Acoustic Limitrophies, or Why Roald Dahl’s Work Sounds More Serious than It Seems

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Introduction

Roald Dahl (1916–1990) was a world-famous writer of children literature. Titles such as *James and the Giant Peach* (1962), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *Danny, the Champion of the World* (1975) *George's Marvellous Medicine* (1981), *The BFG* (1982), *The Witches* (1983), or *Matilda* (1988) are among children’s favourites and have been adapted to the cinema with great success. The visual dimension of his work is already reinforced in print by the numerous illustrations accompanying the texts, particularly those of Quentin Blake, whose name appears on the cover along with the author’s. However, Dahl’s texts also articulate the author’s life-long interest in sound(s), in the aural or acoustic. The present article focuses on – or, rather, tunes into – two regions of the sonic domain in Dahl’s work which may be dubbed *limitrophies* following Derrida’s definition of the term: “what sprouts or grows at the limit or around the limit, but also what feeds the limit, generates it, raises it, and complicates it” (2008, 29–30). I will be dealing with what nourishes and is nourished (*-trophos*) by two *limits* which, against our common expectations, are not visual, but acoustic. Furthermore, I will take my cue in both cases from two passages taken from what is also an unexpected source: George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871–72), a text usually considered an example of literary realism and, in Virginia Woolf’s words, “one of the few English novels written for grown-up people” (as quoted in Eliot 1985, 7).

The first acoustic limitrophy I will be tuning into in the following section is non other than language itself, but language understood as *lalange*, a neologism coined by the
late Jacques Lacan and which Mladen Dolar, in his indispensable *A Voice and Nothing More* (2006), singles out as the concept that signals the internal limit of language as such (144). In language, “the logic of difference [which produces meaning according to structuralist linguistics] constantly intersects with the logic of similarities and reverberations [which make wordplay and nonsense possible], to the point where the former can no longer be isolated as a sphere on its own (‘the symbolic’)” (2006, 145; emphases added)—Dolar’s parenthetical reference is to Lacan’s register of the Symbolic, the order of language and of social norms, particularly the norms that regulate any given linguistic system, English in the case, which must be assumed by all subjects in their process of socialisation. *Lalangue* neatly condenses the relationship between the two logics as a limitrophy: they establish a limit because they are distinguishable and, at once, complicate the limit on account of their interaction which makes something new sprout, grow. If *langue* is the name Ferdinand de Saussure gave the linguistic system which generates meaning through differential operations, the extra *la* produces a sonic reverberation akin to the humming of a song (*la-la*) that unsettles the meaningfulness of the signifier *langue*—I elaborate on this later.

The second acoustic limitrophy is related to Dahl’s fictional exploration of the relationship between the human ear and what in living nature is commonly considered mute *per se*: namely, plants (trees, included). The vegetal world does make sounds of its own and reacts to sounds, even if we cannot hear them. As Dahl imaginatively prefigured and the developing field of phytoacoustics confirms, human beings must upgrade their hearing capacity to tune into vegetal aurality by means of sound technology. By going beyond the limits of what is naturally audible for humans, a new limit is established, one out of which new perspectives on a substantial portion of the natural realm open. Our
relation to so-called non-human nature is expanded, something ecological discourse should take into account, should listen to.

**Acoustic Limitrophy # 1: Dahl’s “Langwitch”**

In Chapter 24 of Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, Mrs Garth, whose “grammar and accent were above the town standard” (1985, 275), is teaching her youngest children, Ben and Letty, the qualities of collective nouns while doing her cooking. She asks Ben the meaning of a statement from a grammar book. Ben answers in confrontational tone and the following dialogue ensues:

‘I [Ben] *hate* grammar. What’s the use of it?’
‘To teach you to speak and write *correctly*, so that you can be understood,’ said Mrs Garth, with *severe precision*. ‘Should you like to speak as od Job does?’
‘Yes,’ said Ben, *stoutly*; ‘it’s *funnier*. He says, “You goo” – that’s just as good as “You go”.’
‘But he says, “A ship’s in the garden”, instead of “a sheep”,’ said Letty with an *air of superiority*. ‘You might think he meant a ship off the sea.’
‘No, you mightn’t, if you weren’t silly,’ said Ben. ‘How could a ship off the sea come there?’
‘These things belong only to *pronunciation*, which is the least part of *grammar*,’ said Mrs Garth. […] ‘Job has only to speak about very plain things. How do you think you would write or speak about anything more difficult, if you knew no more grammar than he does? You would use wrong words, and put words in the wrong places, and instead of making people understand you, they would turn away from you as a tiresome person. What would you do then?’
‘I shouldn’t care, I should leave off,’ said Ben, with a sense that this was an agreeable issue where grammar was concerned. (Eliot 1985, 276–277; emphases added)

Much is to be found here, in the midst of Eliot’s massive three-decker, (1) of what is at stake in and around the internal split of language, (2) at the intersection between signifier and sound (“ship”/“sheep”, meaning-making difference that is, at once, disrupting consonance), (3) in homophony and nonsense as the source of (childish) pleasure (“funnier”) and unexpected new sense (Lewis Carroll, Eliot’s contemporary, would surely make much of “A ship’s in the garden”), (4) of the aggressivity (“violence”, Jean-Jacques Lecercle [1990] calls it) at work in both instilling (“severe precision”, “air of superiority”)
and resisting ("hate", "stoutly", "shouldn’t care") langue’s rules, (5) of the latter’s crucial function in (to put it in Althusserian functionalist terms) constituting ideological subjects to occupy their proper places (classes) in society (Althusser 2001) and of the child’s (Ben’s) potential to become (Althusser had later on to recognise this possibility) a bad ("militant") subject on account of his disregard for grammatical rules (Larrain 1989, 95), and (6) of the minor place sound substance ("pronunciation", Mrs Garth calls it) occupies in grammar, a chance prefiguration of its later demise in “the structure of Saussure’s langue: phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics” (Lecercle 1990, 2) – phonology, the showcase of structuralist analysis, disciplines sound substance to such an extent that it banishes it from linguistics, as argued in what follows.

