetic, and semantic difference. 'Pit' is pit because it is not a well, not a ditch, not a trench (semantic difference); 'pit' is 'pit' because the phoneme [i] differentiates it from 'pot'. Meaning, thus, is built on the quicksand of difference, and to believe that speech is somehow free of this 'removal' from the source that is 'present' is to be deluded. While this might be a more extreme position to take in applied linguistics, the general point about complicating 'meanings' (Hause 2005)—is not to be missed. My interpretation of Tina's inability to narrate to Nick or of Nick frequently 'repairing' her turns was predicated on this assumption of determinacy: meaning for me at the time was trapped in the actual words that both Tina and Nick used, and that I used to describe their speech.¹¹

Experimentally-inclined linguistics—and some strains of sociologically motivated applied linguistics—has not problematized 'meaning' adequately and has tended to interpret it as if it is stable, definable, substantive, and inherent in words that can be captured (a point countered by much

poststructuralist thought; see Cameron 2005, Kramersch 1998, Kramersch and Lam 1999, Menard-Warwick 2004, *pave* Norton 2000; Pavlenko 2001).¹² Derrida's thought reminds us that in Western metaphysics the speaking subject has been privileged as the source of meaning, the origin, the locus of presence. Speech, somehow, has been seen as more authentic, more true, as proceeding directly from consciousness and therefore more present to itself. In fact, the speaking subject is caught on the shifting sands of language which, according to Saussure and Derrida, has only differences and no positive terms. Thus, from this point of view, the Alzheimer patient's silences and broken speech are only degrees removed from what is in any case a vanishing spiral of smoke or vapour, with trace leading to trace.

Derridean analysis shakes the ground when it resists the methodological course of the kind I have described as prevalent in my student days. At the bottom, according to Derrida, is nothingness, the basis upon which all consciousness takes on meaning and speech becomes possible. Having read the recorded transcripts given above of the patients, Derrida's remarks seem to be especially poignant. Here is Derrida (1978) on the emergence of speech in his essay *Force and Signification*:¹³

[The anguish of the writer]... is not an empirical modification of the state of the writer, but is the responsibility of *angustia*: the necessarily restricted passageway of speech against which all meanings push each other, preventing each other's emergence. Preventing, but calling upon each other, provoking each other too, unforeseeably and as if despite oneself, in a kind of autonomous overassemblage of meanings. (Derrida 1978: 9)

This description applies as well to the recorded transcripts I have supplied as to the process undergone by those we call 'creative writers', or by critics or by academic scholars, indeed, by all who use language. My Alzheimer transcripts read differently in the light of such remarks. Derrida's description of an emptiness out of which speech and meaning emerge struggling, fighting to be heard, applies strikingly to Tina and Ellie's situations.¹⁴ The gaps in the recorded transcript, the 'Ahhs...' (the groping for words, the difficulties that Tina has in recalling, features that psycholinguistic research views as characteristic of 'failing memory') that get repeated can be seen to point to that absence over which an 'overassemblage' of words appear out of which the speaker has to choose some, experiencing anguish in the process. I am aware that Derrida was not discussing memory failure (the distinguishing characteristic of Alzheimer patients), but what he says makes one look at gaps, silences, presences, sequences, and coherence afresh, since sequencing, coherence, and logic, as Derrida reminds us, are interpretations (Derrida 1978). A re-reading of the conversation between

Tina and Nick whose interruptions we have noted may yield a sense of how deeply given we are to logical sequencing:

N:	do you recall how you joined the Red Cross right after college wasn't it?	59
T:	ya ya I was I ah I wanted to go, I always wanted to go and be part of the Red Cross.	60 61
	and so I I joined the Red Cross.	62
N:	<i>you enjoyed it? You know they almost did not let you join</i>	63
	<i>remember Tina how hard it was to get in?</i>	64
T:	Well ah I do, they thought ah ah they thought I ah I wouldn't ah ah [...] I think they thought I was just all for the uniform.	65 66
N:	<i>no that might have been part of it, they were also concerned, that you'd gone to an all girl's school, that you'd been raised by your mother and your two other sisters, your father died when you were very very young,</i>	67 68 69 70 71
	<i>so you'd never lived with anybody but women, and you'd gone to school an all girls' school.</i>	72 73
T:	that's right	74

(Ramanathan 1997: 80)

