For the past few decades, postmodernist novelists have been using and describing speech and language disorders in their works, showing a growing interest in picturing the ways in which individuals with their linguistic skills impaired relate to the social environment and organize their knowledge of reality. Mentioning just four examples, novels as different as Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* (1971), Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* (1985), Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral* (1997) and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) feature characters suffering from more or less explicitly defined speech disorders: selective mutism in Atwood’s and Roy’s characters, stuttering in Roth’s terrifying Merry Levov or the deficient language acquisition process in Auster’s feral child, Peter Stillman.

Don DeLillo (New York, 1936) seems to be a particularly relevant author in this context. Most of his novels contain one example or other of a character suffering from some disorder related to his or her linguistic skills: In *Ratner’s Star* (1976), a character known as “the scream lady” suffers attacks of what appears to be a combination of logorrhea, coprolalia and verbigeration (*RS 249*).¹ In *The Body Artist* (2001) a stranger with his linguistic skills severely damaged appears at Lauren Hartke’s door. DeLillo’s portrayal of Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra* (1988) emphasizes the character’s dyslexia or “word-blindness” (*L 166*), which is diagnosed by KGB recruitment agents when he passes the tests in order to become a spy for the Soviet Union. In *White Noise* (1985), Wilder, the youngest child of the Gladney family, suffers from either autism or selective
mutism. And in *Great Jones Street* (1973), rock star Bucky Wunderlick, suffers a transitory episode of global aphasia.

After this enumeration of more or less accurately diagnosed disorders, I should make clear that my interest in this topic lays not so much on the clinical description of them, but on the effects they have in literary terms. The aims of this paper are mainly two: first, to analyze in detail some instances of speech disorders in DeLillo’s novels in the wider context of his interest in abnormal linguistic behaviors including babble or glossolalia. Second, to locate their narrative function in the novels, which can be said to be analogous to that of other narrative elements related to isolation and anti-social behaviors, in the literary context of modernist and postmodernist fiction.

In order to illustrate DeLillo’s use of speech and communication disorders I will focus on the exposition of two case stories: Mr. Tuttle, from *The Body Artist* and Bucky Wunderlick, from *Great Jones Street*. Mr. Tuttle shows severe impairment of his comprehension capacity, while his output is fluent. His verbal output is the only clue we have as to what his condition may be: he might suffer from autism, specific language impairment (SLI) or some form of fluent aphasia. *Great Jones Street* (1973) ends with an episode of global aphasia suffered by its protagonist as a consequence of drug consumption. The description of its effects coincides with usual definitions of aphasia: “It’s a drug that affects one or more areas of the left sector of the brain. Language sector […] Loss of speech in other words” (*GJS* 255). Mr. Tuttle’s condition is fluent and seems to be permanent, while Bucky’s is non fluent but temporary.

Both novels offer abundant evidence of the characters’ verbal output, which might help us to identify their disorders. Mr. Tuttle’s speech consists of fragments of jargon and repetition of phrases—“ ‘If there is another language you speak’ she told him, ‘say some words’. ‘Say some words’ ” (*BA* 55); “Say some words to say some words” (*BA* 55); “The word for moonlight is moonlight” (*BA* 82)—and of agrammatical
sentences—“It is not able” (*BA* 43)—which show his incapacity to establish a conversation with another person. This is what Lauren, the woman at whose door he mysteriously appears, says about him: “There’s a code in the simplest conversation that tells the speakers what’s going on outside the bare acoustics. This was missing when they talked” (*BA* 65). Moreover, Mr. Tuttle has an almost miraculous ability to imitate other people’s voices, as an extreme form of echolalia—“It wasn’t outright impersonation but she heard elements of her voice, the clipped delivery, the slight buzz deep in the throat, her pitch, her sound” (*BA* 50). He is able to reproduce fragments of conversations they had in the past—“But it was Rey’s voice she was hearing. The representation was close, the accent and dragged vowels, the intimate differences, the articulations produced in one vocal apparatus and not another, things she’d known in Rey’s voice, and only Rey’s” (*BA* 61)—and, according to Lauren’s impression, conversations they will have in the future: “She listened to him say, Don’t touch it. I’ll clean it up later […] Then she said it herself, some days later” (*BA* 98). To sum up, while Mr. Tuttle’s output remains fluent, it seems to be affected by his incapacity to process input; his paraphasic speech, together with his compulsion to reproduce other people’s speech, may help us to conclude that he suffers from transcortical mixed aphasia.\(^3\)