It is very difficult to effectively challenge ocularcentrism, the millennia-old rampant dominance of the visual over the aural in our conception of reality. Only what is seen can be said to exist—seeing is believing, as the saying goes. According to the Big Friendly Giant, the title-character of Dahl’s 1982 The BFG who is endowed with extraordinary powers of hearing and whose speech is the most prominent example of lalangue in Dahl’s work by far, this is the problem with “‘human beans’”: “‘they is absolutely refusing to believe in anything unless they is actually seeing it right in front of their schnozzels ['noses’]” (1998, 99) – The BFG is a central text in Dahl’s articulation of language and ultrasonic vegetal sounds as limitrophies. Indeed, it is a commonplace that Western civilisation is and always has been hypervisual. Postmodernism may have aggravated this scopic supremacy by insisting on the idea that simulacra, spectacle, surface, image and so on are primordial constitutive ontological elements. We soon forget that for light to be, for the very constitution of the field of the visible to take place, God had to emit a sound in the form of the creating Word according to the narrator of the Book of Genesis, a (partially) fitting correlate of what in contemporary cosmology goes by the
sonorous name *Big Bang*, the constitutive event of the Universe itself. The status of sound bears, thus, a strong resemblance with, not to say is the epitome of, what Fredric Jameson (1973) called “the vanishing mediator”: that which makes it possible for an order to establish itself yet is bound to disappear once the process concludes. This vanishing mediator, sound, has been *silenced* by dominant concepts such as *idea* (Greek *eidos*: ‘sight, vision, aspect’) or *imagination* (the etymology is too obvious to deserve any comment). What is more, it may be argued that when *logos* (‘discourse’, also ‘word’) came to be united with *phone* (‘sound’) to form *phonology*, it did so at the cost of sound. As Mladen Dolar argues, phonology meant “a treatment of linguistic sounds which deprives them of their phonic substance and reduces them to purely differential entities” (147). Meaning, the production of meaning, is, therefore, an effect of structural differences, not of substantial identities. This is how language (*langue*) operates.

But it happens, it *always* happens, that the sounds of any language do not remain silent, do not stay quiet, do not just disappear after fulfilling their relational/differential role of communicating meaning. They struggle, as it were, to be heard, they interfere with the limpid web of signifying differences erupting in their midst with an interplay of reverberations, echoes, homophonies and co-sonances that reaches beyond meaning, undermining it, and producing aesthetic, ludic, funny, pleasurable effects in the process. “Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves”, the Duchess advised Alice in chapter 9 of Lewis Carroll’s immortal work (1998, 133). 1 Yet, after saying this, the Duchess, one of the many eccentric and uncanny inhabitants of Wonderland, unstoppably “displays the senseless part of making sense” (Dolar 2006, 147). For instance, after Alice speculates that mustard has a mineral origin, the Duchess agrees and says: “‘there’s a large mustard-*mine* near here. And the moral of that is – ‘The more there is of *mine*, the less there is of yours.’”” (Carroll 1998, 134; emphases added). The
homonym “mine” (noun and possessive pronoun) regulates a nonsensical line of argument in a conflation of meanings that should be normatively kept apart.

The words of any language have a double nature: words as signifiers and words as sound objects. As Roman Jakobson (the Jakobson of *Six lessons on sound and sense*, published in 1976 as *Six leçons sur le son et le sense*) knew very well, these two spheres or series (signifiers as carriers of meaning and sounds beyond or before meaning) are not always (potentially, never) separated. In contingent manners (as in Freudian slips) or more intentionally (as in Carroll and Dahl), they intersect and interact, so that sound ruptures differential normative meaning and generates unexpected new meaning which is loaded with what Jacques Lacan called *jouissance*, ‘enjoyment’. Actually, Lacan had to correct himself in this regard: from writing in 1960 “jouissance is prohibited [interdite] to whoever speaks” (2006, 696) to admitting in 1972-73 (*Seminar XX: Encore*) that language is permeated with enjoyment and that there is a surplus of meaning in it which he called *joui-sense*. Lacan calls the interaction of both spheres (differential web of meanings and the play of sound similarities) *lalange* and considered James Joyce the writer of *lalange* par excellence (1998).

