Constitutive Graphonomy: A Post-Colonial Theory of Literary Writing

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Abstract
The written text is a social situation. That is to say, it has its existence in something more than the marks on the page, namely the participations of social beings whom we call writers and readers, and who constitute the writing as communication of a particular kind, as ‘saying’ a certain thing. Just as the sociologist attempts to uncover structures and regularities in social situations, so it is assumed that the meaning of writing is an a prion to be uncovered existing either as a function of the language, or the inscription of something in the mind of the writer, or the reconstruction of the reader’s experience. Constitutive Graphonomy, the constitutive ethnography of writing systems, is concerned to examine the objective meanings of writing as social accomplishments of these participants. This is because meaning is a social fact which comes to being within the discourse of a culture, and social facts as well as social structures are themselves social accomplishments.

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Constitutive Graphonomy is a post-colonial literary theory. It can be described as such for several reasons: it affirms the fact that a literary theory is a cultural formation; it resists the reification of the art form out of its social and cultural provenance; it confirms the text as originating in material practice at a dual site of production and consumption; it contributes to a dismantling of our nominal and largely unexamined assumptions of literary definition, reassessing what kinds of writing 'fit' or could be considered to fit into the category 'literature'; it questions the assumptions of the process of ascribing merit through critical practice. But above all it focuses the meaning event within the usage of social actors who present themselves to each other as functions in the text, and by its privileging of cultural distance at the site of this usage it resolves the conflict between language, reader and writer over the 'ownership' of meaning. These characteristics do not represent an 'essential' feature of post-colonial theory, nor are they necessarily exclusive to it. Rather they are individual and overlapping features of this particular discursive formation.

Clearly the notion of the text as dialectical accomplishment requires some clarification, since our assumption of the givenness of texts is supported at
Clearly the notion of the text as dialectical accomplishment requires some clarification, since our assumption of the givenness of texts is supported at the very least by the evidence of their physical tangibility. To the question, ‘How do you mean?’, we could say that the meaning of a word is meant by the person who utters it and is taken to mean something by the person who hears it. As a radical over-simplification of the history of European literary theory we could say that such history has been an arena in which all of these participants – the language, the utterer or writer, and the hearer or reader – have been locked in a gladiatorial contest over the ownership of meaning. But on closer examination it can be seen that all three ‘functions’ of this exchange participate in the ‘social’ situation of the written text. The constant insistence of that discourse which operates through hybridity and marginality is that writing is a social practice. There is simply no room in post-colonial literature for a reified art that ‘exists for its own sake’. Admittedly, the political impetus of post-colonial theory has been to focus meaning at the site of production. But such theory is in a unique position to resolve some of the lingering questions of European theory because it exists in a permanent and creative tension with the metropolitan centre and its privileging of standard code, intrinsic value and veridical truth.

Meaning is a social accomplishment characterised by the participation of the writer and reader ‘functions’ within the ‘event’ of the particular discourse. Meaning may thus be called a ‘situated accomplishment’ – a term which takes into account the necessary presence of these functions and the situation in which the meaning occurs. It is easy to see the understanding reached in conversation as a ‘situated accomplishment’, for the face-to-face interaction enables a virtually limitless adjustment to the flow of talk. The central feature of such activity is presence, the presence of the speaker and the hearer to each other constituting language as communication. Yet even in the most empathetic exchange the speaker and hearer are never fully present to one another. The experience of one conversant can never become the experience of the other: the ‘mind’ is a retrospective and largely hypothetical concomitant to what is ‘revealed’ in language. Meaning and understanding of meaning can occur because the language encodes the reciprocity of the experiences of each conversant. It is the situation, the ‘event’ of this reciprocal happening which ‘tells’, which ‘refers’, which ‘informs’.

The example of conversation alerts us to the extent and the limitation of the structuring activities of individuals in any social situation. No person is a totally free agent, for that would be to deny the effects of society, culture, and history upon the individual and the situation in which s/he is acting. But
rather than upon the participating individuals. And though these individuals can direct or unleash the potentialities of the antecedents, affecting the situation, they cannot change them. The apparently simple example of a casual conversation clearly demonstrates the complex array of structuring participations in the social event. But it is the 'event', the situation of its structure and structuring participations rather than the contingent intentions or psychological sates of speakers, which imparts a direction and a meaning to the conversation.

