# Refracting Mothertongues: Considering Mobility Through Language

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## Refracting Mothertongues: Considering mobility through language

By Michaela Fay[1]

**Abstract**

In this article I explore the interplay between language and mobility. As the number of debates about mobility and belonging has grown both in the social sciences and in feminist theory, there has been an increasing discussion about the interaction between language and place and I argue here that increased mobility leads to changes in one's understanding and experience of the languages one dwells in. My argument is that the ways in which language is reflected upon shapes the ways in which subjects experience and define their mobility and further, that when individuals reflect about language, they also reflect, in fact, their affective relationship to their mobility *through* language. The ability to think about language can, hence, be seen as a way of describing one's mobility. My focus is then not on language as a social practice but about how by thinking about the languages they inhabit, individuals shape their own mobility. I show that such an engagement with language disrupts and utilises the concept of the mothertongue by going beyond the often static, romantic conflation of space (in particular the nation of origin), language and belonging. I explore these questions based on empirical material drawn from an ethnographic case study of the International Women's University 'Technology and Culture' 2000 (*ifu*). I draw on this particular empirical case because I believe that it is symptomatic of current developments towards academic internationalisation. Indeed, it is only possible because and in the light of these developments. The *ifu* is thus embedded in an institutional and academic context, which favours, even requires, transnational mobility and linguistic competence.

*Keywords*: *ifu,* language, networking

Without language there is no social. And vice versa. We are, to use Judith Butler's (1997) expression, 'beings who require language in order to be' (p.2). The symbolic attachments to language have been addressed in various ways and by various scholarly disciplines, but none have addressed the ways in which reflections *about* language become a way through which the social, in its mobility (Urry, 2000), is created and experienced. This paper addresses that question.

As the number of debates about mobility has grown, there has been an increasing discussion about the interaction between language and place. To be in-between languages is one of the dwelling places of the mobile subject, especially those who live in exile. To be in-between languages is described as a place equally uncomfortable as to be in-between cultures; neither here, nor there and hence, somehow nowhere (Aciman, 1999; Bammer, 1994; Hoffman, 1998). To mourn the loss of one's mothertongue and the silences this loss creates is a commonly described emotional state (Hoffman, 1998; Kristeva, 1991). Narratives that mourn the loss of one's mothertongue often reflect longingly the loss of one's childhood and the ruin of a feeling of settlement and belonging (Hirsch, 1998). Eva Hoffman (1999) is a prominent voice in examining the role of language in 'possessing a place'. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1986) have

also explored the processes by which one becomes foreign, 'a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one's own language' (p.19) whether by choice or by circumstance. Many 'third world' or black feminist scholars have addressed the relationship between race, language and feminist theory in evocative ways (Anzaldúa, 1987; Minh-ha, 1994). In this literature, common themes here are processes of *Finding a Voice* (Wilson, 1997), explorations of how to *Tame a Wild Tongue* (Anzaldúa, 1987), but also angry appeals to those who fit neatly into language, as it is described in *White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood* (Carby, 1997). Therefore, the theorisation of the corporeal and political effects that language has is a central issue of feminist and postcolonial studies. Sneja Gunew (2002) in particular describes the learning of and living in a second language as a Foucauldian technology of the self, arguing that we not only embody languages but that languages in turn embody us. Language 'gets into' us by shaping the way in which we move, feel and express our relationships with places and people. Joan Scott (1992) has furthermore suggested that language is one discourse through which individuals produce their experiences. Identities come into being only by being narrated as experiences. In such narrations, individuals can be said to become through language.