Pun words are salient examples of *lalange* and *joui-sense*, and *nonsense* is their extreme manifestation. In the English literary tradition, the work of Edward Lear (1812–1888) stands out as a substantial example of the latter (his *A Book of Nonsense* [1846], a collection of limericks, was immensely popular), while Carroll’s “Jabberwocky”, from *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), can be considered with little space for doubt as the most famous instance of *nonsense poetry* in English. The point is, of course, that there is a lot of (new) sense in nonsense, and, it goes without saying, in wordplay; something that the normative web of differences is incapable of fully eradicating. Yet – this is the proviso that must be underscored – wordplay and nonsense would not exist if the law of the
signifier (*langue* as a structure of meaning-making differences) were not in place. If *Lalange* allows the conceptualisation of the limitrophic interaction of the normative linguistic structure and its phonic disturbances, of what sprouts at the limit and of how the limit is transformed, it is because a normative structure has been established in the first place. Lecercle had pointed out that *lalange* (he used the Lacanian concept) exerted its pressure in “the interior limits that, within *langue* itself, threaten the system” (1990, 40) and affirmed that *lalangue* “is also within grammar” (1990, 41). Dolar’s position, which I endorse, seems similar, but is not: *lalangue* is the name given to language as limitrophy, to the frictions occurring at the language’s intersecting zones: the system of *langue* and the series of co-sonances, echoes, and reverberations that disrupt the system’s differential operations. These zones can neither be mistaken for each other, nor can they be separated: *this is the specificity of language, which, in Derridean terms, is limitrophic.* Hence the unsolved contradiction in Lecercle’s theory of the linguistic “remainder” between Lacan’s *lalangue* and Deleuze and Guattari’s *rhizome* (*from A Thousand Plateaus* [1987]). Lecercle fails in his attempt in combining both because *lalangue* and *rhizome* are incompatible theories of the remainder, as Slavoj Žižek states (1996, 108). At one point, even Lecercle himself recognises that, with the *rhizome*, he reaches a dead end. In spite of its appeal and (I add) of Deleuze and Guattari’s unsurpassable argumentative subtlety, “a structureless root, propagating in anarchic fashion [i.e., the *rhizome*], is the second name of the remainder – except that by now [in contrast with *lalangue*] there is no remainder, because there is no previous abstraction and separation of a *structure* from the dross of irrelevant phenomena” (1990, 50–51; emphases added). His confessed “attempt to have my cake and eat” is purely voluntaristic, not to say illegitimate, though one cannot help but admire the originality of Lecercle’s approach (1990, 51). Certainly, “[t]he dissolution of all structures [Deleuze and Guattari’s position]
raises more problem that it solves. The opening up of language to the world, the invasions of the whole field by the remainder, no longer enable us to account for the specificity of language” – so, why insist? (Lecercle 1990, 51; emphasis added). The insight into the specificity of language that lalangue allows is formulated with unsurpassable clarity by Mladen Dolar: “Language is never just about making sense, but on the way to making sense it always produces more than the sense catered for, its sounds exceed its sense” (2006, 146).

Dolar’s formulation comes in the midst of his discussion of Jakobson’s awareness that language’s specificity is more than what structuralist linguistics elegantly theorised; hence his (Jakobson’s) interest in and contribution to the field of poetics, which is the field that takes care of the sounds beyond linguistic difference and the effects they produce – the original title of his New York lectures already announces this via homophony: leçons / le son. In case we forget: Jakobson was not just an outstanding structuralist linguist, he was also a major literary theorist with a particular interest in sound effects in poetry, not specifically popular poetry or nonsense poetry, but poetry in general, serious poetry, canonical poetry, which is verbal art and hence part of language all the same. Jakobson, however, kept the codification of poetic effects (“repetitions, rhythms, rhymes, sound echoes, metric patterns” [Dolar 2006, 148]) apart from the establishment of the codes that regulate “the referential or informational function of language” (Dolar 2006, 148). David Crystal (1996) argues, however, that language play is a normal practice in both children and adults: “Everyone […] plays with language or responds to language play”, he states (328). Most of us play with language (nonsense included) for the fun of it, but some do it to earn a living, and the latter include not only comedians or clowns, but also radio or television show hosts, news-paper editors in charge of devising punchy headlines, and advertising creatives (Crystal 1996, 328–329).
Of course, among those using language play in their profession as writers, we may list authors like Lear, Carroll, Joyce or Dahl, all aware and willing to put to the fore the fact the specificity of language is limitrophic. I have chosen a passage from *Matilda* (1988) to begin my discussion of Dahl because, apart from being one example among many of the author’s articulation of his limitrophic conception of language, it is a scene of linguistic instruction which constitutes a good point of comparative reference with the one from Eliot’s *Middlemarch* quoted at the beginning of this section. In the Dahl novel, the role instructor carried out by kind yet firm Mrs Garth is split in two radically different positions: on the one hand, Miss Trunchbull, the terrifying and gigantic headmistress of Crunchhem Hall, who hates children and is up to what her name signifies and evokes, and, on the other, the sweet, sympathetic Miss Honey, the teacher of five-and-a-half-year-old child prodigy Matilda Wormwood’s class. A lover of limericks, Miss Honey has her pupils read some from a book and is surprised to find out that little Matilda is an achieved practitioner of this popular poetic genre. When she visits the Wormwood household, “Cosy Nook”, to speak with Matilda’s parents about their *wunderkind*, we are told: “Cosy Nook. Nosey Cook might have been better, Miss Honey thought. She was given to playing with words that way” (Dahl 2016a, 92). The scene I am referring to is from Chapter 13, “The Weekly Test”, in which Miss Trunchbull visits Miss Honey’s class to test the children’s progress. Among the skills this viciously domineering figure of authority usually tests is the children’s ability to spell words. In the episode, Dahl has her falls into a trap she herself had laid because of her obliviousness to the workings of homophony. She orders a boy, Nigel Hicks, to spell the word “write”, to which boy reasonably retorts: “‘which one?’ […] ‘The thing you do with the pen or the one that means the opposite of wrong?’”. “‘The one with the pen, you little fool’”, she vents her frustration by way of an answer (1988, 144–145). All the children spell the words correctly because, they inform
Miss Trunchball, the teaching method of Miss Honey, a lover of wordplay and limericks, combines orthography and melody: “‘Miss Honey’, Nigel says, ‘gives us a little song about each word and we all sing it together and learn it in no time’” (Dahl 2016a, 147). The headmistress reacts in fury: “‘How perfectly ridiculous! […] You’re not meant to teach poetry when you’re teaching spelling’” (Dahl 2016a, 147; emphases added). Poetic effects (poetics) and orthography (linguistics) should be kept apart, according to Miss Trunchbull (“‘Cut it out in the future, Miss Honey’” [Dahl 2016a, 147]), while for Miss Honey and, by extension, for Dahl, they should go and, actually, do go together. Drawing on the work of Korney Chukovsky and others, David Crystal spells out the different modes of language play that schoolchildren practice at different stages of their training. Crystal makes, among others, two important points in this connection. The first one would be rather sound striking were we not to bear in mind that lalangue signals the specificity of language, what language is: “The persistent absence of language play is […] likely to be an important diagnostic feature of language pathology” (1996, 335). Children who do not participate in their fellow’s pervasive and intense practice of playing with language have difficulties in learning a language. Furthermore, Crystal proposes to incorporate language play in teaching children how to speak and read (as Miss Honey does) so as to activate their “creative urge” and “refine their creative language interests and skills” (1996, 341). But this is seldom done probably because it requires a greater amount of effort and receptiveness on the part of educators, who, furthermore, may sense that their position of authority as bearers of the (linguistic) norm could be undermined. And this takes me to the second point in Crystal’s argument: the recurrent references to the adversarial thrust of language play as the source of pleasure. We read that repetitions of sounds like “thumb” and “bum” can be “‘a bit naughty’”; that “often in pairs, [children] begin to ‘talk funny’, deviating from normal articulation”; that “[t]hey [children] break
pragmatic rules”; and that “enjoyment is a direct consequence of deviating from the normal use of language forms or using normal forms in unexpected contexts” (1996, 330, 331, 333, 334; emphases added).

