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# Linguistic Injustice. The Fragility of Women's and Girls' Voices in Sexist Contexts

## **Abstract**

My paper deals with the fragility of women's and girls' voices in sexist contexts. I describe this situation as one of linguistic injustice, and I propose an approach based on Wittgenstein and Cavell's works. I argue that the characteristic female experience of being silenced when they express their experiences in sexist contexts can be understood as an enforced lack of attunement with the community of male locutors.

Keywords: attunement, Cavell, Feminism, Wittgenstein

## **1. Introduction**

A common experience of women and girls in sexist contexts is to be refused to be taken seriously when trying to say something. My article focuses on one specific type of speech acts: (attempted) denunciations of sexist violence (from verbal violence and intimidation, to harassment, assault and rape). And it focuses on one specific context in which women and girls try to speak up against sexist violence: sexist contexts in which their words are rejected.

The sexist behaviour I focus on here is not simply disbelieving, i.e. refusing to believe what women and girls say, if one means by that: refusing to consider their statement as true, and taking it to be false. Disbelieving implies acknowledging that there is some content to be believed or not. In such a case, the alleged victim is taken as correctly stating the alleged facts, and it is possible to begin the process of verification, the statements under scrutiny being taken to be either true or false.

The sexist dismissal I want to deal with occurs at a more fundamental level than disbelief: it consists in questioning and doubting women's and girls' very ability to utter statements capable of being true or false («bipolar»), when denouncing male violence. In this form of rejection, women and girls are subjected to a scrutiny that questions their very competence as locutors, capable of issuing proper statements. The list of ways to undermine one's person confidence as a competent locutor is long and varied. One typical way to deny that a proper statement has been made is by questioning their very choice of words to state their facts and report their experiences: they can be told, for example, that what they experienced was not an «assault», that it was not what we call «rape», etc. Their tone of voice can be questioned as not the right one: a crazy tone, not the tone of a person in her right mind.... Or their hesitations between words can be taken to show that they do not know what these words mean exactly. Or the victim's attempts at denunciation can be branded as confabulations, ravings. In such circumstances, the alleged victim's words do not even reach the status of proper statement: the victim has been linguistically disarmed by the sexist audience. They are left confused, with the feeling that something was wrong with their words.

In sexist contexts, women's and girls' attempts at denouncing sexual violence are thus threatened with a scrutiny of their language use aimed at disabling them. From a sexist point of view, the advantage of this scrutiny is that the attempt at denunciation is nipped in the bud: to be in a position to dismiss someone is far stronger than having to check what they say.

Since dismissal does not allow the statements to be proper candidates for verification, an epistemological point of view cannot be sufficient to understand this special aspect of gender violence, based on the denial of someone's linguistic competence. The concept of epistemic injustice devised by Miranda Fricker (2009), which is powerful and illuminating in contexts where a proper statement is made and recognized as such, is not sufficient for the cases which interest us here. Epistemic injustice properly speaking (i.e. as concerning knowledge) can be deployed at a level where persons are already considered as competent locutors, which is in

fact a lot to grant: one way to maintain power over someone is by denying their mastery of their own language. I propose to describe this particular kind of injustice as linguistic injustice, and to turn to ordinary language philosophy to analyze it. This work is thus situated in current feminist research inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell<sup>1</sup>.

In the first part of my paper, borrowing from Rae Langton's feminist speech act theory, I describe the sexist dismissal of women's and girls' speech acts as cases of linguistic disablement. In the second part, I describe the experience of being linguistically disabled as an experience of confusion, drawing on analyses by Wittgenstein. To further understand what happens in this situation of confusion, I draw on Cavell's notion of attunement, by describing the confused, bewildered speaker as being forcefully made to feel that she is out of tune with the people she is trying to speak with. This can result either in the victim renouncing to speak, or, on the contrary, in the victim fighting back against the attempt at disabling her: the first case is more likely to occur in situations of pervasive sexism. I will more generally use this act of being made to feel out-of-tune to describe women's and girls' linguistic predicament when they try to denounce patriarchal power in sexist settings.

It is very difficult, generally, for a human being to go on speaking when they feel their voice is out of tune: a sympathetic audience usually tries to bring back the unhappy speaker within the conversation; but a sexist audience confronted with female speech is bound to maintain discordances in order to make the speaker give up her speech<sup>2</sup>. In the last part of my paper, I will deal with different cases of successful resistance against attempts at disablement. I will consider in particular the *#MeToo* Movement: the *#MeToo* Movement has been striving to overcome the linguistic disablement

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<sup>1</sup>For the general spirit of feminist ordinary language philosophy, see *Feminist Interpretations of Wittgenstein* (Scheman and O'Connor 2002).