What we get from Tina is that she always wanted to join the Red Cross and for reasons more serious than just the uniform ('they thought I was just all for the uniform'). Her utterances, as we can see, are, grammatical. What Nick adds is sequenced information which fleshes out Tina's response (lines 6–8, 12–18), thus rendering Tina's recalling fuller, more meaningful, and 'coherent'. What would Derrida say here? Is it that Tina has forgotten the words, cannot call up language, or that she cannot decide which to select from the 'overassemblage' in her mind? Or is it that our thoughts (and the language we use to encase them) are traces that always resist pinning down? When memory begins to fail, what traces are left of all those 'thoughts' that are themselves 'traces'? Derrida (1978) says:

The trace is the erasure of selfhood, of ones' own presence, and is constituted by the threat or anguish of its irremediable disappearance, of the disappearance of its disappearance. An unerasable trace is not a trace, it is a full presence, an immobile and incorruptible substance. (Derrida 1978: 230)

That unerasable trace is the logos, or God, or center which haunts Western metaphysics, which undergirds all our use of language, never countenancing

the possibility of emptiness. Logocentrism, the desire for a center that explains our ‘presences’ is characteristic of Western thought (this is Derrida’s critique of what he sees as a vain desire to master anxiety, Derrida 1978). Nick’s explanation of Tina’s memories regarding the Red Cross seems to proceed from this desire for a center that explains and orders our worlds. This, according to Derrida, also explains our tendencies to not only act, think, and behave as we have grasped ‘the meaning’ but that that grasped meaning excludes other possibilities for the space of that moment. I am deliberately using *space* and *time* in terms of each other (à la Derrida) to point to his notion of ‘*différance*’ (which it can be recalled has both notions encoded in the term). By using the neologism ‘*différance*’, which in French comes from the infinitive ‘*differer*’ meaning both *to differ (in space)* and *to defer (in time)*, Derrida suggests simultaneously the shifting sand on which meaning or identity is based (a word means what it does by virtue of being different from related words), and to the fact that that meaning never reaches closure. Through the play of his neologism on (Saussurean) difference and deferral at one and the same moment, Derrida suggests the importance of understanding the unfixed nature of language. This seems to me to be highly relevant to my purpose here of underlining the risk of foundational assumptions. To illustrate the instability of meaning, I now take a brief excerpt, Ellie’s transcript recorded at the more severe stage of her condition (see Figure 2):

- V: tell me about yourself Ellie
How did you come to California?
E: sometimes,
V: how did you come? Have you always
been here?
E: well, *my mother and father don’t live together anymore*,
So I just take it as it comes along.
V: ya
E: *I carry on by myself.*

If one looks at the first two sentences, the word ‘sometimes’ suggests that Ellie visits California from time to time, that she lives elsewhere. But allowing for loss in recording, ‘sometime’ could also mean be ‘some time’, that is, for some time she has been living in California. This is almost the opposite of the earlier interpretation that she visits California occasionally. It could also mean that she told me, the interviewer, her story of how she got to California more than once (‘I’ve told you some times’). A single word has yielded three possible readings. Closure is not easy. This would still be the case if Ellie were not afflicted with Alzheimer’s disease. It is worth noting that Derrida expresses in an interview his fear of memory loss. He says:

The only loss for which I would never be consoled and that brings together all the others, I would call it loss of memory.

The suffering at the origin of memory for me is the suffering from the loss of memory, not only forgetting or amnesia but the effacement of traces. (Derrida, in Weber 1995: 143)

That did not happen to Derrida (he died of pancreatic cancer), but the dread in those remarks now casts an unbearable sadness over patients I was sympathizing with, and whose sense-making I was trying to argue for and defend against dehumanizing psycholinguistic tropes. Today I might think in terms of traces, of remembering that ‘differences appear among the elements...and constitute the chains, and texts and systems of traces’ (Derrida, in Culler 2003: 106), that there may be indeed a general emptiness from which our languaging emerges, of resisting propensities towards logical sequencing, and of interpreting their speech through a variety of lenses rather than attempt to counter the experimentalist approach on its own terms.

What does this say, then, about researching-texting processes? One, that our cognitions and knowledge-producing efforts were and are influenced by numerous ‘presences’ in our immediate environments (that my writing against psycholinguistic scholarship was partly because they constituted a set of powerful master-discourses in my environment), and two, that the retrospective acts of revisitation and reinterpretation allow one to pry apart the boundaries that govern ‘meanings’ in old research texts and enable connections between earlier and current thinking. As Faubion (1994: xxxiv) points out, the ‘task of the history of thought is to identify and delimit the development and transformation of these domains of experience, as these domains and these experiences are diverse, it follows that so too, are modes of thought’. Given the general drift of this paper, it is in the (re)tracing of what governs our prior and current thinking that researching ethics lies, since ‘thought’ in a variety of possible forms constitutes ‘the human being as a knowing subject...and as an ethical subject’ (Foucault, cited in Faubion 1994: xxxiv). (It seems to me that moving on, discovering ‘our truths’ (however provisional and slippery), acknowledging contradictions, and failure perhaps, is part of the growth of the ethical subject.) But beyond the ethical nature of this enterprise, this kind of uncovering has also thrown open the (Derridean) issue of ‘originals’: If the initial writings of my Alzheimer research were the ‘originals’ then what is this current revisitation? Am I really able to articulate what my ‘original’ thinking was and how does my referential use of language to do so dismantle the binarism between ‘original’ and ‘current’ set up here?