As Susan McDonnell has recently argued in “Nonsense and Possibility” (2019), no matter the way in which they are theorised, playful practices (language play included) are paradoxical by definition. They involve “a tension between order and disorder, creation and destruction” (McDonnell 2019, 254). Paradox permeates play as playful practices pose (potential) problems for Power while reproducing Power’s imperatives in the process: “play may provide a site for exploration and questioning of socio-cultural contexts, and may critically examine as well as reinforce the norms surrounding the players” (McDonnell 2019, 253). What sprouts in lalange as language’s dynamic internal limit may create changes in normative langue (for example, by lexical amplification through new coinages like, say, “smog”, “prosumers”, or “Dadaism”). Yet, apart from the latter, what lalangue in literary texts does is to provide a fundamental insight into the true workings of language, into language’s specificity, into its inherent limitrophic nature. This ampler and more profound understanding of language is usually drowned in lalangue’s waves of enjoyment. In sum, it is at once very funny and very serious.

The BFG is by far Dahl’s most open and through rendition of lalangue. This is already apparent in simple quantitative terms. Dominic Cheetham (2016) has studied the distribution of neologisms and other created lexical items in the seventeen books that constitute the corpus of Dahl’s novels for children. Eight of these works contain twenty-seven created words altogether (The Gremlins [1973], The Magic Finger [1966], Fantastic Mr Fox [1970], Danny the Champion of the World [1975], The Enormous Crocodile [1978], Matilda [1988], Esio Trot [1990] and The Vicar of Nibbleswicke), “nineteen of which are names of characters or creatures” (Cheetham 2016, 96). The
remaining nine in the list of seventeen works “have between them 700 created words”: *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) has 29, *George’s Marvellous Medicine* (1981) contains 21, and *The Witches* (1983) has 22, to mention just three examples (Cheetham 2016, 97). The second largest number of new coinages, 72, is to be found in *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator* (1972), which does not come even close to the sum of neologisms *The BFG* contains: 339 (Cheetham 2016, 97). Cheetham adds to this “49 existing English words used with original meanings or usages, 6 false neologisms, 56 phrasal creations, 18 spoonerisms [“Dahl’s Chickens” instead of “Charles Dickens” being the most famous one (113 and 207)] and 4 words with punned re-spellings”, resulting in a total of 473 “lexical items created” in *The BFG* (Cheetham 2016, 97). Were other items like malapropisms (“rotten-wool” instead of “cotton-wool”, or “humbug” instead of “humble” [49 and 157]), homonyms (“Turks from *Turkey* is tasting of *turkey*” [26; emphases added]), homophones (“*Wales is whales*” [28; emphases added]) and other devices like co-sonance and alliteration (“Greeks from *Greece* is all tasting *greasy*” to man/child-eating Giants, those from “*Wellington*” are delicious, “so says the *Welly*-eating Giant”, or “The *devil is dancing on my dibbler*” [26, 30 and 82; emphases added]) included in the count, we would get an even better idea of the extreme degree of limitrophic fecundity that Dahl’s text reaches.

