

# WHY LYDIA DAVIS LOVES MISUNDERSTANDINGS

*The writer's painstaking attention to the smallest units of language scales up to momentous questions about how errors of communication shape human relations.*

**By Merve Emre**

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Photograph by Lila Barth for The New Yorker

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**I**n 2019, the literary magazine *NOON* published a story by Lydia Davis called “The Language of Armagnac,” a quietly comic meditation on the difficulties of translating “the patois of the city of Auch, which is a local form of the language of

Gascon, which is in turn a dialect language of Occitan.” A second version of the story much like the first was included in Davis’s “Essays Two,” a collection of her writings on translation, a career that parallels her work as a writer of fiction. A third and notably different version appears in her story collection “Our Strangers,” under the title “Bothered Scholar on Train.” It refashions Davis’s elaborate philological commentaries as the tirade of a scholar whose attempt to read in the language of Armagnac is disrupted by noisy passengers. Davis designed the story to open with an exclamation—“Oh, can’t you quiet down, please!”—and end with an exclamation mark, too (“So, please!”). This symmetry would clue readers in to an irony underlying the scene. The bothered shouts at others to be quiet. He—or she—annoys strangers while insisting that they are the annoying ones.

As always in Davis’s fiction, an almost imperceptible line divides pedantry from precision, enthusiasm from solipsism. When I met Davis at her house in East Nassau, New York, this August, she eyed the galley of “Our Strangers” that I had brought with me and noticed that, in it, the final exclamation mark was missing from “Bothered Scholar on Train.” “You’ve got to have the exclamation mark there,” she said. When we looked at a finished copy of the U.K. edition that she’d been sent, we discovered that someone had blundered: the exclamation mark was still missing. “Well, that’s too bad,” she said. “That was important.” Then, while trying to find another story, we discovered that almost all of the table of contents had been misnumbered. “There’s so much trouble that goes into trying to get something right, and then they do something really basic wrong,” Davis said. She sat on the couch with Jack, her cat, curled at her side, and started to correct the errors with a pencil. “It’s terrible,” she said. “But it’s good we’re doing this, because I might not have done this on my own.”

Since the mid-nineteen-seventies, Davis’s fiction has often taken as its subject matter the mistakes that creep into writing, or the misunderstandings that arise from speech and silence. The stories in “The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis” and “Can’t and Won’t” reward what I think of as too-close reading: an attentiveness to the marvel of the individual letter, the punctuation mark, and the italicized word, perfectly and savagely deployed. In “Mother’s Reaction to My Travel Plans,” we hear, “Gainesville! It’s too bad your *cousin* is dead!” The shortest stories are often composed of a single sentence or a snatch of dialogue, as in “Overheard on the

Train: Two Old Ladies Agree”:

“Everything gets worse.”

“Does anything get better?”

The painstaking attention to how the smallest units of language can be used or misused scales up to momentous questions about errors or missteps in human relations. Davis’s novel, “The End of the Story,” whose protagonist negotiates an agonized love affair and separation, rivals Marcel Proust’s “Swann in Love” in its intimate yet analytic representation of the whirl of consciousness. One can see her great economy of style at work in her translations—of works by Proust, Michel Leiris, Maurice Blanchot, Peter Bichsel, and A. L. Snijders, and, most notably, of Gustave Flaubert. Her translation of “Madame Bovary” is the best English version by far, because its deadpan reminds us that the book is both a great realist novel and a satire of realism.

On and off the page, Davis is reserved, droll, precise, and principled. She does not fly, eat meat, kill insects, or buy anything on Amazon; “Our Strangers” will be available for purchase only at independent bookstores or through bookshop.org. She and her husband, the painter Alan Cote, live in a converted schoolhouse with their three cats. They—Davis and Cote, not the cats—are generous hosts. After speaking for several hours, Davis asked for half an hour of complete silence (she prepared lunch, I got on with some work), and then we ate: cucumber-mint soup, a vegetable quiche, chocolate-chip cookies on “teeny-tiny plates,” Davis and Cote joked, and, from their garden, white peaches and strawberries in cream in teeny-tiny bowls. Cote told me that he was rereading “Ulysses,” while Davis and her book club were reading Matthew Desmond’s “Poverty, by America.” She was hoping to persuade the club to read another hundred pages of “Don Quixote.” “There are still plenty of people who want to settle down with a big, fat, long novel,” she said. “But I hate to think that it’s the only thing people should read.”

Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**What attracts you to scenarios in which speech causes confusion?**

I’m thinking of the story “Caramel Drizzle,” in which an airline flight attendant is

stuck ordering her coffee because she doesn't know what the difference is between a caramel drizzle or a caramel syrup. She has to think about what the words mean. That thinking is what captures my attention. But it always emerges from a combination of language and character. I don't know if I would have been drawn to that scene the same way if the main character, the flight attendant, was someone else, someone different. But I liked her confusion and her alertness, and she seemed like a nice person. It feels natural to be drawn to a scenario like that because of my interest in language and then my interest in human relations. Where they intersect are these moments of dialogue and misunderstood dialogue.

**It's a misunderstanding that is easier to see in certain characters. I'm thinking of your story "Egg." It begins with a paragraph on cognates for "egg" in several languages, and then shows us two little boys trying to say the word "egg" to describe a round, white object. It turns out to be a Ping-Pong ball.**

You would relate to that because you have two boys.

**I do, and I do relate to it. For those children, and for my children, too, there's often a mismatch between a word and an object. There's comedy in that mismatch, but there's also pathos, especially when the characters are little.**

I'm drawn to humor, but also how language, humor, and character create moving situations. And what is touching about "Egg" is that the boys are so earnest. Kids are very earnest. They're so earnest in their little tiny way because they couldn't have been very old. And yet they're working so hard at identifying an object, which isn't even an egg. And, at that age, they're playing parallel to each other, not together, but they're still influenced by each other.

The kernel of the story is obviously the kids and trying to identify that object. But then I added the first paragraph because they have their own way of saying the word. But then we have all these other languages that also have different ways of saying the word. And it's similar to the boys. The boys get very close. Their words for "egg" or "Ping-Pong ball" are very close. And we have neighboring languages that are very close, but then the comedy for me comes in, you know, with the Scots Gaelic word for "egg" is just "*ugh*." And the French is funny too, "*oeuf*." They suddenly have nothing to do with the thing itself.

**The Turkish for “egg” is “yumurta.”**

It’s a much more complicated word.

**It’s entirely too irritating to say when all you want is a boiled egg for your breakfast.**

Another reason I was drawn to that story is that an egg is so primordial. It’s absolutely essential and basic.

**Those boys were eggs not too long ago.**

That’s right. They were eggs until they got inspired.

**In other words, the yolk of that story was the boys and then you added the first paragraph to it?**

Yes.

**Did you not feel like the second paragraph could have stood on its own?**

It could have. But sometimes I like to be mock scholarly, so I thought, Let’s have a little preface to this story. I liked the balance—the dry information, very straightforward and plain, and then moving to the scene in the living room with the boys. I like making fun of stuffy academics.

**“Bothered Scholar on Train” gives us a stuffy academic who is offensive less for their stuffiness or pedantry than for the desire to impose themselves on everyone around him. Why are people comfortable with being so talkative and self-revealing?**

There are several ways to answer that. One thing I think a lot about is Europe versus America. That may be changing in Europe, but there’s sort of a code there, or there was, especially on trains. You would be quiet. You would keep your voice down. You would be quiet. And in restaurants, too. I was thinking about it in a restaurant the other night because people are extremely loud in restaurants. And it’s not just New York City but even up here. And, in Europe, it used to be anyway that you kept your voice down because you were in a room full of people who all wanted to enjoy their dinner.

It leads me to think about something that I'm always amazed by: that some people I know are very aware of their own behavior, and then there are other people who just don't seem to be able to see themselves from the outside. They are not able to stand back and look at themselves, especially once they start talking. One friend and I have a running conversation about the people we know who will talk on and on almost neurotically—you know, the people you know, that you are friends with, who have no sense that they are dominating the conversation from start to finish and make it very hard for anyone else to comment. And they have strategies for it. They'll say "Ah." They'll stop in mid-sentence so you don't dare intervene, or they'll fill up the silence with "Ah . . . um."