<sup>2</sup>This sheds some light on the fact that, in countries where rule of law generally prevails, very few complaints are nonetheless registered by the police and transmitted to the courts, compared to the number of acts of violence perpetrated against women and girls. Linguistic disablement is one aspect of women's and girls' predicament that would explain this discrepancy, though much more remains to be said of course to understand this fact, by turning to feminist psychology, sociology, law and political science.

women and girls are threatened with in sexist settings<sup>3</sup>, by the use of massive social media preventing the disabling effects of face-to-face sexist dismissals<sup>4</sup>.

Methodologically, I will discuss individual cases, drawn either from autobiographical literature, or from the media coverage of the #MeToo movement. My examples will concern women and girls from the Western World, from France in particular.

Of course, linguistic disablement concerns speech in unequal relationships in general: it is an intersectional phenomenon, amplified by racial and economic inequalities, and one must also take into account inequalities of age, health and sexual orientation. But taking up the question of linguistic disablement intersectionally would require further analyses that exceed the scope of this article.

## ***2. Linguistic disablement***

I borrow the expression of linguistic disablement from the feminist philosopher Rae Langton (2009), who devised the notion of illocutionary disablement, using Austin's concepts. Langton devised this notion in the context of her critique of sexist pornography and its consequences on women's and girls' ability to be heard and taken into account when they say «no» to unwanted sex. Langton also identifies locutionary disablement and perlocutionary disablement. Saul and Diaz-Leon (2018) effectively summarized these distinctions in their Stanford Encyclopedia article on feminist philosophy of language:

A person is locutionarily silenced if she is prevented from speaking, or intimidated into not speaking. A person is illocutionarily silenced if she is unable to carry out the acts that she intends to carry

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<sup>3</sup>I do not argue that all settings in our contemporary societies are sexist: a small proportion of sexual violence against women and girls are effectively addressed in courts of justice. But most acts of violence against women and girls never find the way to court in countries where the rule of law is said to hold, let alone in war-torn countries or countries without political freedom. The situation is one of pervading injustice throughout the world, about which the #MeToo Movement has tried to raise awareness...pending justice.

<sup>4</sup> See *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement* (Chandra and Erlingsdóttir 2021).

out in speaking. A person is perlocutionarily silenced when her speech cannot have its intended effects.

Langton describes the situation in which a woman says “No” and fails in terms of failure of uptake by the hearer. Under this analysis, the woman’s speech act of refusal can be said to have misfired:

A woman says “No” to a man, when she is trying to refuse sex; she uses the right locution for an act of refusal, but somehow her speech act goes wrong. The woman says “No” and the man does not recognize what she is trying to do with her words. She says “No”, intends to refuse, but there is no uptake in her hearer. She fails to perform the illocutionary act of refusal. She is like the actor in the story, who says “Fire!” intending genuinely to warn, using the right locution for warning, but who fails to warn. Her speech has misfired (cf. Langton 2009: 79).

I propose to extend the use of Langton’s notion of linguistic disablement to other kinds of cases, cases where women’s and girls’ speech act infelicities come from other sources than failure of uptake. One is linguistically disabled when one’s statements are made to fail by being wrongfully denied their status as proper bipolar, verifiable, statements. Linguistic disablement can have many different forms. To paraphrase Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* § 23, there are countless kinds of ways to disable someone’s capacity to speech.

### **3. Confusion**

In the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Wittgenstein deals with a particular case of confusion : the confusion we fall into when others do not agree on very simple, basic judgements. He takes colour vocabulary as an example, considering the simplest case (not unusual colour words like sepia...):

How do I know that the colour that I am now seeing is called “green” ? Well, to confirm it I might ask other people; but if they did not agree with me, I should become totally confused and should perhaps take them or myself for crazy. That is to say: I should either no longer trust myself to judge, or no longer react to what they say as to a judgement. (RFM: §§ 336-337)

This kind of disagreement concerns my ability to use basic concepts in the same way as my interlocutors: it concerns the very meaning of words. So it is a disagreement that comes before any further disagreements about facts, further disagreements that would require that we agree on our use of language. It concerns our very capacity to talk about things in the same way, so to talk about things tout court. It is for this level of agreement that Cavell designed the metaphor of attunement. We are attuned if we react in the same way to the same things and situations, with the same words, “(...) sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfilment (...)”, as he writes in the “Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy” (Cavell 1962 : 52).