Sophie, the little girl with defective eyesight living in an orphanage run by a Miss-Trunchbull-like woman (38), sees from her window at night how a being “four times as tall as the tallest human” (12) and “with the most enormous ears” (15) blows a silent trumpet in the ears of sleeping children across the street. She is spotted by the giant (whom we later learn is the BFG, the Big Friendly Giant), who kidnaps her (“kidsnatched you” [39]) and brings her to Giant Country. Unlike his fellow Giants, who double him in size and with whom he does not keep company, the BFG is a vegetarian because he considers
that “[e]ating human beans is wrong and evil” (61) and feeds instead on the only thing that grows in that barren land: “disgusterous”, “sickable”, “rotsome”, “maggotwise” “snozzcumbers” (51), a type of vegetable similar to a huge cucumber with a nauseating taste. Instead of eating human beings in night hunts into the human world as the rest of the Giants do, the BFG blows the sweet dreams that he traps in Giant Country with a net and keeps in jars into children’s ears to make them happy. He laments the errors he makes when speaking the “langwitch” (44 and 98) and the difficulties he has in expressing what he wants to say in words: “Words […] is oh such a twitch-tickling problem to me all my life. […] I is speaking the most terrible wigglish” (53; see also 29, 40, 49, 50 and 100). To the BFG’s extreme delight, Sophie responds: “‘I think you speak beautifully’ […] Simply beautifully. […] I just love the way you talk”’ (53–54). In 2010, A. Robin Hoffman carried a case study of children’s reception of Dahl’s books in the Spaghetti Book Club website. In spite of the popularity of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and Matilda, the book the most attracted the young readers’ attention was The BFG. Child readers revealed themselves to be a more active and sophisticated audience than adults normally take them to be. They were well aware of the narrative’s non-realistic nature and showed a capacity for aesthetic appreciation “usually made visible through mention of valued formal qualities like language play” (Hoffman 2010, 239). Examining the children’s responses to The BFG reproduced in Hoffman (2010), Cheetham highlights the fact that “none mentions any related difficulty in reading, some even praising the story as being easy to read”, though many of the new words of Dahl’s invention are “semantically opaque” (2016, 105). Cheetham elucidates many of the strategies is by Dahl to avoid comprehension problems: explanation in the text, repetition of the words, pairing with familiar words, and contextualisation – which is very much what happens when we learn “unknown real words” (2016, 106). “Children”, Hoffman writes, “understand that words
do more than denote because they use them too” (2010, 248). Their sound carries sense even if the precise meaning is not clearly differentiated. Many of the opaque neologisms sound like English words even if they are not part of the system’s lexis. In reference to Dahl’s invented term “snozzwangers” from Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Cheetham argues that it is “what in psychology would be called a non-word with a high degree of English wordlikeness” (2016, 99). This perceived sound similarity relates the invented word to langue: it is not included in the system of the language, but neither is it completely unrelated to the former. Moreover, as Susan Rennie comments in the entry “squiggle” from The BFG (31):

Certain groups of letters and sounds make you think of particular things. For example, words that start with hard sounds like cr- and gr- are often about hard or harsh things, like crunching crashes or grating grunt, and words that start with softer sounds like sl- and squ-, are often about slippery slimy or squishy squelchy things. This is called phonoaesthesia and it is why you can often guess what Roald Dahl’s invented words mean, even if you have never heard them before. (Dahl 2016b, 233; last emphasis added)

At the end of the novel, the helicopter pilots of the RAF, guided by Sophie and the BFG, succeed in the mission ordered by Queen of England to trap the man/children-eating Giants and bring them to England to be put away. After this, the “BFG expressed a wish to learn how to speak properly, and Sophie herself, who loved him and he would love a father, volunteered to give him lessons every day” (207). Now an articulate adult, the BFG became a real writer, the one who wrote the book titled The BFG, we are told. Apart from the fact that Roald Dahl was a very tall man and that he made millions of children happy with his stories, the explicit identification of the author with the title-character of a book which, if closely scrutinised, would emerge as a much denser thicket of lalangue than I have shown above has to do with Dahl’s desire to perform his most remarkable and boldest act of what, according to David Crystal, language play involves: namely, “‘stepping back’ from language […] by intuining the norm and manipulating it”
While the BFG stepped forward into the norm of the language to speak correctly and become a writer, Dahl, with the Big Friendly Giant as his surrogate, stepped back from language as *langue* and into language as *lalangue*, something he hinted at but not systematically pursued in works written and published before and after *The BFG*.

**Acoustic Limitrophy # 2: Phytoacoustics *avant la lettre*[^9]**

Inscribed in Dahl’s work there is a vindication of the importance of sound in the constitution of reality. The previous section was devoted to showing how Dahl expanded the ordinary conception of language by refashioning its limits, particularly in *The BFG*. For this, I drew on Dolar’s reconceptualization of Lacan’s *lalangue* according to which the series of signifiers and sounds “differ precisely on their points of convergence, of crosscuts, intersections, where sound conflation functions as the break of signification and at the same time the source of another signification, their amalgamation serving as the point of their divergence” (2006, 144; emphasis added). I now turn to the second acoustic limitrophy articulated in Dahl’s work, which belongs not in the realm of language, but in what normally goes by the name *soundscape*. The term “soundscape” was coined by Michael Southworth in 1969 and became quite popular after the publication of R. Murray Schaffer’s *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tunning of the World* (1977). The point is made that sound(s) should be admitted as a component part of the *landscape*, but the problem is how to gather data and represent in a unified manner the acoustic dimension of our surroundings. This was and continues to be a very difficult task on account of the fact that, whereas the visual can be easily grasped and represented as a coherent sum of details in maps and photographs, with the sonic it happens otherwise: the ear or the microphone “samples details […], but nothing
corresponding to aerial photography” (Schaffer 1977, 7). Thus, Schaffer argues, “[a] soundscape consists of events heard not objects seen” (1977, 8; emphasis in the original).

How has English literature rendered the aural, acoustic, sonic in the landscape? William Wordsworth may, perhaps, come to mind in this connection. In poems such as “The Solitary Reaper” or “To the Cuckoo”, the poetic voice represents the perception and remembrance of the incomprehensible song of a girl reaping the fields and of the birdsong, respectively, as an experience of accessing immaterial transcendence, of connecting with the glory around us in our early childhood, more valuable now because the poet is conscious of it, of a connection with the divine in nature. In “Ode to a Nightingale” by John Keats, a poet of a younger generation, the result of the experience of natural sounds is more ambiguous, not to say frustrating.