The discursive 'event', the site of the 'communication', therefore becomes of paramount importance in post-colonial literatures because the 'participants' are potentially so very 'absent'. Indeed, unlike spoken discourse, the central problematic of studies of writing is absence. It is not so easy to see the written meaning as the 'situated accomplishment' of participants because the message 'event' occupies the apparent social fissure between the acts of writing and reading, the discursive space in which writer and reader as social actors never meet. Whether the writing is a newspaper article, instructions for the assembly of a model aeroplane, or a philosophical treatise, the writer and reader have access to each other only through the mutual construction of the text within certain linguistic and generic parameters. That distance between minds, which seems to be compensated for in the spoken conversation by the situation of the dialogue, would appear to elude writing. The written text stands apart in its own material integrity, apparently unrelated to persons, to language or to social systems in any purely mechanical or isomorphic way, but grounded in the semiotic systems by which such persons and systems are imputed. How meaning is constructed in the writing by its absentee users becomes a central question in writing studies and is made much more salient by post-colonial writing systems in which writer and reader might have ranges of experience and presuppositions which may not be expected to overlap greatly, if at all. The additional perspective which the consideration of post-colonial literatures brings to this discussion is obviously their accentuation of this phenomenon of distance: they present us with writers and readers far more 'absent' from each other than they would be if located in the same culture; they present a situation which in some cases (because the genre of written prose is so removed from some cultures) provides a totally ambivalent site for communication. One qualification to this may be that the sharing of an imperial system of education and cultural patronage, issuing forth in the widespread uniformity of curriculae, readers, and other cultural 'guides' used throughout Britain's empire, considerably ameliorates this distancing within the post-colonial world. But even in the monoglossic settler cultures

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used throughout Britain's empire, considerably ameliorates this distancing within the post-colonial world. But even in the monoglossic settler cultures the sub-cultural distancing which generates the evolution of variant language shows that the linguistic cultures encompassed by the term 'English' are vastly heterogeneous. Most importantly, post-colonial literatures provide, through the metonymic function of language variance, a writing which actually installs distance and absence in the interstices of the text.

The face-to-face situation of spoken discourse is replaced by the distanciation of the writing system, a distance which frees the meaning from the constraints of speech and creates a vehicle which at once confirms and bridges the absence of writers and readers. As writing, the message event is not merely a different physical mode, but a different ontological event. Derrida claims that:

Inscription alone ... has the power to arouse speech from its slumber as sign. By enregistering speech, inscription has as its essential objective ... the emancipation of meaning ... from the natural predicament in which everything refers to the disposition of a contingent situation. This is why writing will never be simple 'voice painting' (Voltaire). It creates meaning by enregistering it, by entrusting it to an engraving, a groove, a relief, to a surface whose essential characteristic is to be infinitely transmissible.¹

By freeing language from the contingent situation, writing, paradoxically, gives language its greatest permanence, whilst, at the same time, giving meaning its greatest volatility, because it opens up horizons within which many more sets of relations then those pertaining to the contingent situation can be established. Writing does not merely inscribe the spoken message or represent the message event, it becomes the new event. Nor is it merely the inscription of thought without the medium of speech, for such thought is only accessible as a putative associate of the event. Post-colonial literature reveals this most clearly when its appropriation of English, far from inscribing either vernacular or 'standard' forms, creates a new discourse at their interface. Post-colonial writing represents neither speech nor local reality but constructs a discourse which may intimate them. This distinction ought to be made as clearly as possible. While writing is a new ontological event it does not cut itself off from the voice. The inscription of the vernacular modality of local speech is one of the strategies by which a 'marginal' linguistic culture appropriates the imported language to its own conceptions of society and place. This discourse also questions the Derridian conclusion that writing is infinitely transmissible and hence infinitely interpretable. Infinite transmissability assumes a totally homogeneous
subsumes all writing into a universalist paradigm which is essentially that of the metropolitan centre.

The danger exists that within this universalist paradigm writing may become reified. In fact, this problem begins with structuralist linguistics, which tends to reify the linguistic code. In Saussure’s distinction between langue and parole, langue is the code or set of codes on the basis of which a speaker produces parole, a particular message. While langue, the description of the synchronic systems of language, is the object of linguistics, the parole, the language in use, the intentional message, focuses a study of language on its actual operation. Now parole is precisely what Saussure’s Course in General Linguistics (1916) is not about, and ever since its publication, linguistics, the handmaiden of structuralism, has bracketed the message in order to concentrate on the code, in which it is primarily interested.