When Wittgenstein writes that if people did not agree with him on the word “green”, he should become totally confused, and take them or himself for crazy, he describes a state of disharmony from his fellow human beings. In other words, he would suffer a special sort of linguistic disablement.

In the same section, Wittgenstein gives another example that tries to go down to our primitive linguistic reactions. It is the example of a cry of help:

If I am drowning and I shout “Help!”, how do I know what the word “help” means? Well that’s how I react in this situation. – Now, that is how I know what “green” means as well and also know how I have to follow the rule in the particular place. (RFM: §§ 336-337)

Let us use Wittgenstein’s description of an experience of bewilderment at being denied basic agreement on how to use words to analyse real situations where women or girls are denied their words and expressions when speaking up against patriarchal violence.

When women and girls cry “Help !”, or use some more complex expressions for their distress, it is an astonishingly common practice for sexist persons and institutions not to take their words seriously. This refusal can happen in families, or in more official public settings, like in police departments or schools. Wittgenstein uses the example of help to go back to basics: to the immediacy of a cry, replaced by a word, which becomes a natural reaction. But, strange as it is, this very persuasion of Wittgenstein is already the expression

of male entitlement. It is strange, because we would like to say that nothing is more natural than a cry of help in its immediacy. But then, nothing is more entrenched in patriarchal societies than to refuse to take a rape complaint seriously. There is of course a difference between the cry of help in the very moment when one is drowning or being assaulted, and going and asking for help after the event. But using the word “green” is also deferred compared to the drowning person’s cry, and it is still a natural reaction to call a green leaf green.

The very capacity to call things by their name is under scrutiny in the special situation where women and girls want to denounce male violence. It is a slightly different case from the one described by Langton. In Langton’s case, the assaulted woman is not denied her use of the word «no»; but the male partner has conditioned himself to ignore it. In the cases of disablement by confusion, comparable to the case of Wittgenstein’s baffled locutor, the woman is denied her very capacity to use language properly, to judge about basic things. It is the difference between being ignored, and being judged incapable of a proper judgement or assertion. (In fact, Langton’s case could be experienced by the woman as a case of denial of her very capacity to use language properly, to say no clearly for example; but Langton does not describe the situation in this way. She describes it as disablement by failure of the hearer’s uptake.)

This pervasive threat directed towards female linguistic competence is something slightly, but notably, different from the threat towards her credibility as a witness. To be credible as a witness, one has to be credited at least to be a competent speaker: there must be a content to be believed or not. This content is absent when the person is denied having said anything. So this is not a case falling under Fricker’s concept of testimonial injustice. We need to turn to a different philosophical framework to have a clearer view of this kind of disablement. One needs to turn to philosophy of language, and more especially, as I propose in this paper, to ordinary language philosophy. Wittgenstein and Cavell’s visions of language can help us understand situations when a locutor is attacked on their very capacity to speak their mind.

Fricker proposes a second notion, hermeneutical injustice, that could seem to answer the problems at stake here. But there is a

crucial difference between her notion of hermeneutical injustice and my notion of linguistic disablement. Fricker considers that the person suffering from hermeneutical injustice lacks indeed some concepts that could help them state their case (see her example of “Carmita Wood”, a woman who lacks the concept of sexual harassment and who cannot defend her rights after having fled from work because of a sexually abusive employer); whereas in my description, the person under threat lacks nothing, but is denied her very competence. Fricker’s very analysis of a hermeneutical lack or deficiency could in fact be used by the denier here, which is not what her general feminist approach would be congenial with. So we need something different from the epistemological approach for what I call linguistic disablement<sup>5</sup>.

Moreover, in the cases I am interested with, it is the mastery of her own language that is denied to the victim, and not the ignorance of technical juridical terms belonging to the higher classes. The expression “not to know what one means” captures the spirit of the accusation. It is typically the kind of questions where ordinary language philosophy, especially Wittgenstein’s and Cavell’s interrogations on knowing, saying and meaning, can be illuminating.

#### **4. A disabled child**

Let us take one example of such a radical linguistic disablement, in the story of the French singer Barbara, who is well-known for a song called *L’aigle noir*, The Black Eagle. At the end of her life, the story of her childhood came to be known, after her memoirs were published: it became apparent that she was a victim of incestual rape. She recalls that, when she was still a child, she fled once to the police. They listened to her, but refused to register her complaint. She writes in her memoirs:

I am increasingly afraid of my father. He knows it.