Both poets (Wordsworth and Keats) speak of sounds humans can hear. Later in the history of English literature we come across a passage that refers to natural sounds that we humans cannot detect. It is in the middle of chapter 20 of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. The novel’s heroine, Dorothea Brooke, is in Rome in her honeymoon trip feeling depressed after her marriage with Mr Casaubon. At a point, the narrator drops a comment on what we could dub the *sonic sublime*: “If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence” (Eliot 1985, 226). Eliot’s narrator speaks of those natural sounds we cannot (fortunately) hear, which are silence for us, but not for Dahl’s Big Friendly Giant, a character with ears disproportionately long even for a giant. He tells Sophie he can hear the speech of ants, “micies”, spiders and “cattlerpiddlers” (1998, 44 and 46). Yet, the Giant adds that natural sounds other than those of animals are not speech properly speaking, not articulate language really, though these other sounds do communicate something, pain and
suffering, in particular. The acoustic emissions of plants and trees are, the Giant says, “not exactly talking”, but “noises”, so much so that when he cuts a flower, he can hear it “screaming”, and when he drives an axe into the trunk of a large tree, he can hear a “terrible sound”, a “moaning” comparable to that of a dead man dying (Dahl 1998, 44-45). The Giant endowed with superhuman powers of audition in the 1982 fantasy novel – whose characterisation had been growing in Dahl’s mind as shown in the fact that it is the main character of one of Danny’s kind father’s bedtime stories in Dahl’s 1975 novel Danny the Champion of the Word (Dahl 1998b, 8–14) – is an far-off echo (quite literally) of what Dahl had published many years before, in 1949, in The New Yorker in the form of a science fiction short story The Sound Machine”— “science fiction differ[ing] from fantasy in that science fiction employs questions of scientific and technological plausibility while fantasy typically does not” (Sterling 2022).10 In “The Sound Machine”, Klausner, an amateur scientist constructs a machine capable of capturing sounds at an ultrasonic frequency, beyond the range of human audition, something consistent with what has come to be known as “phytoacoustics”, a field of research that focuses on “the ability of plants to emit sounds and to respond to sounds”, a field that, according to I. Khait et al, “is still [2019] in its infancy” (2019, 134 and 138). Plants like tomato or tobacco emit short ultrasounds of over 60 dB at a frequency range of 20 to 150 kHz (the frequency range of human audition goes for 20 Hrz [lower limit] to 20 kHrz [upper limit] [Khait et al. 2018, 4]). The frequency, in the sense of number of acoustic emissions (snapping sounds), suffers an exponential increase when plants are under stress due to drought (/draut/) and cutting. So, as I. Khait et al found out in their research, tomato and tobacco plants emit 1 sound per hour in normal conditions, up to 35 (tomato) and 11 (tobacco) sounds per hour in drought-stress conditions, and 25 (tomato) and 15 (tobacco) sounds per hour with cutting (Khait et al. 2018, 4-5).
The first pieces of empirical evidence of the existence of vegetal ultrasounds were obtained by John A. Milburn and R. C. P. Johnson in 1966. These scientists subjected common castor plants (*ricinus communis*) to water privation and recorded the snapping sounds provoked by *cavitation*: that is, the formation of bubbles in the xylem that transports the sap and their ensuing explosion, which is what produces ultrasonic vibrations. They borrowed the technology used by the music recording industry connecting sensors first to the leaves and later to the xylem of the plant, for which they had to make incisions in the stem. Substantial progress has been made in the field of phytoacoustics since this first recording (the work of Monica Galiano may be mentioned in this connection) thanks to the advances in sound recording and amplification that allows to capture ultrasonic sounds from a distance. It is known, for instance, that flowers produce more nectar when they “hear” bees buzzing close to them. Furthermore, it is not infrequent for research in this field to have an artistic dimension such as the installations of Marcus Maeder (sonic artist, electronic music composer and researcher at the University of Zürich in Switzerland) and his project “Trees: Rendering Ecophysiological Processes Audible”.

This sonic universe of vegetal acoustic emission and reception called phytoacoustics, though rich and diverse, is just a part of what Almo Farina calls *biophonies* (the whole set of sounds made by living nature: animals, plants, other organisms, including human beings [voices, screams, etc]—actually the term was coined by Bernie Krause in his 2012 book *The Great Animal Orchestra*, as Farina himself acknowledges). *Biophonies* overlap and interact with *geophonies* (the sounds made by non-biological natural agents such as volcanoes, rainfalls or winds) and *anthrophonies* (the sounds of artifacts such as engines, machines, hammers, etc.). The interaction of these three sonic spheres is what is called *soundscape*: “The soundscape”, Farina writes
at the very beginning of Soundscape Ecology (2014), “is defined as the entire sonic energy produced by a landscape and is the result of the overlap of three different sonic sources: geophonies, biophonies, and anthrophonies” (1).12 Bearing this in mind, soundscapes are clearly dynamic limitlethic processes caused by the acoustic interaction of sound events from three distinguishable sonic sources. Moreover, as Farina insists, studying soundscapes reveals itself as a necessarily transdisciplinary task (2014, 7). The Songs of Trees: Stories from Nature’s Great Connectors (2017) by David George Haskell, a British-born professor of biology and environmental studies at the University of the South (Sewanee, TN), is one remarkable example of such a transdisciplinary effort in approaching soundscapes. Haskell’s work, we read in the introductory note to this book in the Penguin edition, “integrates scientific, literary, and contemplative studies of the natural world” (2017, n.p.). Haskell’s concern in his stories of trees around the world is mainly with sounds the human ear can hear. Yet once in the book he relates his experience of using technology (to which he refers in a rather dismissive tone) to hear sounds in trees “whose pitch is too high for any human ear” (Haskell 2017, 128). Haskell, as Eliot and Dahl (see endnote 13 below) before him, expresses his relief about humans’ avoidance of the sonic sublime, while affirming its existence: “The forest sizzles, but our ears fail us. […] Robert Frost lost ‘all measure of pace’ amid the noise of tress. We and Frost are perhaps lucky. If we could hear the inner cries of every twig in the forest, ultrasound would truly unfix us” (2017, 129–130).