A post-colonial approach to linguistics, however, redresses this imbalance by focusing on the message, reinstating the parole as the realisation of the code in social life. This has the consequence of re-establishing the ‘margins’ of language as the substance of theory. This reassertion of the margins of language use over the dominance of a standard code, a centre, is the most exciting conclusion of the theory of the ‘creole continuum’. But it is also instrumental in conceiving the discourse of the post-colonial as rooted in conflict and struggle, as ‘counter-discourse’, since the perpetual confrontation with a ‘standard code’ is that which constructs the language. This does not mean the replacement of one canon for another, or the reconstruction of the centre which is being subverted. Such a re-orientation emphasises the fact that the code is abstracted from the activity, and re-installs the priority of the practical or constitutive semiology of the message. This observation reveals that language has its only practical existence in the parole within which the usage of members, rather than a supervenient system or a priori referentiality, determines meanings. This becomes particularly true of English in which the notion of a standard ‘code’ is dismantled by the continuum of practices by which the language is constituted.

This constitutive semiology radically modifies the most fundamental tenets of Saussurian theory, namely;

(a) That in semiotic system there are differences but no substantial existence. No entity belonging to the structure of the system has a meaning of its own; the meaning of a word, for example, results from the opposition to the other lexical units of the same system.

(b) That all systems are closed, without relation to external, non-semiotic reality.
While it is certainly true that meaning is not necessarily determined by the external relation of a sign and a thing, meaning is determined within the relations actualised within the message rather than those purely abstracted in the system. In short, language is a social medium for individuals rather than a self sufficient system of inner relationships. Though it does not determine meaning ostensively, it is a social act within which reality is determined. Consequently, the message event marks the terrain of meaning for the written work, for only the message event gives currency to language within the relations of social beings. Neither the mental lives of speakers and writers nor the objects of their talk can usurp this fundamental concern.

Constitutive Graphonomy reassesses traditional approaches to meaning such as those in speech act theory. While we can inscribe the propositional content of a speech act we cannot, for instance, inscribe its illocutionary force. Such force is carried in the situation of the message. Both the illocutionary and perlocutionary force of the sign THIS WAY are embodied entirely in its character as sign and the social conventions surrounding its role. Similar conventions surround and determine the forms of different kinds of writing, particularly those given the designation 'literary'. The illocutionary force of these texts similarly cannot be conveyed by means of grammar, italics, and punctuation, but rather is actualised constitutively in the conventional practice – the situation – of the reading. The writing 'event' thus becomes the centre of the accomplishment of meaning, for it is here that the system, the social world of its users, and the absent 'participants' themselves, intersect.

The post-colonial affirms the orientation of writing to the message event. The immense 'distance' between author and reader in the cross-cultural or sub-cultural text undermines the privilege of both subject and object and opens meaning to a relational dialectic which 'emancipates' it. This emancipation, however, is limited by the 'absence' which is inscribed in the cross-cultural text, the gulf of silence installed by strategies of language variance which signify its difference. Inscription therefore does not 'create meaning' by enregistering it; it initiates meaning to a horizon of relationships circumscribed by that silence which ultimately cannot be traversed by an interpretation. It is this silence, the active assertion of the post-colonial text, rather than any culture-specific concept of meaning, which questions metropolitan notions of polysemy and resists the absorption of post-colonial literature into the universalist paradigm. We can thus see how important is the cross-cultural literary text in questions of meaning. Nothing better
describes to us the distance traversed in the social engagement which occurs when authors write and readers read. But it is clear that the distances are traversed. Writing comes into being at the intersection of the sites of production and consumption. Although the 'social relationship' of the two absent subjects is actually a function of their access to the 'situation' of the writing, it is in this threefold interaction of situation, author function, and reader function that meaning is accomplished.

LANGUAGE

We may now examine more closely the contending claims in the struggle for the dominance of meaning. The first of these is language, which is commonly held to embody or contain meaning either by direct representation or, in a more subtle way, by determining the perception of the world. Constitutive Graphonomy raises the question of language to prominence because language that exists in complexity, hybridity and constant change inevitably rejects the assumption of a linguistic structure or code which can be characterised by the colonial distinction of 'standard' and 'variant'. All language is 'marginal'; all language emerges out of conflict and struggle. The post-colonial text brings language and meaning to a discursive site in which they are mutually constituted, and at this site the importance of usage is inescapable.