CONCLUSIONS

I type this subheading tentatively, hesitatingly, since this paper has been arguing that argument cannot be conclusive, that, in the words of the old ABBA song, we need to move on. Nevertheless, one needs to ask oneself

what these ruminations have clarified, at least to oneself. The Derridean double edge that I am advocating when I posit that we begin to critically address our researching-texting processes by, among other things, revisiting our prior research is one that places the researcher and her texts in interesting disciplinary-textual spaces: not at the center of the 'language forest, but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one' (Benjamin 2004: 79–80). While completely intertwined with the first effort at producing 'originals', revisitations to our prior research represent a very different enterprise. Arguably, the intention of the first effort—where the qualitative researcher is neck-deep in fieldwork, gathering her raw materials, transcribing and translating them, consulting the people she is working with, writing 'original' drafts—could, at some level, be seen as 'primary', with the revisitations being more 'removed,' and 'derivational' (since the latter arguably draws on the nubs of the former).¹⁵ However, because both initial productions and subsequent reinterpretations take form in textual molds of the sort that we in the discipline collectively regard as 'knowledge' (as books or articles), this division into 'primary' and 'derivational' seems to break down, raising in its wake Derridean concerns regarding 'originals'. Are 'originals' our first attempts at producing 'original' texts? If indeed they are, then what is this paper?

The impossibility of ever fully answering these questions partially points to at least two related issues in our discipline that need problematizing: (1) ways in which we qualitative researchers have, on the whole hesitated to speak about local tensions and problems in our researching practices,¹⁶ and (2) our disciplinary preoccupations with *use*, and our general reluctance to 'philosophize' how our insistence on 'presences' shape our texting practices. The applied linguistic tendency to overvalue the pragmatic, 'how-to-do-aspects' of our professional lives (how to do researching, teaching, writing, grading, materials development) has led to what Derrida (in 'La mythologie blanche' 1974) calls the *us*-system: the chain of values linking the *usual*, the *useful*, and common linguistic *usage*. Our field has tended to interpret its 'applied' focus in utilitarian terms, with the 'worth' of research being partially addressed in terms of its *use*-value (its *usefulness* in teaching contexts, to solve language 'problems', to think in terms of 'solutions'). While it is not my intention to question the value of such work, it may be time to consider ways in which we can build in parallel narratives that can prompt us to reflect on our preoccupation with use. A revisitation has the capacity to do this: by revisiting and reinterpreting old 'use'-oriented research (one that is more 'pragmatically' oriented), some of our attention can be deflected into a newer, more philosophical (albeit less traditionally *useful*) space.

A question, though, that I find myself asking now is: what are some implications of Derridean deconstruction for such use-oriented work? Will research-based 'usable knowledge'—for pedagogies or policies for

instance—be undermined if we take Derrida at his word? Is it indeed impossible, as two characters ponder in *Alice in Wonderland* about whether we can say what we mean or mean what we say because all meanings are unstable? I do not know that there is an ‘answer’ to this. I can say, however, at this stage of my ‘present’ unstable thinking that Derrida’s views nudge us to carefully scrutinize the language we use, that they encourage us to probe as far as possible our unacknowledged foundational assumptions, and to admit that our representations are most precariously poised and partial even though for the moment they are all we have; they are our provisional truths, and as for that inner ‘Truth’ or center, it is not there. We look through a glass darkly, and we see only traces. Revisitations permit this glimpse into shadowy traces.

But even as I graph this, I can hear Derrida reminding me that the seeds of dismantling are inherent in all texts and that I proceed cautiously: to remember that all textual edifices, including this one, are built on sand, that my referential use of language needs always to be deferred and displaced with parallel cross-questioning narratives, that my creation of past/present, previous/current binarisms are artificial constructions that need to be rethought, since it is our proclivity towards binarisms that does the most violence to our thinking. Processes of revisitations are, needless to say, endless; there is a seductive element of infinity built into this enterprise, since all ‘originals’ and ‘revisitations’ invite subsequent interpretations. And because this process is re-iterative with the possibility of limitless re-visitations, there can be no ‘end’ (or conclusion). So I will just cease writing for now.