Roald Dahl’s short story “The Sound Machine” prefigured what the scientific field of phytoacoustics has been gradually discovering: namely, that plants are not mute natural beings, that they make sounds even if we cannot hear them, and that these sounds increase in volume and, particularly, in frequency when they are under stress (when they are cut, as in the story). Dahl’s sci-fi story and phytoacoustics and ecoacoustics (the latter field
encompassing the former) emphasise the idea that, in order to connect more deeply with nature (a Romantic yearning) and to better take care of it (ecoethics) the capacities we are born with as human animals are not enough, with need the prosthetic supplement of technology – to a certain extent, to be more of nature we need to amplify our capacities through technology, we must be a bit more cyborg, cyb- from cyber (cybernetic) and -org from organism. Klauser, the story’s protagonist and an amateur scientist, tells his friend Dr Scott that the machine he has just finished building “‘is designed to pick up sound vibrations that are too high-pitched for reception for the human ear, and to convert them to a scale of audible tones. I tune it in, almost like a radio’” (155-156). Later that very night, he decides to test the machine in his garden. He moves the frequency dial “starting at 15,000 [vibrations per second] and going up to 1,000,000” (157). With a mixture of fear and excitement, wearing his headphones, he felt he was entering, we read, “a dangerous ultrasonic region where the ears had never been before and had no right to be” (157). In absolute silence, he suddenly hears “a shriek, a frightful piercing shriek”, which he later finds out comes from the other garden every time his neighbour snips a yellow rose. The sound the roses emit when cut is at once similar and different from that of the daisies as their stems break when pulled (“a faint high-pitched cry” [159]) – an indication that the features of vegetal sonic emissions depend on the species of plant in question and on the circumstances of their production, something that phytoacoustics would confirm in time, but not, of course, in the terms described in the story.

Furthermore, the story, as it develops, also connects to the contemporary debate in the field of ecology on whether plants can feel pain. Klausner’s position as a listener progressed to one of oscillation between anthropomorphisation, which attributes to plants the capacity to feel pain like humans and one in which this possibility is rejected. In the case of the yellow roses, Klausner confronts his neighbour asking her (rhetorically) how
can she be so sure that plants do not feel the same she would feel if her wrist were cut, whereas about the daisies’ sound, “he wasn’t so sure that it expressed pain. No, it wasn’t pain; it was surprise. Or was it? It didn’t really express any of the feelings or emotions known to a human being. It was just a cry, a neutral, stony cry – a single emotionless note, expressing nothing” (159). He, then, even qualifies his conclusions concerning the yellow roses: “It had been the same with the roses. He had been wrong in calling it a cry of pain” (159). As the sound of these flowers is, in sum, ineffable, the narrator has recourse to the device frequently used by Dahl in his texts for children, particularly in The BFG: he coins new terms, but with the comic effect sharply diminished. We read: “A flower probably didn’t feel pain. It felt something else which we didn’t know about — something called toin or spurl or plinuckment, or anything you like” (159-160; emphases added).

When early the next morning, Klausner goes to a nearby park and drives his axe into the trunk of a beech tree, he hears in his headphones a sound different to that of the roses and the daisies: “a screaming sound […] like a sob lasting for fully a minute” (160). Deeply moved, he apologises to the tree and tries to close the injury he had inflicted with his hands. He calls Dr Scott to make sure he is not hallucinating. When he drives the axe into the trunk a second time while the doctor has the headphones on, the ground moves and a tree branch falls off onto the sound machine, smashing it into pieces. The doctor is not sure he heard anything special, worried as he was to save his life by dodging the falling branch. The story ends with both men walking home, Klausner ridden by guilt for inflicting a wound on the tree and after having the doctor agree to put iodine on the trunk and to come around to check on the tree’s health the following days.

The slow but steady epistemological and aesthetic progress in the field of phytoacoustics that Dahl’s story in a way prefigures is inevitably connected to ethic
questions that are part of the ecological debate. If plants and trees react to and interact with the environment perceiving and emitting sounds, if they make snapping noises because of the stress provoked by drought and cutting, the same question that troubles Klausner we may ask again: can they feel pain? In case they do feel pain, must we respond and contribute to their wellbeing? Is the tendency of ecological discourse to identify the no-human world with animals a bit short-sighted or, more properly, hard of hearing when it comes to prick up our human ears and listen to the biophonic dynamics of the vegetal world? I leave these questions open.