Although the view is rarely expressed by anyone conversant with languages in different cultures that language 'represents' or 'reflects' an autonomous reality, it is probably the most ubiquitous Western assumption about the operation of language because our sense of how words mean operates within a discourse in which the world (the object) is irretrievably separated from the speaker (the subject). The Lockian separation of subject and object, the separation of the consciousness from the world of which it is conscious, is the schema which still underlies the modern Western episteme with its passion for 'scientific' objectivity and its tendency to see the world as a continuum of technological data. Such a view is possibly the most crucial factor separating Western society from those societies in which much (though not all) post-colonial literature is generated. The view of language which this schema installs is best represented by the theories of 'reference' which dominated Anglo-empiricism in the earlier part of this century, but which still hold sway in most empirical philosophies. According to this view words have referents in the real world, and what a word refers to is, for all intents and purposes, what it means.
But words are never so simply referential in the actual dynamic habits of a speaking community. Even the most simple words like ‘hot’, ‘big’, ‘man’, ‘got’, ‘ball’, and ‘bat’, have a number of meanings, depending on how they are used. Indeed, these uses are the ways (and therefore what) the word means in certain circumstances. A word such as ‘bat’ can operate as a noun with several referents or as a verb describing several kinds of action. Many other words, such as ‘bush’ (which has found hundreds of uses in post-colonial societies), reveal that the meaning of words is also inextricably tied to the discourse of place. Post-colonial literature has continually shown both the importance of this discourse and the inescapable linking of meaning to the usage within the event. In his novel *The Voice* Gabriel Okara demonstrates the almost limitless prolixity of the words ‘inside’ and ‘insides’ to describe the whole range of human volition, experience, emotion and thought. Brought to the site of meaning which stands at the intersection between two separate cultures, the word demonstrates the total dependence of that meaning upon its ‘situated-ness’.

Language cannot, therefore, be said to perform its hermeneutic function by reflecting or referring to the world in a purely contingent way, and thus meanings cannot remain exclusively accessible to those speakers who ‘experience their referents’, so to speak. The central feature of the ways in which words mean things in spoken or written discourse is the situation of the word. In general, one may see how the word is meant by the way it functions in the sentence, but the meaning of a word may require considerably more than a sentence for it to be adequately situated. The question remains whether it is the responsibility of the author in the cross-cultural text to employ techniques which more promptly ‘situate’ the word or phrase for the reader. While post-colonial writing has led to a profusion of technical innovation which exists to span the purported gap between writer and prospective reader, the process of reading itself is a continual process of contextualisation and adjustment directly linked to the constitutive relations within the discursive event.

An alternative, determinist view which proposes that language actually constructs that which is perceived and experienced by speakers is less problematic for post-colonial literature. Edward Sapir proposed the exciting and revolutionary view that what we call the ‘real’ world is built up by the language habits of a group, and that the worlds in which different societies live are quite distinct, not merely the same world with different labels attached. The central idea of Whorf and Sapir’s thesis is well known. It proposes that language functions not simply as a device for reporting
experience, but also, and more significantly, as a way of defining experience of its speakers:

... the linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade ... We dissect nature along the line laid down for us by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organised in our minds – and this means by the linguistic system in our minds. 10

But even this more attractive view of the link between language and the world may give rise to a number of objections from constitutive theory. Clearly, language offers one set of categories and not another for speakers to organise and describe experience, but to assume that language creates meanings in the minds of speakers misconceives the way in which meaning is constituted in discourse. While it is quite clear that language is more than a 'reproducing instrument for voicing ideas' (for what do thoughts or ideas look like apart from their expression in language?), the same objections can be applied to the idea of language as the 'shaper' or 'programmer' of ideas. Such ideas are still inaccessible apart from language. To possess a language is to possess a technique, not necessarily a quantum of knowledge about the world; and therefore it is tautological to say that one speaker 'sees' the world in the same way as another because they share a technique for putting certain rules into practice – the 'seeing' is embedded in the practice. To speak of language as 'shaping' ideas also logically leads to the identification of one particular 'shaping' with a particular language, or more commonly, with the use of language in a particular place. This sort of identification leaves itself no conceptual room to cope with the phenomenon of second language use or vernacular linguistic variance, for it is only in the most metaphorical sense that we can talk about a speaker 'seeing' a different world when s/he speaks in a second language.