Bucky’s speech is more severely impaired during his aphasic episode, which is described by another character in the following terms: “You’ll be perfectly healthy. You won’t be able to make words, that’s all. They just won’t come into your mind the way they normally do and the way we all take for granted they will. Sounds yes. Sounds galore. But no words” (*GJS* 255). While he is completely unable to produce any words, he is still able to emit inarticulate sounds: “I made interesting and original sounds. I looked out of the window and moaned (quietly) at the lumbering trucks…” (*GJS* 264). As to his comprehension capacity, it is not easy to evaluate the extent of his impairment,
for he does not have direct intercourse with anyone during his aphasic episode. As he
walks the streets like a somnambulist, he seems to keep his capacity to register what
other people perform, though most of the times as shouts and cries: “the man wailed to
the blank windows above him. It was a religious cry he produced, evocative of mosques
and quaking sunsets” (GJS 259); “[…] those whose only peace was in shouting ever
more loudly” (GJS 263). Bucky’s could be a case of global aphasia, as his language
function as a whole seems to be affected.

From a narratological perspective, we must note in the first place that Bucky’s
episode is narrated retrospectively by himself—“the drug was less than lasting in its
effect” (GJS 264)—while Mr. Tuttle’s condition is described and reflected upon from
Lauren’s point of view. While Bucky will undergo a drastic impairment in his
communicative skills, just to report on it afterwards, Lauren will bear witness to Mr.
Tuttle’s condition simultaneously, thus bridging the communicative gap between him
and the narrative form and therefore, between him and the reader. Both narrators, it
should be noted, are artists whose habitual modes of expression are different from
verbal communication: Bucky is a musician; Lauren is the body artist mentioned in the
title. We should note as well that both cases of communication impairment take place in
contexts of physical isolation. Lauren and Mr. Tuttle live in an isolated house in an
indeterminate coastal area; Bucky retreats to a decrepit apartment in an obscure New
York City suburb. In both cases, there is an attempt on the part of protagonists to
withdraw from their social environments.

For both Mr. Tuttle and Bucky, the narrative suggests that their cognition is
affected by their aphasia. In this way, the novels seem to take a position regarding the
historical debate on whether “thinking” is affected by aphasia or not (see Varley, 128;
Sarno, 11) and, in a wider context, they enter the realm of the discussion on linguistic
determinism. As a consequence of their disorders, both their image of themselves and
their perception of the world are affected. As it has been observed in psychological practice, “the loss of normal communication strikes at the very roots of a person’s sense of self inasmuch as identity is based primarily on relationships which, in turn, depend largely on communication” (Sarno, 569; see also Jonker, 41). Mr. Tuttle’s realm of perception and existence is described by Lauren as an indeterminate state external to the linguistic organization of time and space: “He hasn’t learned the language. There has to be an imaginary point, a nonplace where language intersects with our perceptions of time and space, and he is a stranger at this crossing, without words or bearings” (BA 99). Living without language makes Mr. Tuttle a stranger in the world, without means to interact and with it. In this passage, the topographical metaphorization of the linguistic order as a grid—suggested by terms as “imaginary point,” “intersect,” “crossing”—closely resembles B.L. Whorf’s famous statement on the strongest version of linguistic determinism: “We cut nature up, organize it into concepts and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it this way—an agreement that holds thought or speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language” (Whorf, 213-214). As for Bucky, his newly acquired condition results in an estranged perception of the objects and people around him. The lack of this linguistic grid to measure reality affects his perception of it even in spatial terms: “Having no words for the things around me affected my movements across the room. I walked more slowly, as though in fear of objects, all things with names unknown to me” (GJS 264).

In narrative terms, it must be noted that even if both stories are told by normally fluent characters, they are affected by characters’ estranged perception of the world: Bucky’s later reconstruction of his aphasic episode shows the traces of his deformed perception of street sounds and people’s voices; Lauren’s story (in free indirect discourse) is affected by her relationship with Mr. Tuttle, as her narrative ends up imitating his speech. The first narrative effect of the characters’ disorders in the novels
is defamiliarization, defined by Russian formalists as the capacity of literary language to alter habitual perceptions of reality through the verbal manipulation of representation (Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” 5-24). The representation of reality in both novels is that of a “deforming mirror,” and it connects with other literary works in which characters with their linguistic or cognitive skills impaired tell a story, from the Benji section of William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) to Jonathan Lethem’s *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999).