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<sup>5</sup> Although Fricker’s analyses are powerful and illuminating for many cases, her notion of hermeneutical injustice has been rightly criticized for being too centered on what victims of injustice lack, rather than on their own resources and on their capacity to fight. See Dotson (2012) and Medina (2013). See also Saul and Diaz-Leon (2018) for a review of recent debates.



(...) One night, in Tarbes<sup>6</sup>, my world falls apart in horror. I am 10 and a half.

Children shut up because no one believes them.

Because they are suspected of confabulations.

Because they are ashamed and feel guilty.

Because they are afraid.

Because they believe they are alone with their terrible secret. (Barbara 1998: 5)

Her cry of help was not heard. If she had been drowning some people would have probably answered, but not if she told she was raped by her father, as if it would have been encroaching on some sort of patriarchal right just to take her words seriously. It is different not to believe someone, but to check the facts nonetheless to see if the complaint is true; and not to check anything because the words are not considered as verifiable at all; they are not considered as proper assertions. The girl Barbara was considered not to be able to say something about her own situation. Her words were considered as neither true nor false, but as confabulations (fabrications, ravings). We can imagine that her experience, in being thus rejected by the police who was supposed to protect her, would have been an experience of utter confusion. She never came back to them. The rapes were completed by a predatory gesture on her very capacity to name things, to judge about them. The traumatic events were extended by an enforced linguistic disablement.

We could object that children are not usually considered as reliable witnesses; but in fact, adolescents and adult women are often treated in the same way for these kinds of complaints. So that the crucial aspect here is not age, but the fact of speaking up against male violence. Imagine for example that a child of 10 or 11 tells the police that one member of his or her family has fallen and needs medical help...The reaction of the police would probably be very different: they would probably consider the child reliable enough as a witness.

About the way the police rejected the child's complaint, we can speak of a linguistic gaslighting. As someone could try and gaslight Wittgenstein in not agreeing with him that grass is green, the police

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<sup>6</sup> Tarbes is a city in the South-West of France, near the Pyrénées Mountains, where Barbara's family lived when she was a child.

tried to gaslight the girl Barbara by telling her she had a lot of imagination. This is not refusal to believe: it is refusal to take the words seriously, it is to fictionalize them. It is the reversal of Austin's case of the actor seriously saying "Fire!" while on stage. It is taking women and girls complaining about sexual assaults as actresses saying "Fire!". What would be the life of Austin's actor if, most of the time, his calls of distress were treated as if he was on stage? This actor could be said to be out of tune with his fellow human beings.

So there is a real question about what kind of linguistic attunement really exists between male and female in patriarchal societies. In what respect are women and girls really full members of their linguistic community? This question concerns women's and girls' status as able locutors. A general answer is that they tend to be thrown out of tune when they cease to submit and comply to patriarchal rules. (The *#MeToo* Movement challenged precisely this systematic rebuttal by preventing it to happen through the use of massive communication tools.)

As an adult, Barbara had a beautiful career as a singer, partly overcoming her childhood linguistic disablement by expressing herself in songs. Many diverging interpretations were given of her Black Eagle song, disagreements which are there to stay. It is a song about a mysterious black eagle soaring after she falls asleep, "one beautiful day or maybe at night", as the song goes. In certain interpretations, the black eagle was taken to mean fascism (her family had a near escape from Nazi forces during the Second World War); in other interpretations, it was taken to symbolize the incestual rape; others say the song has beautiful dimensions too. In any case, the meaning of the song was transformed after the publication of the memoirs; many newspapers mentioned the incestual rape as one way to understand the well-known song<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, La Croix (<https://www.la-croix.com/Culture/Musique/LAigle-noir-Barbara-drame-sublime-2017-07-30-1200866497>); L'Humanité (<https://www.humanite.fr/barbara-les-ombres-incestueuses-de-laigle-noir-691497>); Le Figaro (<https://www.lefigaro.fr/musique/2015/12/09/03006-20151209ARTFIG00143-l-histoire-secrete-de-la-chanson-l-aigle-noir-de-barbara.php>).

## 5. *Shame*

The depth of these disabling attacks must not be underestimated. Generally, these kinds of rebuttal, which are designed to deny girls and women's entitlement to speak about their own experiences, undermine profoundly their confidence in their capacity to speak their own language, even about other subjects and in other situations. Since they have been absurdly shown, by the very fact that they were attacked, that they do not master their own language, they can see themselves as inferior language-users, as inapt minds, lacking the required mastery, having failed to protect themselves. Shame, in a word, comes with bewilderment and linguistic disablement.