But it is the situation of discourse rather than the linguistic system in the speaker's mind in which the 'obligatory terms' of language are structured. For instance, Whorf's discovery that Inuit languages have a variety of words for 'snow', thus suggesting they see the world differently from non-Inuits, overlooks the fact that skiers of all languages have a similar variety of words for snow, but could hardly be said to see the world differently in the way Whorf means. The meaning and nature of perceived reality are not determined within the minds of the users, nor even within the language
itself, but within the use, within the multiplicity of relationships which operate in the system. Margaret Atwood makes an interesting reference to a North American Indian language which has no noun-forms, only verb-forms. In such a linguistic culture the experience of the world remains in continual process. Such a language cannot exist if language is either anterior or posterior to the world but reinforces the notion that language inhabits the world, in practice. The semantic component of the sentence is contained in the syntax: the meaning of a word or phrase is its use in the language, a use which has nothing to do with the kind of world a user 'has in his or her head'.

What the speaker 'has in mind', like a linguistic system or culture, or intentions or meanings, is only accessible in the 'retrospective' performance of speaking. The categories which language offers to describe the world are easily mistaken to shape something in the mind because we naturally assume that, like the rules of chess, we hold the linguistic system 'in our minds', in advance of the world. But language is co-extensive with social reality, not because it causes a certain perception of the world, but because it is inextricable from that perception.

Languages exist, therefore, neither before the fact nor after the fact but in the fact. Languages constitute reality in an obvious way: they provide some terms and not others with which to talk about the world. Because they provide a limited lexicon they may also be said (metaphorically) to 'use' the speaker, rather than vice versa. But the worlds constituted in this way do not become fixed composites in the speaker's mind, a set of images which differs, by definition, from the set in the mind of the speaker of a different language. Worlds exist by means of languages, their horizons extending as far as the processes of neologism, innovation, tropes and imagination will allow the horizons of the language itself to be extended.

THE READER FUNCTION IN THE WRITING

If the written text is a social situation, the post-colonial text emphasises the central problem of this situation, the 'absence' of those 'functions' in the text which operate to constitute the discursive event as communication: the 'writer' and 'reader'. The author function, with its vision and intentions, its 'gifted creative insight', has historically exerted the strongest claim upon the meaning of writing. But the concept of the author is quite alien to many post-colonial cultures and, as Foucault has pointed out, is really a quite recent phenomenon in European culture. The need to ground discourse in an originating subject was the reason to accord it the status of a possession.
Speeches and books were assigned real authors only when someone had to be made responsible for them as possessions and therefore subject to punishment, first for transgressing religious rules and later for transgressing or affirming the rules of property ownership. To attain this social and legal status the meaning had to be a product attributable to a subject. Consequently, the immense and complex forces of which the text was a product could be conveniently located in an originating mind.

This should assist us to find some balance in assessing the author’s place in the ‘production’ of the text. We have made an important start by rejecting the notion that meaning is a mental act, a sort of picture which the author translates into words or vice versa. But how does the non-English speaker, for instance, mean anything in English? Firstly, the writer, like the language, is subject to the situation, in that s/he must say something meanable. This does not mean s/he cannot alter the language, and use it neologistically and creatively; it does mean, however, that the writer becomes limited, as any speaker is limited, to a situation in which words have meaning. In literature the ‘situation’ refers to something of extremely wide range. It is, at its simplest, the place of the word within a meanable context, the grammar or rules which make the context meanable, but it is also a continuously unfolding horizon which ever more finely articulates the meaning. (From the reader’s point of view it is important to realise that the ‘situation’ extends beyond the text.) Literature, and particularly narrative, has the capacity to domesticate even the most alien experience. It does not need to reproduce the experience to construct the meaning. Thus although there is no word in English which has the associations of mana (oneness with the world) in Polynesian or Tjukurrpa (the ‘Dreaming’) in Pintjantjatjara, there is no insurmountable conceptual difficulty in articulating their associations.