Elsewhere, in the context of globalisation debates, the attention has been on bi- or indeed multilinguality. Attention here is paid not so much to the feelings of displacement that are often described as going hand in hand with the loss of one's language. Rather, 'multilingual competence' is rated highly (e.g. Edwards, 1994) and the ability to speak several languages has become a valued, even necessary currency in the transnational world. The best case in point is the spread of English. In this context, Holobrow (1999) argues that 'the increased spread of English represents a powerful expression of the bond between language and social change' (p.56). With the spread of English especially, but by no means exclusively in the academic arena, the world is fast becoming a linguistic network of non-native English speakers and linguistically displaced subjects. English has become, to use Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) argument, the vehicular language of today's world. Their distinction between four languages- vernacular, or territorial, or maternal language; vehicular language, the worldwide language of business and exchange; referential language, the language of sense and culture; and mythic language - is especially relevant here, particularly considering the spatiotemporal categories of these languages. Vernacular language, they argue, is 'here'; vehicular language 'everywhere'; referential language 'over there'; and mythic language 'beyond' (p.23). As Coco Fusco (1995) has put it in the title of her book, *English is brøken* almost everywhere and can in fact be described as the 'mothertongue of transnational mobility'.

In this article I explore these issues both theoretically and empirically. There is in the arguments as I have outlined them above an assumption (often implicit) that the places in which one dwells influence the relationship one has with language. It is mobility, forced and voluntary, that forces individuals upon a re-engagement with their mother tongu*es*, the acquisition of new languages, and through them, a changed sense of belonging and embodiment.  From this perspective, it is mobility that disrupts the conflation between language, place and belonging, as it is so often associated with the concept of the mothertongue. I argue here that this causal, one-way argument needs to be complicated. My argument is that the ways in which language is reflected upon shapes the ways in which subjects experience and define their mobility. I argue that when

individuals reflect about language, they also reflect in fact their affective relationship to their mobility *through* language. The ability to think about language can be seen as a way of describing one's mobility. My focus is then not on language as a social practice but about how by thinking about the languages they inhabit, individuals shape their own mobility. I show that such an engagement with language disrupts and utilises the concept of the mothertongue by going beyond the often static, romantic conflation of space (in particular the nation of origin), language and belonging. I ask then in this paper how language is addressed and experienced through mobility and vice versa.

I explore these questions based on empirical material drawn from an ethnographic case study of the International Women's University 'Technology and Culture' 2000 (*ifu*)[2]. The *ifu* was hosted by a number of German universities and was intended as a pilot project in academic interdisciplinarity and internationality. For 100 days[3] almost 1000 feminist scholars from all over the globe, spanning 105 different countries were admitted to participate in a multicultural dialogue. The *ifu*'s aims were not only to be academically cutting-edge but also to facilitate transnational exchange and networking amongst the next generations of internationally mobile and versatile feminist scholars, professionals, and artists. The event received much media attention and was supported by a diverse array of funding bodies, ranging amongst many others from the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (bmf+f), the European Commission, the World Exhibition EXPO 2000, Hewlett Packard, IBM Germany and Telekom (T-Mobil), as well as several city councils and research foundations (e.g. the Hans-Böckler and Heinrich-Böll foundations), pointing to its global aspirations and recognition[4]. The *ifu* continues to exist online as the so-called 'virtual *ifu*' (v*ifu*), mainly an array of lively mailing lists, but also a resourceful and, indeed, prize-winning[5], homepage.

I draw on this particular empirical case because I believe that it is symptomatic of current developments towards academic internationalisation. Indeed, it is only possible because and in the light of these developments. In the context of increased 'Europisation', such feminist networks are becoming simultaneously more possible and necessary[6]. The *ifu* is thus embedded in an institutional and academic context which favours, even requires, transnational mobility and linguistic competence. Secondly, and closely connected to the first point, it offered feminists and female academics a platform for professional networking and feminist community building which advocates diversity, while trying to take into account the problematics of difference, exclusion and inclusion that have been part of the feminist agenda for several decades (e.g. hooks, 1982, 2000; Lorde, 1984; Lugones, 1983; Rich, 1984; Spivak, 1988). Thirdly, it is important to point out that, although geographically located at various universities in Germany, the *ifu* was held exclusively in English, bringing together a group of women for most of whom English is a second or third language, which they acquired at earlier or later points in their lives and under greatly differing conditions of possibility. In sum the *ifu* can be seen as one example that allows me to address both processes of mobility and language.