What is most interesting about DeLillo’s portrayal of speech disorders in his novels is that they are recurrently described as desirable states, thus contradicting all evidence on real aphasic patients, who usually regard their condition as traumatic, sometimes to the point of undergoing a “catastrophic reaction” (see Goldstein, cf. Sarno, 569-570). In *Great Jones Street*, however, Bucky remembers his aphasic period as one of absolute happiness: “I was unreasonably happy, subsisting in blessed circumstance, thinking of myself as a kind of living chant” (*GJS* 264). Lauren, on the other hand, contemplates Mr. Tuttle with admiration and almost envy: “She wanted to chant with him, to fall in and out of time, or words, or things, whatever he was doing” (*BA* 74). In both novels, aphasia is described as a means of liberation from usual modes of perception and expression—“Maybe he falls, he slides, if that is a useful word, from his experience of an objective world, the deepest description of space-time” (*BA* 83).

Bucky’s slow recovery of speech, moreover, will be described as a process of failure to remain in that non-verbal realm: “Mouth was the first word to reach me, dropping from one speech mechanism to the other. It happened while I was looking at myself in the mirror, examining its strange parts, hanu, ous, leb, oog, nakka, and when I opened my mouth out came the word for that part, word instead of sound, mouth, startling me” (*GJS* 264). As Christopher Donovan has noted in relation to *Great Jones Street*, “Bucky longs for a pristine state of language, and to this end he endeavors to
strip away all the most frivolous aspects of our modern tongue in order to reach an
elemental core, equivalent to the state of the baby at the moment of birth” (Donovan,
46). Bucky attempts to attain “permanent withdrawal to that unimprinted level where all
sound is silken and nothing erodes in the mad weather of language” (GJS 265). He talks
about a pure, nonreferential form of language that appears throughout DeLillo’s novels,
often described as “pure chant:” “It was pure chant, transparent, or was he saying
something to her?” (BA 75), wonders Lauren in The Body Artist, but the same
expression can be found in White Noise (1985) or Underworld (1997) as well. It relates
every abnormal linguistic behavior in his novels through the same mystical rhetoric of a
conception of an alternative form of communication outside the grounds of conventional
meanings.

At this point, DeLillo’s concerns about language apparently depart from
Whorfian determinism, for he seems to hint at a point or a state in which individuals can
be completely free from language: the “unimprinted level” mentioned above. I suggest
that “unimprinted” lends itself to Lacanian interpretation in terms of the negation of
“double inscription”: DeLillo seems to suggest a realm beyond or beneath conscience
that is not formulated in linguistic terms. Bucky and Lauren long for what Leonard
Wilcox has called, in reference to Lacan, “the return of the Real:” “Occasioned by an
eruption of contingency, it involves a shock of recognition, a disturbance in the
symbolic world of the subject” (Wilcox, 121). Though I am not qualified to offer a
comprehensive Lacanian interpretation of these novels, I would like to point out,
nevertheless, how Lacan’s concept of the (pre-verbal) Real and the possibility to
encounter it only in those instants he calls the “tuché” might be illuminating for the
understanding of Bucky’s—and other DeLillo characters’—longing for the
“unimprinted level” of sound.
DeLillo’s intuitive notion of a pure, pre-referential language, has been repeatedly expressed in his writings in terms charged with religious and mystical overtones. When Lauren tries to join Mr. Tuttle in his gibberish in *The Body Artist*, for instance, her attempt is narrated in terms that resemble those of mystical poetry: “This is the point, yes, this is the stir of the amazement. And some terror at the edge, or fear of believing, some displacement of self, but this is the point, this is the wedge into ecstasy, the old deep meaning of the word, your eyes rolling upward in your skull” (*BA 75*). Pure chant is a means to attain that “displacement of self,” literally an attempt to escape from oneself: by escaping from the linguistic order, DeLillo’s characters can escape from their conscious being, as formulated in the symbolic order.