Cavell's philosophy sheds light on this condition. Let us come back to a famous passage in the *Claim of Reason*, where language acquisition is described as a kind of initiation:

Instead, then, of saying either that we tell beginners what words mean, or that we teach them what objects are, I will say: We initiate them, into the relevant forms of life held in language and gathered around the objects and persons of our world. For that to be possible, we must make ourselves exemplary and take responsibility for that assumption of authority; and the initiate must be able to follow us, in however rudimentary a way, naturally (look where our finger points, laugh at what we laugh at, comfort what we comfort, notice what we notice, find alike or remarkable or ordinary what we find alike or remarkable or ordinary, feel pain at what we feel pain at, enjoy the weather or the notion we enjoy, make the sounds we make); and he must want to follow us (care about our approval, like a smile better than a frown, croon better than a croak, a pat better than a slap). (Cavell 1979: 177-178)

If we read this passage with the examples of disharmony I have described, we see how fragile this attunement is indeed. The child Barbara lived with a seriously impaired attunement to her community, as most children who are victims of parental violence do. The whole description of what the child must do to follow "us" becomes tragic in these children's cases: they must be able to follow adults they are terrified with, adults they probably loathe. Can we imagine her laughing at what her father laughs? All the initiation process becomes a profoundly painful process, where linguistic initiation is interwoven with the initiation of pain and shame. So that

Barbara's attunement to her fellows was an impaired and painful one<sup>8</sup>.

In speaking about "our" attunement in our forms of life, Cavell shows that the community is fragile, that its very frontiers are at stake. I would say that one pervasive threat that patriarchy imposes to women and girls is the threat of their rejection outside of attunement. In the situations where they dare to threaten male's supremacy, their use of words are not theirs to be judged as proper use.

I think that male life in language is of a different kind: there is a threat too, connected to the pervasive injunction to be a real man, but this threat is different from the threat under which females live. When this latter threat is enacted, women and girls learn that they cannot be sure-footed in taking their words to be properly used, in taking their judgements to be bona fide judgements. I think that this linguistic life of uncertainty has consequences on the way many women approach philosophy of language. I would say that many (not all) female philosophers arrive from a place of uncertainty for which Wittgenstein's and Cavell's philosophy provide illuminating insights.

Wittgenstein himself was not a feminist, but he was not speaking from a place of confidence concerning his position in the patriarchal hierarchy. His philosophical style of radical questioning is not attuned to any kind of patriarchal show of power, where such (apparently) ridiculous questions as "How do I know that the colour I am now seeing is called green?" have no place, nor entertaining the idea of one's own craziness as in "if other people did not agree with me, when I asked them for confirmation, I should become totally confused and should perhaps take them or myself for crazy" (RFM: §§ 336-337). This feared accusation of craziness can be compared to the craziness accusation feared by girls and women when they want

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<sup>8</sup> As she recalled in her memoirs, she strived all her life to build back some kind of harmony with other people, especially with men: "From these humiliations inflicted to childhood, from these high turbulences, from these sinkings to the bottom, I have always come back. Sure, I had to have a pretty strong will to live, a pretty strong desire to be happy, a pretty strong will to find pleasure in a man's arms, to be able to feel purified from everything one day, a long time afterwards" (Barbara 1998: 6).

One aspect of this quest for attunement lies in the very fact of telling about her experiences in her own terms and style, throughout her career as a singer.

to describe their experience in their own words in a sexist context. One major difference nonetheless remains, with the case of women's and girls' confrontation with patriarchal power: the possibility of entertaining the craziness of the others, in place of one's own, is not given to the child, and does not come easily to the grown-up, precisely because they do not speak from a place of power.

Let us note a difference within ordinary language philosophy in this respect, a difference between Wittgenstein and Austin's way of questioning language. Austin seems not to speak from the same place of uncertainty as Wittgenstein does. Austin's linguistic space is apparently lived as a secure place, his field of research seems not to be mined as Wittgenstein's is; there seems to be no pervasive threat of being out-of-tune in his vision of language. The insights we take from his philosophy of language are thus different from what we can inherit from Wittgenstein, and from Cavell. Austin gives us new tools to see order in language (like his classification of speech acts in illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, that can have a juridical impact, as in Langton's reading), whereas Wittgenstein and Cavell also show places of disorder in language, and their importance to understand linguistic inequalities, and what we could do to overcome them.