In the following sections I look at a series of empirical vignettes[7], all of which illuminate different angles of the ways in an engagement with language shapes the experience of one's mobility.

**'Still Turkish'**

> 'Turkish [is my mother tongue]. Because when I want to swear, express my love, my anger, in a nutshell all my feelings, I still switch to Turkish. I still dream in Turkish.'

Turkish born Ayla[8] is a permanent resident in Canada, where she pursues an academic career. She has lived and worked in various European countries outside Turkey all of her adult life. She is one of those 'international drifters' (Hoffman, 1999, p.42), who experience strongly the sometimes harsh emotional effects of 'voluntary' professional mobility, which mainly takes the form of a sense of detachment that collides with an awareness of her privileged position. She mourns her feeling of being out of place in most places, never 'there' anymore or 'elsewhere' yet. She expresses her sadness about having lost intimate relations with friends and families only to point out her amazement when finding that for every lost one there usually comes along a new one. She values the excitement and the joy of being privileged enough to have a life that allows her to be mobile and in which each professional engagement at European and North American universities means another step up on the 'transnational, academic class ladder'.

Hence, it is little surprising that even though 'from a legal point of view' she is a migrant, she would prefer to call herself a *global citizen* or a *nomad*, because she 'love[s] discovering new places' and is 'good at getting adapted to different environments or creating my own little world wherever I go'. She adds, however, that she is 'also a nomad in another sense', not getting 'emotionally attached to people in my social circles'. 'I make friends', she adds, 'hang around with them, share many things, but emotional attachment is something that I rarely experience. I came to think that this might be a defence mechanism because leaving emotionally attached people behind would be much more difficult'. Her 'own little world' then, is remarkably 'Turkish' and in fact, Ayla's story evokes resemblances to many exile narratives much more than it does to narratives of global citizenship. Elsewhere, she writes her that her 'homepage is the first page of a Turkish newspaper' and that she 'still cook[s] Turkish at home'. Further, she points out that she is 'still more up to date in terms of events happening in Turkey than anywhere else (including Canada)'.

She further explores her solitary detachment through the way she remembers people and places. 'One impact of so much travelling', she says 'is that images, people, and events get more and more easily washed off. Memory has a certain capacity I guess and you can only fill so much in there. I have flash backs most of the time that someone, something, some place suddenly pops up in my mind and then I think back and say yes, I had met this person even though I cannot remember the name. It is usually the photographs, instances that I remember, but not so much the names and the specifics'. The 'specifics' of her life seem to get lost somewhere along the way.

I want to suggest that her romantic and deep connection to the Turkish language as it is expressed in the initial quote and culture functions as a counter weight to this sense of detachment. For her, Turkish is the language that goes deep as indicated by the fact that she 'still dream[s] in Turkish'. Turkish is the language of emotions; it resides under the skin, while other forms of cultural embodiment seem to merely brush over it.

In a recent article, Gunew (2002) pays specific attention to the physical and the psychic effects that acquiring and living in English has on those who embody it. Gunew borrows from Michel Foucault and sees the ways in which 'English writes on the body' as a technology of the self, which, quoting Foucault 'permit[s] individuals to effect their own means or with the help of their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves …' (p.731). She argues that English, due to globalisation, internationalisation, and cosmopolitisation has become the neo-imperial language and wonders to what extent these processes have also reduced English 'to the level of a technical language almost totally stripped … of expressive and aesthetic characteristics…' (p.734). But in spite of, or perhaps, because of, this, English is important in the development of one's subjectivity as globalised and/or exilic. The evocation of emotions when referring to her mothertongue, seem to make Ayla's example a point in case.

In contrast to this, the concept of the mothertongue easily evokes images of (the) home, of childhood and geographical and national rootedness (e.g Yeager Kaplan, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Robertson et al., 1994). Nostalgia is the companion of this discussion, often discussed with close reference to Freud's concept of the uncanny. Homesickness is not far here. Ayla's narrative highlights the tense connections between these two approaches, not least by pointing to Turkish being the language of her dreams.