This account of two speech and communication disorders in DeLillo’s fiction should be enough to show that his aim when using them in his novels is not to provide accurate accounts of those pathologies, but to use them as an excuse for reflection on the nature of language. It could be said that speech disorders often lead in DeLillo’s novels to a reflection on the nature of language itself, pointing to what Arnold Weinstein describes as his “visionary concern with language” (289). In both cases the emphasis is laid in the characters’ perception and narrative representation of reality as a consequence of their disorders and in the consideration of their state as a desirable one, as long as it is understood as liberation from any linguistic order. In this sense, both Mr. Tuttle’s and Bucky’s cases should be understood in the general context of other abnormal linguistic behaviors in DeLillo’s fiction, such as the episode of glossolalia or “speaking in tongues” narrated at the end of *The Names* (1982), the fascination with infant babbling in *White Noise* or the different attempts on the part of several characters in *End Zone* (1972) or *Underworld* to attain a state of quasi-mystical speechlessness which provides the happiness and serenity mentioned by Bucky. Moreover, this “displacement of self” finds parallel behaviors in other ascetic impulses like physical isolation or the
imposition of severe self-discipline, drawing what Mark Osteen has called “a pattern of withdrawal” in DeLillo’s characters (450).

Another focus for the interpretation of the narrative function played by abnormal linguistic behaviors in DeLillo can be found in the linguistic construction of social reality, and in a general dialectical frame in which language is described in ideological terms. Going back to Whorf’s statement: “we are parties to an agreement […] we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees” (214). In twentieth century culture, the awareness that language is the frame on which all world-views are cast is followed by the conviction that all language is ideological, in the sense that its normative uses are determined by particular power structures operating through institutional (and hence collective) discourses: political, scientific, artistic, etc.—formulated by Russian formalism, particularly in the work of V. Voloshinov, and also by authors such as Louis Althusser or Michel Foucault. Voloshinov writes in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*: “The word is the ideological phenomenon par excellence” (13). The clearest expression of this view can be found in *Great Jones Street*, when the drug administered to Bucky is said to have been created by a governmental secret agency—tentatively known in the novel as the “language warfare department” (*GJS* 255)—as a means to control subversive groups: “Maybe they think the best way to silence troublemakers is literally” (ibid). In *The Body Artist*, Lauren considers the possibility of calling mental hospitals and asylums in order to find out about Mr. Tuttle’s origin, and she thinks: “He didn’t act crazy, only impaired in matters of articulation and comprehension. Why did she ever think there was something psychotic about him except in the sense that people who threaten our assumptions are always believed to be mad?” (*BA* 97). This idea was formulated in very similar terms by Michel Foucault in *Histoire de la folie* (1961), and it points to the underlying power structure in any formulation of what is normal, sane or appropriate in
a particular social context. In this case, as Lauren ponders, her initial consideration of Mr. Tuttle as a mad person betrays the mechanism by which her perception of reality protects itself against threats to its epistemological integrity.

In this context, abnormal linguistic behaviors can be easily perceived as a threat to those power structures, thus providing a possibility of escape from them to those characters affected by particular disorders. In *The Body Artist*, Mr. Tuttle is said to be free from language and time codes, basic structures which impose order upon human existence: “If there is no sequential order except for what we engender to make us safe in the world, then maybe it is possible, what, to cross from one nameless state to another, except that it clearly isn’t” (*BA* 83). If silence, speechlessness or any deviation from what is usually named “normal” speech is described as a desirable state in DeLillo’s novels, it is because of the way in which those abnormal linguistic forms provide an unmapped area in power structures. In this sense, speech disorders in DeLillo’s narrative serve the aesthetic and sociological role of resistance often attributed to silence or to any abnormal use of language in previous literary traditions, such as the interest in extremely alienated and isolated individuals in modernist and existentialist fiction and drama (Engelberg, 2001), on the one hand, and to the American anti-social tradition, on the other hand (Tanner, 1971).4

Contemporary interest in speech disorders has very prominent antecedents in the Anglo-American tradition like Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd Sailor*. In *City of Words*, Tony Tanner writes: “There is a profound quest for silence running right through American literature, even in its most prolix manifestations” (Tanner, 28). He is referring to a long tradition of anti-social retreat into silence and isolation as a means to rebel against any organized power structure that goes back to H. D. Thoreau, developing up to the second half of the twentieth century into the novels of William H. Gass—*In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*—or William H. Burroughs—*The Exterminator*,
Naked Lunch—and the poems of Charles Simic—“Windy Evening”—or Mark Strand—“The Remains.” Although Tanner refers to this tendency as characteristic of the American tradition, we must note that authors such as Virginia Woolf or Samuel Beckett were also obsessed by abnormal linguistic behaviors, thus linking DeLillo’s aphasic characters to an ascendance that can be traced back to modernist and existentialist fiction. As it has already been mentioned, modernist novelists and playwrights repeatedly exploited for narrative use characters who exhibited anomalous or pathologic linguistic behaviors to dramatize the modern individual’s isolation or the collapse of traditional forms of communication (Engelberg, 2001).