## ***6. The courage to speak out of tune***

I turn now to my last case. A case of resistance to the threat of linguistic disablement. So a case where a woman accepts a situation where her voice is not in tune with the persons around her. But she goes on speaking, not silenced, not baffled nor confused. And the fact that she accepts this challenge changes eventually the whole situation. Not exactly at the moment of her speech, but afterwards, with on-going consequences years after the speech itself.

The case I will describe is a dinner, during which a woman tells about her sexual assault by a former IMF president, D. Strauss-Kahn (DSK). The woman is the journalist Tristane Banon. The dinner was filmed by its organizer Thierry Ardisson, a television presenter, for a show called "93 Faubourg Saint-Honoré", in 2007. It is a difficult scene where Banon is calmly and politely, as a good guest, with a smile, explaining to the men (and one woman) around her that she

was assaulted, while the majority of them are laughing, sneering, and are asking for details. It is a scene which epitomizes rape culture.

But the amazing thing is that Banon goes on in spite of that. She gives a detailed description of her fight against DSK. There is no attunement here with the majority of the guests, she is not sharing with them any “route of interest and feeling”, any sense “of humor and significance and fulfilment”, she is speaking out of tune, but it is a powerful performance, precisely because of her being so alone in her sense of what is interesting, important, funny, fulfilling in life.

She explains in an interview for Cheek Magazine given in Dec 14th, 2020, that this scene turned out to serve as a document in the judiciary procedures that were taken against DSK in the United States (cf. the 2011 New York vs Strauss-Kahn case). So it was eventually a good thing that this dinner was filmed. Her difficult performance was important for an event that was a turning point in the battle against sexism at the world-level, a few years before the global expansion of the *#MeToo* Movement.

Banon refused to be disabled. She did not convince the majority of her audience, she did not persuade them either of the seriousness of the assault she endured. So, in a sense, she failed illocutionarily, and perlocutionarily, since the majority did not take her declarations seriously. She was facing a wall of bad faith. But she did not allow the disablement to take place. She was not silenced.

## **7. Conclusion**

In the course of this article, I have contrasted three situations: first a situation of attunement in our forms of expression; second a situation of linguistic disablement where the out-of-tune voice fails and surrenders; third a situation of resistance, where the challenge to speak out of tune is (at least partly) successfully met, and the speech act of denunciation (at least partly) succeeds. I describe women’s and girls’ resistance to patriarchy as a condition in which they find the courage to go on speaking out of tune, so as to create new ways of being in harmony with one another.

As this forced failure is common practice in patriarchal societies, the condition of women and girls under patriarchy can be called a condition of linguistic disablement. It means that, in circumstances that threaten patriarchal powers, women and girls are routinely submitted to a range of disabling attacks preventing them to use their linguistic capacities to the full. This linguistic disablement is itself a key element in the perpetuation of violence against women and girls.

Wittgenstein asks the following question in the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*: “What sort of public must there be if a game is to exist, if a game can be invented” (RFM: § 334)?

What I have tried to show is that the #MeToo Movement is in the course of creating new language-games, where women’s and girls’ words of complaint about patriarchal violence are gaining acknowledgement as capable language-use. These words have to be assessed of course, as to their veracity. But they are words that at least have come up to this new status of being true or false, not delusional, excessive, or whatnot. Equality between male and female is not possible without ending female linguistic disablement, a disablement which is sadly still enforced every day in all sorts of settings all around the world.

Wittgenstein then writes, just after the above quotation: “What surrounding is needed for someone to be able to invent, say, chess” (RFM: § 334)?

Let us paraphrase it this way:

What surrounding is needed for someone to be able to invent, say, a rape complaint which is not received with gestures of dismissal, but as something to be seriously assessed?

I think we are precisely in this moment: new games are being invented.

This allows us to criticize one way of presenting the #MeToo Movement. It is sometimes presented as a freeing of women’s speech. As if they did not speak before. As if the child Barbara did not go to the police to tell everything. It is not at all a question of women finally speaking up. They have always tried to do that. In which kind of situation did they try to speak up, and confronted with which kind of reception? Were they attuned, and in which ways, to

the people to which they tried to speak? One way to analyse what happened in the #MeToo Movement is that it was striving to create new language-games in which female speech could go unthreatened as proper competent speech. It is only then that allegations of violence can be assessed as reliable or not, and that courts of justice can do their work.

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