The emotionality that Ayla attaches to her mothertongue – 'when I want to express my feelings, I still switch to Turkish' – is marked by a curious spatiotemporality, which, in turn, is important for the ways in which she experiences her own dwelling in mobility. Although having lived outside Turkey all of her adult life, Ayla stresses that she *still* switches to Turkish to express her feelings, *still* cooks Turkish food and *still* is more informed about Turkish politics than Canadian politics.

Turkish (language and culture) is hence constructed as a two-fold fixture in her global detachment. On the one hand, Turkish is described as a safe haven, that which does not change and is outside mobility. It is the constant in her global life that is marked by losses and by compromise and about which there is uncertainty 'whether I will keep moving even though this is what happened till now. The future may be different or not, that I cannot tell'. The stressing of the *still* becomes the signifier for the always 'not entirely there', i.e. in the other language (in this case, English). Turkish is both the connectedness to the past, to a childhood and the thing that makes English (and possibly life in Canada) 'strange'. It is also, however, what makes her life outside Turkish more real, as the partner of *still* is *not any more*. At the same time, the stabilising of 'Turkish' is what equips Ayla with her own sense of being mobile, in fact, a *global* citizen and not 'just' a Turkish one.

The mother tongue can therefore be described as a territorial language (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p.23). As such it is also the tongue of the nation and the tongue that keeps the boundaries of nationality intact. Roots and origins are, however, not always straight forward. The next section will explore this last point further.

**'No desire whatsoever'**

> 'I don't use Russian – no one to talk to (except once in a while on the phone with my parents). [I have] no desire whatsoever to do so (I have detached myself from my Russian roots quite a while ago).'

This example suggests quite a different understanding of and attachment to language and hence, mobility. Compared to Ayla's narrative, what is intriguing here is a different emotionality attached to the Russian language. The fact that Adele refers to something that can be *utilised* renders the language of her 'Russian roots' outside of her; cut off. Russian is described here as a tool, to be used in order to *do* something with (i.e. the occasional phone call with the parents) rather than *be* someone through. As I will show in the following sections, Adele consistently describes Russian as outside of her, disassociating and locating herself from Russia, which she fixes as not only outside but also *past* or *behind* her.

Adele and her family were part of the emigration of Soviet Jews into Israel in the early 1990, predating the fall of communism. Granted the Law of Return, her family settled in Israel and were granted immediate Israeli citizenship. So far, Adele's mobility has a wider historic and social context. There is, however, more to her migration, for Adele's move from Russia to Israel also coincided with, or, more likely, facilitated her coming out as a lesbian and a radical shift away from a stereotypical Russian hyper-femininity to gender-bending tomboyism.

It is not surprising then that in a lengthy interview, she goes through enormous efforts to construct her disconnectedness from Russia and Russian, to prove to me that she is not Russian anymore, that the language does not mean anything to her and that the culture is one she despises. Of course, in order to make this point she falls back on a very 'Russian' repertoire to explain her journey to me. More than once she refers to the cultural concept of Russian romanticism, which has been so important to her in order to understand the world, her emotions, and live out her teenage drama, which consisted mainly of revolting against Russian femininity. Adele intellectualises the notion in order to distance and detach herself by referring to a number of theoretical, academic literature and other cultural expressions, which she draws on in order to help me understand.

Adele's associations with the concept of mothertongue are quite different to Ayla's. Russian is the language, which 'shaped [her] language skills' and has imprinted on her an 'accent that [she] will never get rid of'. As such the embodiment of Russian that she refers to is a negative one – an imprint that she would like to get rid of, that marks her out as someone and something she does not like to be but knows that she has to carry like a scar – on the surface and forever. It is not surprising then that she stresses that she has 'no desire whatsoever' to 'use' Russian because she has 'detached [her]self from [her] Russian roots quite a while ago'. The latter is added in parenthesis,  signifying the obviousness of the statement.