DeLillo’s interest in aphasic characters can only be fully understood in the literary context I have tried to briefly sketch. In this sense, it is worth mentioning Ihab Hassan’s postmodernist poetics, designed precisely through the line I have just pointed at, linking modernist and postmodernist authors in what he called “The Literature of Silence:”

Silence refers to an avant-garde tradition of literature […] Silence implies alienation from reason, society and history, a reduction of all engagements in the created world of men, perhaps an abrogation of any communal existence […] Silence creates anti-languages. Some of them are utterly opaque, others completely transparent […] Silence fills the extreme states of the mind—void, madness, outrage, ecstasy, mystic trance—when ordinary discourse ceases to carry the burden of meaning. (Hassan, 13-14)

The literature of silence described by Hassan in this passage encompasses the uses of speech and communication disorders I have mentioned in this paper, and serves as a cue to sum up some conclusions: In the first place, DeLillo’s use of aphasia and other disorders must be related to the recurrence of abnormal linguistic behaviors in his novels. Speech disorders in his narrative are a source for narrative defamiliarization,
calling forth the Russian formalist concept of ostranenie or estrangement. They can be seen in turn as part of a wider dialectical narrative structure, which usually organizes his texts, often rendered in DeLillo’s novels through a narrative pattern of ascetic withdrawal or extreme alienation attainable only through the renunciation to language or the creation of alternative forms of communication. This dialectic can be read as well in ideological terms, as the individual’s attempts to escape from institutional discourses by means of linguistic behaviors considered abnormal by those institutions (political, medical, cultural). In his use of what Hassan calls “anti-languages,” DeLillo joins a double literary tradition of radical individualism and aesthetic experimentation, which connects him to modernist and existentialist poetics of extremely alienated individualities. In his novels, then, speech disorders function as the only means to escape “the prison-house of language.” The recurrent use of abnormal forms of communication provides a defamiliarized narrative perspective on reality which proves to be the real ground for individual resistance to any concept of “normal” linguistic use in DeLillo’s novels, thus becoming a central element in his narrative from a psychological, ideological and aesthetic perspective.

Works Cited


Notes
References to DeLillo’s works will be made parenthetically and identified by initials—*Ratner’s Star*: RS; *White Noise*: WN; *Libra*: L; *Great Jones Street*: GJS; *The Body Artist*: BA. Full reference will be given in the “Works Cited” section.

2 See Sarno, 1998: 25: “Aphasia is a disturbance of the complex process of comprehending and formulating verbal messages that results from newly acquired disease of the central nervous system (CNS)”; from the National Aphasia Association: “Aphasia is an impairment of language, affecting the production or comprehension of speech and the ability to read or write. Aphasia is always due to injury to the brain-most commonly from a stroke, particularly in older individuals. But brain injuries resulting in aphasia may also arise from head trauma, from brain tumors, or from infections”.

3 Defined by the National Academy of Neuropsychology as follows: “A rare aphasic disorder involves the isolation of both Broca’s and Wernicke’s areas. The patient has a virtual compulsion to repeat utterances to the point of appearing echolalic. Other language abilities, such as comprehension, naming, expression, and reading are impaired. The patient may not utter any language unless spoken to”.

4 A similar use of communication disorders has been made in the field of postcolonial literatures, where abnormal linguistic behaviors are explicitly related to the will to resist the colonizer’s culture through the rejection of its language (See Dennis Lee, “Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in the Colonial Space” (1972) in Ashcroft et al. (eds). *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 397-401. London: Routledge, 1995). See the works of the already mentioned Arundhati Roy, the Caribbean-Canadian Marlene Nourbese Philip or the Jamaican Michelle Cliff.


6 See also Susan Sontag’s “The Aesthetics of Silence” (1969), in connection with DeLillo’s mystic rhetoric aforementioned: “As the activity of the mystic must end in a *via negativa*, a theology of God’s absence, a craving for the cloud of unknowingness beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech, so art must tend toward anti-art, the ‘subject’ […] the substitution of chance for intention, and the pursuit of silence” (Sontag, 1969: 4-5).