One could go further than this to say that the author is subject not only to the situation of discourse but to the reader as well. The reader is present, as a function, in the writing of the text. Thus the relationship between these social forces and the text is the same as that between the linguistic system and the ‘text’ of a particular world view: neither causal nor representative, but co-extensive. The crucial assertion of Constitutive Graphonomy is that within the framework of these social antecedents, the writer and reader functions are as ‘present’ to each other in the acts of writing and reading as conversants are in conversation. The reader may be present in the writing at a conscious level, in the author’s sense of an audience, of a purpose for writing, but it is not necessarily so specific. To detect the presence of the reader function in the writing let us first think clearly whether the act of writing can ever exclude the simultaneous act of reading. That moment of
as Sartre says, the others 'were already present in the heart of the word, hearers and speakers awaiting their turn'. The requirement of meanability itself implicates the reader function. The space within which the writer meets the reading other is neither one culture nor another, neither one language nor another, but the parole, the situation of discourse

THE WRITER FUNCTION IN THE READING

Just as the reader 'writes' the text because s/he takes it to mean something, and just as the reader function is present in the writing as the focus of its meanability, so the author is present in the reading. Again, this is firstly true at a conscious level, where the reader accepts the convention that the author is telling him or her something in the text. S/he responds to the text as 'telling' him or her something because such ways of using language as this literary text represents come within the rules for the activity of 'telling'. But one cannot 'tell' others anything that they do not incorporate or 'tell' themselves. The mind is active in knowing. Whether in a child learning a language or in a scientist 'observing' an 'objective' universe, knowing is conducted within the situation of horizons of expectations and other knowledge. In reading, a horizon of expectations is partly established by the unfolding text, while a relevant horizon of other knowledge (actually other texts) is established by exploration.

The reader constructs the other dialogic pole of discourse because speaking is a social act. But the reader does not simply respond to the convention of the authoring other; s/he responds to the 'intentionality' of the work itself, quite apart from any imputation of an author. The work is a way of seeing and responding, a way of directing attention to that which is 'given to consciousness'. It is more accurate to say that the reader sees 'according to' or 'with' the text rather than sees 'it'. This orientation to the intentionality of the text occurs whether there is an actual author or not. We can deduce from this that the intentionality of the text can be put for the direction of the author's consciousness. Thus interpretation is never univocal, but the reader is subject to the situation, to the rules of discourse, and to the directing other, as the author is subject to them.

As with language, our natural assumption about understanding is that it must be a discrete experience, that when we 'understand' there must be characteristic experiences of understanding which have corresponding identifiable mental correlates. Otherwise how could we 'understand' a writer (even one writing in a common language) who has a profoundly different experience of the world? But we can test this assumption that understanding
identifiable mental correlates. Otherwise how could we ‘understand’ a writer (even one writing in a common language) who has a profoundly different experience of the world? But we can test this assumption that understanding is an identifiable experience. Take the example of a bricklayer who uses the term ‘Brick!’ as an elliptical form of the phrase ‘Pass me a brick’. Neither the bricklayer nor the person to whom s/he is talking needs to translate the word ‘Brick!’ into the phrase every time it is used in order to understand it. The word operates perfectly well as a communication within the exchange and it is its use and the continuation of the job which locates the understanding of the word ‘Brick’ as an order. The same process applies when English variants, neologisms and borrowings are situated in the written English text. As with most words there may be many possible uses but it is the use in this situation which locates the meaning. Gabriel Okara’s use of ‘inside’ and ‘insides’ is an obvious case in point.

The processes of understanding are therefore not limited to the minds of speakers of one mother tongue and denied the speakers of another. Meaning and the understanding of meaning exist outside the mind, within the engagement of speakers using the language. Understanding, then, is not a function of what goes on in the ‘mind’ at all, but a location of the hermeneutic object in its linguistic situation. When I understand a language, I can go on to continue the discourse. When I understand what other people say, I am not required to have their mental images; and when they communicate meaning they are not obliged to transfer to the listener the ‘contents’ of their mind, nor any of the mental images and associations which may be aroused by that language.

THE METONYMIC FUNCTION OF POST-COLONIAL LANGUAGE

Given the multiaccentuality of meaning which a Constitutive Graphonomy uncovers, the question remains as to how the post-colonial text itself resists the reincorporation of its discursive practice into an amorphous universal textuality. As I have suggested, it does this by actually installing alterity and absence in the interstices of the text. Whether written from monoglossic, diglossic or polyglossic cultures, such writing uses language to signify difference while employing a ‘sameness’ which allows it to be understood. Such difference is signified by language ‘variance’, the part of the wider cultural whole which appropriates the language of the centre while setting itself apart.

One of the most interesting features of post-colonial literature is that kind of writing which is informed by the linguistic principles of a first language,
adopted literary form. And it is this intersection of language which many writers propose as the distinguishing feature of post-colonial literature. This use of language is something for which the writer usually takes as evidence (of both his or her ingenuity and ethnographic function) an insertion of the 'truth' of culture into the text by a process of metaphoric embodiment. But quite simply, language variance is métonymie, a synecdochic index of cultural difference which affirms the distance of cultures at the very moment in which it proposes to bring them together.