The elements of comfort and belonging, of somewhere to go back to, seems neither desirable nor possible for Adele. The emotional repertoire of the mother tongue as expressed by Ayla ('when I want to swear, express love and anger … I switch to Turkish') is not available here. There is no comfortable backdrop of being able to switch back to something that carries a personal and a cultural history, something that can be recognised and felt. The language that stabilises a sense of belonging for her is the language she uses professionally: 'I tend to switch to the language I'm studying and I'm writing in'.

A sense of belonging is often associated with corporeality, and here especially, with sight. The postcolonial canon has placed much attention on embodied appearance,

especially the colour of one's skin (i.e Eagleton, 2000; Frankenberg, 1993, 1996; Ifekwunigwe, 1999; McClintock, 1995; Treacher, 2000). Whether one can pass (as someone more fitting or someone more desirable) or not depends often on shades of skin colour. Ahmed (1997) explores the ways in which one gets recognised/read and simultaneously recognises and understands herself by being looked at and by looking at others. Similarly, Beverley Skeggs (1997) has explored the complex negotiations of working-class women desiring to pass as middle-class. A 'respectable' exterior is, amongst other signifiers, of crucial importance in this endeavour. These visual and embodied signifiers open or close doors and shape the conditions of possibility for belonging; they also influence the kinds of mobilities available to a subject – be they geographical, cultural, or social.

Adele's experience of her migratory mobility is precisely one that is concerned with such corporeality. The detachment from the Russian roots is a necessary act of becoming and disidentification here is attachment. The loss of her Russian citizenship was a prerequisite for her to become re-homed in Israel – only, of course, to remain awkwardly outside ('othered') – with an accent and a cultured exterior that are here to stay. She addresses the beginnings of her stay in Israel, when she was still wearing her old clothes brought from the Soviet Union, somehow being 'out of place' because she 'look[ed] different'. She refers extensively to the way that Russian immigrants in Israel can be spotted on the streets and are often addressed as prostitutes because of the way they dress. In Adele's case then, the detachment from the Russian roots refers also to an act of detachment from a particular kind of femininity and sexuality. What Adele's story suggests however is that belonging is also, and in peculiar ways, about language, which remains our 'most portable of accessories' (Gunew, 2003, pp.41). 'You know', she explains 'like sometimes I forget and then I realise how … culturally handicapped I've become after detaching from Russia because I lost language, I lost culture, I lost cultural heritage because I don't want it. And it's still like, you know my Russian is probably still better than Hebrew even though I haven't used it for a while. And it's richer than Hebrew. It's probably as good as English but my English is far from good, you know. And I used to like, I forgot but I used to like the language'.

But most importantly Adele's story is also a coming out story that *requires* the rejection of everything Russian – be that the language or the fashionable/expected hyper-femininity that makes for a 'good Russian woman'. As she moved countries and citizenships, she also shed femininity and took on gender ambiguity; she left behind heterosexuality and took on queerness. There are no desirable memories as she experienced the past and with it Russia as stifling and suffocating to a self that she experiences as more 'truthfully' herself. There is a sense here that her *simultaneously* becoming an exile and an immigrant *and* coming out as a lesbian prevents her from falling into the black hole of an exile identity – the 'almost there but not quite' or, as Elspeth Probyn (1996) has termed it with reference to queerness, *Outside Belonging*.

In the next and final example I want to slightly shift the focus and introduce quite a different imaginary and experience of place and language than the two previous vignettes offered. The example is taken from one of the v*ifu* mailinglists and was written shortly after *ifu* ended and its members dispersed into the '*ifu* diaspora'. Around this time, postings were marked by a strong nostalgic tone and *ifu* was slowly transformed from experience to memory.

**'Quite a feeling'**

> 'P.s. By the way, I saw [Charlotte] yesterday and the funny thing was that we spoke German with each other, we never did this at *ifu* but used English instead. It was quite a feeling to talk to her and about *ifu* in a strange language….'