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NOTES

- 1 See Morgan (2002) who addresses Derrida’s difference in relation to the Quebec referendum.
- 2 At this point I admit the merging of this Foucauldian approach with the Derridean perspective in which I am interested.
- 3 Making connections with previously written texts (and the thinking in them, however variously we articulate that thinking now) pushes us towards spaces that permit more explicit articulations of the relationship of the self to itself (Foucault 1991, cited in Faubion 1994: xvii), thus rendering our researching and text and truth making processes more transparent and ethical.
- 4 According to White (1989: 212), ‘discourse must be analyzed on three levels: that of the description (mimesis) of the “data” found in the field of inquiry being invested or marked out for analysis; that of the argument or narrative (diagesis), running alongside of or interspersed with the descriptive materials; and that on which the combination of these previous two levels is effected (diataxis)’. The need for parallel ancillary narratives (that critically reflect, probe and disassemble

- our texting-researching practices) that the present paper advocates is similar to White's last level.
- 5 Indeed, recently published qualitative research handbooks are replete with such issues (Holliday 2002; Johnstone 2000; Silverman 2005).
 - 6 Norris (1987: 143) points out that this involves a 'sustained and rigorous attention to the ways in which a certain *idea* of referential language—or indeed a certain materialist metaphysics—has managed to deflect such thinking from its proper aim'.
 - 7 Derrida would say that there is no way we can ever make our way back to our original thinking, since there are no 'origins' to begin with, but for the sake of present argument I have to have some anti-Derridean scaffolding!
 - 8 I need to note here that the Derridean and Foucauldian lines of disassembling that I am advocating here have been seen to lock horns by Derrida and Foucault themselves, with the former maintaining that there is no opting out (a neo-Kantian tradition) of a text, 'that it is only by working persistently within that tradition but against some of its ruling ideas that thought can muster the resistance required for an effective critique of existing institutions' (Norris 1987: 217), and the latter insisting on institutionalized relations between power, knowledge, and the discourses of reason, where knowledge can become a kind of social control. The present discussion does not view these positions as mutually exclusive: a close reading of one's prior texts and an open acknowledgement of one's positioning inside a tradition (à la Derrida) dovetails effectively with the general argument proffered here about uncovering some of our (prior and current) knowledge making tracks that govern our thinking.
 - 9 As mentioned previously, I will be engaging in a 'old-new'/'prior-current' binarism here, but will, in Derridean fashion, attempt to show how the seeds of its dismantling are already inherent in my texting of it.
 - 10 Just as painful events render borders around prior research hard, seemingly innocuous comments can destabilize them. This revisitation has partially come about because of a comment that a reviewer made of my research materials when I was coming up for promotion to Full professor. His evaluation letter said something to the effect of my 'having finally found my voice,' a comment that I thought could only be made by one who knew about what had happened to me in graduate school (when in fact, this person had no clue). It was my reading of that comment (my daring to believe that perhaps I did have a voice) and a subsequent meeting with another colleague who identified me by my Alzheimer's research that prompted me to revisit my old work.
 - 11 While at one level language is intentional—with speakers and authors using it to convey ('present') intentions and meanings—it exceeds any set limits as well, with meaning escaping boundaries set either by the author-speaker or by the reader-listener (cf. Bakhtin's (1981) *double-voiced* discourse). Such a view at once makes us question the interpretations we impose on others' language, including my interpretation of Alzheimer lifehistories which was aimed at countering psycholinguistic interpretations, and psycholinguistic interpretations which tend to address language 'impairments' literally, for instance. Revisiting this material from this Derridean positioning certainly makes both—mine and

- psycholinguistic interpretations—smack of an uncomfortable conservatism.
- 12 As one of the editors pointed out to me, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis in Applied Linguistics has a long history of complicating ‘meanings.’
 - 13 It may be noted at this point that for Derrida, speech *is* writing, that all is writing, so that when he speaks of the writer, he is also speaking of the speaker, in this case my Alzheimer patients.
 - 14 Perhaps, one may sweepingly infer, this *angustia* or anguish characterized the first stages of human speech. Coherence and incoherence, fluency and dis-fluency—from whence do they come?
 - 15 As the general drift of the present argument goes, revisitations serve to laminate previous, ‘original’ canvases differently.
 - 16 See *Applied Linguistics* 26(4) for articles that attempt to directly address researching tensions.

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