The use of English inserts itself into a political discourse in post-colonial writing, and the transcription of English variants of all kinds captures that moment between the culture affirmed on the one hand as 'indigenous', or 'national', and that on the other as 'imperialist', colonialist, or 'metropolitan'. In the play *The Cord* by the Malaysian writer K.S. Maniam the English variant establishes itself in clear contradistinction to the 'standard' within the dialogue itself.

*Muthiah:* What are you saying? Speaking English?
*Ratnam:* The language you still think is full of pride. The language that makes you a stiff white corpse like this!
*Muthiah:* But you're nothing. I'm still the boss here.
*Ratnam:* Everything happens naturally. Now the language is spoke like I can speak it ... I can speak real life English now.
*Muthiah:* You can do that all day to avoid work!

There are two principles operating in this passage which are central to the writing of all cross-cultural literature. On the one hand there is a repetition of the general idea of the interdependence of language and identity - you are the way you speak. This general idea includes the more specific Malaysian and Singaporean debate about whether 'standard' English or local variants should be spoken in the region. The language of power, the language of the metropolitan centre is that of Muthiah, while the 'real life English', the language variant of cultural fidelity, is the one spoken by Ratnam.

But the other, more distinctive act of the cross-cultural text is to inscribe difference and absence as a corollary of that identity. The articulation of two quite opposed possibilities of speaking and therefore of political and cultural identification outlines a cultural space between them which is left unfilled, and which, indeed, locates the core of the cross-cultural text. This unbridged and redolent gulf of silence remains the energising centre of post-colonial
writing. It is undiluted and perfect because it exists beyond language, the ultimate signifier of difference. This gap becomes itself the sign of a fracture between different worlds, worlds which may be sharable in language, but whose apartness – the difference of lifetimes of associations, traditions, simple experiences, learned responses and conventional allusions – is explicitly confirmed. In this way the integrity of the traditional interpretation of the world is articulated by difference and located firmly within its own ‘world’ of experience.

But the location of this aphasic cultural gulf in the text is made most often and most strikingly by uses of language which we could call the ‘devices of otherness’, the devices which appear specifically utilised to establish the difference and uniqueness of the post-colonial text. Apart from direct glossing in the text, either by explanation or parenthetic insertions, such devices include syntactic fusion, in which the English prose is structured according to the syntactic principles of a first language; neologisms (new lexical forms in English which are informed by the semantic and morphological exigencies of a mother tongue); the direct inclusion of untranslated lexical items in the text; ethno-rhythmic prose which constructs an English discourse according to the rhythm and texture of a first language; and the transcription of dialect and language variants of many different kinds, whether they come from diglossic, polydialectical or monolingual communities.

At its extreme, as in the insertion of unglossed foreign language in the text, such language use is a direct confrontation with the requirement of meanability. Signifiers of alterity are not necessarily inaccessible; rather they explicitly establish a distance between the writer and reader functions in the text as a cultural gap. The gap of silence reaffirms the parameters of meanability as cultural parameters, and the language use offers its own hybridity as the sign of an absence which cannot be simply traversed by an interpretation. It directly intercepts notions of ‘infinite transmissability’ to protect its difference from the incorporating universalism of the centre.

In conclusion we can say that post-colonial theory offers a particular insight into questions of literary ontology and hermeneutics. The post-colonial writing, by stressing the distance between the participants, re-emphasises the constitutive nature of the meaning event and the complex nature of the usage in which meaning is accomplished. But the most interesting possibilities of this theory are provided by the way in which it distances itself from the tendency of European theory to establish universal laws and principles. Post-colonial writing questions assumptions about
distances itself from the tendency of European theory to establish universal laws and principles. Post-colonial writing questions assumptions about meaning and its transmissability, and privileges the conception of writing as a social act conceived within the fusion of culture and consciousness.

NOTES

5. Saussure, pp. 71-140.
13. I discovered this in an experiment conducted at the Australian National University in 1978. Participants were offered progressive lines of separate poems selected randomly in the belief that they were progressively reading a single poem. Respondents of high professional competence revealed great ingenuity in interpreting the ‘poem’ and in all cases directed their response to a constructed intentionality generally identified as ‘the poet’.