In this final instance I want to address mobility *within* language that does not necessarily include spatial mobility. This example picks up some of the issues that arise around increased Anglicisation. It also shows how *ifu* was embedded in the latter, as an institution and as a space. This final example, then, evokes particular spatio-temporal resonances that are quite different to the previous examples. I think this extract describes two things: firstly, it is a curious example of rendering 'the native language foreign or discover[ing] the foreignness within it' (Gunew, 2003, p.44). Secondly, it describes a sense of displacement that is much less 'space bound' than the examples we have seen so far.

The author of this quote describes a physical encounter outside of *ifu* with another *ifu*-participant. The encounter took place outside the temporal boundaries of *ifu*. She expresses her surprise and bewilderment at having spoken German during her encounter with Charlotte – even though German is their shared mothertongue. It is, however *not* the shared '*ifu* tongue' and hence the sharing of a 'strange' language evokes bewilderment and a sense of displacement. Even though not its territorial language, English was certainly the language that colonised *ifu*. Lectures were held in English and English was the primary language of communication and interaction.

Referring to the changes in contemporary academe and especially within the boundaries of the 'Fortress Europe', Gabriele Griffin and Rosi Braidotti (2002) summarise this as follows. If, they wonder,

> '… language fashions thought, then it is clear that the way the English language is used in an academic context has a particular impact on how thought operates in English-speaking countries, compared to the impact the German, French, or Swedish languages might have in the same context. English, on an international scale, has thus the effect of homogenizing the linguistic framework within which we operate, but at the same time denies … the dimensions brought into perception by the use of other languages within different conventions of usage and philosophical traditions behind them. … English was and remains the global lingua franca, which, particularly with the establishment of the World Wide Web, has become the language of communication in international contexts, especially in situations where several people from diverse countries come together. English is thus without doubt the language of neo-imperialism and as such has a marked space much wider than that of any other language' (p.6-7).

During the *ifu*, and despite its geographical rootedness, German took a particular and intriguing place in the passenger seat. Those of 'us' who spoke German had both an additional privilege of experiencing *ifu* differently layered than non-German speakers. The politics of the event could probably be grasped more deeply in German. It was, for example, possible, as a German speaker, to follow *ifu* as a media event. There were of

course the hurdles of everyday life, and an additional responsibility[9] of translation. Translation happened on several layers. The space outside *ifu* (i.e. Hannover in Germany) vanished into the background and *ifu* became – linguistically and otherwise – a sort of intellectual island space.

In this island space, it was not unusual for two people who share the same language to communicate in another language with each other, namely English. This allows for an interesting decoupling of nationality and language. What is interesting in the particular instance above is what happens when the performative backdrop[10] no longer exists – when the reason to speak English is not present any longer. However, there is a reversed sense of belonging at work here. In the context of the event *ifu*, German did not make sense, for speaking German would also somehow mean stepping out of *ifu* and into another world.

What is most striking here is the way by which one's *own* language becomes foreign, or, to put it in Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) framework, deterritorialized. The author of the quote expresses her mixed emotions ('quite a feeling') about having communicated to another (familiar/known) person about *ifu* not only *not* in English, but even more so, 'in a strange language'. The 'strange language', however, is her native language. There occurs, then a displacement of her '*ifu* self' but also of *ifu* itself, for, as the example suggests, it cannot exist outside its linguistic boundaries. The coming-into-being and ongoing existence of the event *ifu* is likewise connected to a particular language (English). This is demonstrated by the fact that they chose to switch language *after* the spatiotemporal dimensions of *ifu* had changed – they had, after all, encountered each other in the '*ifu* diaspora'.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have drawn on three empirical vignettes taken from my ethnographic study of the International Women's University 'Technology and Culture' 2000 (*ifu*). Each one of them explores and affirms the dynamic relationship between language and mobility. The empirical examples were intended as a multi-layered exploration of the languages we embody and that, in turn, embody us. As such, the paper traces different ways in which language functions as a site of attachments and detachments. Language becomes, then, both an expression and the condition of possibility of particular kinds of mobility.