**Conclusion**

Roald Dahl’s fictional world of exciting plots and eccentric characters articulates a serious take on the ontological constitution of reality with sound at its centre. He problematises and expands established limits and makes them interact in highly imaginative ways. We, children and adults, draw pleasure from reading works such as *The BFG* or “The Sound Machine”, but there is knowledge also in stock for us in them if we know where to look, or, rather, what to hear. The specificity of language, a very serious thing, comes across as limitrophic, as the fertile convergence and divergence of the differential logic of the linguistic sign and the reverberating logic of the sounds of words. The assumed view of the vegetal world as inherently mute is discredited in ways that science has confirmed and goes on confirming. As Haskell writes: “through the trees’ ever-changing squeals and snaps we’d be aware of the dynamism under the deceptively still plates of bark” (2017, 129). The fixed limit human/vegetal is modified and new interactions hitherto unknown are brought to light with consequences on how we conceive our relation to nature, of which we are also a part.
Notes

1. Also quoted in Dolar (2006, 147).
2. *Six leçons sur le son et le sense* were a series of lectures originally delivered in New York during the Second World War with Claude Levi-Strauss in the audience, who confessed that their impact on him had been so profound that they were the direct source of inspiration for his project of *structural anthropology* (Dolar 2006, 145).
3. Dominic Cheetam (2016) studies lexical creation (neologisms) in Roald Dahl’s work. Whereas in Dahl’s adult fiction neologism are “barely evident”, in his work for children that are “extremely common” (93). Even in the latter, the occurrence of new coinages is uneven: whereas in more realistic works like *Matilda* few neologisms are to be found and come in the form of people or place names (like “Miss Trunchbull” or “Crunchhem Hall”), in more openly fantastic works they are more recurrent, with *The BFG* (1982) containing the largest number by far (96–97).
4. The first is a quotation from Iona Opie and Peter Opie’s *The Language and Lore of Schoolchildren* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959, 117). Alongside “rules” I have highlighted the adjective “normal” to call attention to the root of the word: norm.
5. A point should be made in connection with the political dimension of *lalangue*. In his great book *The Indivisible Remainder*, Slavoj Žižek takes issue with Deleuze and Guattari’s radical celebration of “the ‘rhizomatic’ productivity of *lalangue*,” with their view that it always “stands for the emergence of the liberating plurality of inconsistent sprouts of enjoyment which thwart the formal system of language, and which the ‘repressive’ power of language endeavours to contain” (1996, 108). This is true, but not the whole truth. The repressive normative structure is, indeed, challenged by the liberating, emancipating rhizomatic anarchic intensities and fluxes. But sometimes *lalangue* works in the opposite direction: as a manifestation of obscene *jouissance* that reinforces dominant discourse through an intensification of the prejudices held against the Other. It may be put in the service an expression of racism, ethnocentrism, patriarchal ideology, etc. A personal story told to be by a classmate in college perfectly illustrates this point. He, a studious fellow, spent his summers in England working as a tennis coach. Once, when approaching the tennis court to give his daily class, he heard his pupils laugh after one of them had asked “how does the day go?” The reaction was, of course, triggered by the homophony between “day go” / “Dago” (a corruption of “Diego”), an English ethnic slur used pejoratively and insultingly to refer to us, Spaniards.
6. Page references between parentheses or brackets are to the Puffin 1998 edition of Dahl’s *The BFG*.
7. It comes as no surprise that *The BFG* is the major source of examples quoted in the entries of the *Oxford Roald Dahl Dictionary* compiled by lexicographer Susan Rennie.
8. “Wigglish” means precisely “nonsense or words that don’t make any sense”, though, when inventing it, Susan Rennie suggests, “Roald Dahl may have been thinking of wiggly English” (Dahl 2016b, 280).
9. Two versions of this section were presented at the following conferences: in Galician, at *Soundscales: Cartografías Sensoriais e Paisaxes Sonoras* (University of Santiago de Compostela, 16 June 2022) and, in English, at the 45th *Conference of the Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies (AEDEAN)* (University of Cáceres, 16-18 November 2022).
10. In J.R.R. Tolkien’s books the trees of the Middle-earth communicate acoustically, they speak, but these are works of fantasy fiction, not science fiction (Ryan 2015).

11. We can hear an audio clip of snapping due to cavitation at: https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/215961/215962

12. Farina states: “In the soundscape, geophonies are the sonic sources that have a direct influence on biophonies and secondarily on anthrophonies. Anthrophonies can strongly impact on biophonies” (2014, 11).

13. Page references between parentheses or brackets are to the Penguin 2010 edition of Dahl’s “The Sound Machine”. I have found no evidence of Dahl’s knowledge of electroacoustics. However, he fought in the Royal Air Force during World War II and was the co-inventor of the Wade-Dahl-Till Valve (patented in 1962) used not till very long ago in surgery to release cranial pressure (Wade was hydraulic engineer Stanley Wade and Till was neurosurgeon Kenneth Till). For a study that focuses on the importance of music in Roald Dahl’s work which includes references to “The Sound Machine” see Javier Merchán Sánchez-Jara, Raquel Gómez Díaz and Araceli García Rodriguez. “El contador de historias y la máquina del sonido: una aproximación a las referencias musicales en obra de Roald Dahl como recurso pedagógico”. Álabe 22: 1-19. The authors of this article relate music in Dahl to the idea of musica universalis originated in the philosophy of Pythagoras. Certainly, Klausner wants to hear the music of the universe and even conceives eternity in acoustic terms as a set of sonic layers that grow in frequency ad infinitum (154). In the story, we come across a statement by Klausner that comes close to the sonic sublime and echoes (perhaps, intentionally) the passage from chapter 20 of Eliot’s Middlemarch: “I believe […] that there is a whole world of sound about us all the time that we cannot hear. It is possible that up there in those high-pitched inaudible regions there is a new exciting music being made, with subtle harmonies and fierce grinding discords, a music so powerful that it would drive us mad if only our ears were tuned to hear the sound of it” (155). The BFG also warns Sophie in passing about “Such wonderful and terrible sounds I is hearing! […] Some of them you would never wish to be hearing yourself! But some are like glorious music!” (46; emphasis added).

14. For a recent reading of Roald Dahl’s ecological sensibility and of his work as source of the environmentalist inspiration see Albuja Aguilar (2022).

References


“El contador de historias y la máquina del sonido: una aproximación a las