Ayla's story shows how an intimate and static relationship to the mothertongue is utilised in order to counterbalance a sense of detachment arising from being a global nomad. The second example juxtaposes this relationship between mothertongue and attachment by *rejecting* a static and romantic vision of the mothertongue expressed by Ayla. In this example, the language of origin, Russian, is rejected alongside other cultural signifiers. In this narrative, sexuality steps in in lieu of language in order to make sense of an emigratory trajectory. The case of the native German speaker offered a different concept of the spatial dimensions of language. It focused on the peculiar mechanisms by which one's 'own' language becomes colonised by English as the 'neo-imperial lingua franca' (Griffin and Braidotti, 2002, p.6) and, as a consequence was rendered as 'foreign'.

Throughout I have argued that, in divergence from much of the literature reviewed, it is not mobility that forces a different engagement with language upon those

who are mobile. I argued instead, that it is *through* an engagement with what language means, that different definitions of mobility are created and experienced. Despite the particularities of the different meanings that language can take, what all of the above examples share is that they show that language is as much about mobility as mobility is about language. The relationship between language and mobility is hence one that is dynamic and not causal or one-way.

As one of the *ifu* participants has put it most eloquently,

'if we feel "lost" that perhaps it's a recognition that home exists nowhere, that it exists in in-between spaces. Not quite here, not there. A borderland. A crossroads condition. Like where language exists. In-between people, ala Bakhtinian dialogic space … "Home is where the language is" doesn't sound quite so romantic as "where the heart is" but there is some merit to it. … A site for dislocated subjects, both literally and figuratively (that is, in-between cultures, homes, sexualities, etc) to meet in the interstices of shifting and multiple locations…'

I hope that throughout this paper I could show that there is more than 'some merit' to changing the idiom to 'home is where the language is' but that, equally, language is where home is.

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[1] Michaela Fay is currently completing her PhD in Women's Studies at Lancaster University. She has previously studied Sociology and Women's Studies in Germany and at Wellesley College, USA.

[2] Having been both a participant at the International Women's University and a researcher in one of the follow up evaluation projects (see Metz-Göckel et al. 2002) has allowed me to gather multi-layered and in-depth insights into the conception, the politics, and the 'lived reality' of the institution.

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[3] The slogan "100 day for 100 years" points to the celebration of 100 years of Women's Liberation and Women's Movement.

[4] For more information on the *ifu* and v*ifu*, both current and past, see www.v*ifu*.de

[5] Earlier this year, v*ifu* was awarded the Multimedia Transfer 2003 media prize and attended the 11th European congress and fair for Educational and Information Technologies (LEARNTEC) in Karlsruhe, Germany.

[6] Other examples of such new feminist institutions and networks are for example NOISE (Network of Interdisciplinary Women's Studies in Europe) and its annual European Summer School and the ATHENA (Advanced Thematic Network in Activities in Women's Studies in Europe) to name two of the more prominent examples. None of these however has such an extended period of co-presence as the *ifu*.

[7] These empirical vignettes are taken from online questionnaires and an analysis of listservs, which are part of the virtual *ifu* (v*ifu*). The nature of online research and the very existence of a virtual university (as a virtual community or network) raises in and of itself interesting issues of spatiality, mobility, textuality, as well as identity construction (for a discussion see e.g. Gray, 1995; Hine, 2000; Star, 1995; Stone, 1995; Turkle, 1996).

[8] All names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

[9] This additional responsibility (or 'burden', almost) is a loaded concept that doesn't receive here the attention it deserves. I would be grateful for suggestions as to how to think through the awkward linguistic set up of the *ifu* itself and not just the linguistic balancing acts of its participants, who were much more linguistically versatile than the institution.

[10] I am referring to a Goffmanian (1959) concept of performance here, implying that there is a sort of linguistic 'staging' going on. This instance can thus also be read as a different expression of 'public' and 'private' language as I have addressed it earlier on.