**Situations in which people cannot see themselves from the outside while they're talking to others often become quite generative for you. The most striking story in "Our Strangers" is "Addie and the Chili," in which the narrator goes to a restaurant with her friends Ellie and Addie, orders chili, and confronts Addie about her tendency to make herself the center of attention.**

Yes, she is a good example of someone who's not aware of her whole situation, not aware of how she's fitting into it or not fitting into it.

**But it's also a case where the narrator intervenes.**

Which is unusual. But, if you think of the opposite, if she hadn't said anything, that's very uncomfortable, too. Either way, if she said something to Addie or didn't say something to her, it would have been equally frustrating.

The stories are not all necessarily close to reality and close to my life. But that one is. The character I'm calling Ellie is the person I just mentioned, with whom I was having this ongoing conversation about people who talk so much. She was the one who went to this experience. And, soon after, she must have said, "You should write a story about it." But, as I say in this story, she had no memory of that or really of the occasion. I enjoy this story because of the way it traces the shifting moods. Now the narrator is angry. Now she's not angry anymore. And the waiter is sort of the straight man among the ladies. And this weird thing, which I don't think would happen in New York City anymore: she takes the bowl of chili home with her. That would not really happen anymore.

**In “Our Strangers,” as well as in “Can’t and Won’t” and “The Collected Stories,” it is often women who are speaking to one another. Is there a way you think that women speak to one another that is different, or particularly amenable to scenarios like the one where Addie’s friends take her to task?**

I don’t know about that. I’m thinking of an earlier story, “Glenn Gould,” about friends watching “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” in which the friend is Mitch. Even though the narrator is a married woman with a family and husband, it’s her friend Mitch that she’s relating to in somewhat the same way as the narrator is relating to Ellie here. I say “she” because it isn’t me. When I write, the character becomes objectified. But I think there are male–female friendships that are comfortable in the same way and familiar in the same way. I’d have to really look through and think, What’s the role of men versus women here? I don’t usually think that way. You’re probably much too sophisticated to imagine that I’ve set out to make a point. Because I don’t set out to make a point. I don’t set out to write about women in a certain way, or even to write about women, period.

**I am thinking about your story “Suddenly Afraid”: “because she couldn’t write the name of what she was: a wa wam owm owamn womn.” I can’t quite pronounce the semantically incoherent permutations. . . .**

The permutations of the word “woman.”

**It’s difficult to read a story like that and not think you set out to write about gender.**

I didn’t mean to insult you. I was actually showing respect for you. Because I have been asked that so much: What was your intention? What were you setting out to do with the story? And I never set out beforehand to do something. That one just came out of the actual fact that I was trying to write the word “woman,” and I couldn’t. I got it all mixed up. And I was probably typing, but I get things mixed up when I write by hand, too. That’s all it was—capturing that moment. Of course, I saw the implications.

**For me, the difficulty that the story addresses isn’t only about gender. It’s about the difficulty of speech. When I teach it, and I ask students to read it aloud, they don’t know what to do with it. It seems like the kind of utterance that can only**

**exist in writing.**

Although I have read it out loud.

**How do you read it?**

I'd have to have it in front of me, but I just pronounce it phonetically: whoa-hum-mana.

**Now your mouth looks like it's trying to say "egg" in Turkish.**

What is it again?

*"Yumurta."*

It might be good to make students pronounce it. I don't know if kids are taught phonics anymore. It makes them read phonetically, and it makes them make weird sounds and be O.K. with it or do it anyway. I think that's a good thing.

**Going back to what you said about people who can't see themselves from the outside: as I was reading your story about singing lessons, "Learning to Sing," I realized that singing was the experience that made it most evident to me that what I think I sound like is not, in fact, what I sound like. Singing is a deeply self-estranging experience for me. I wonder if it is for you as well.**

I was starting from rock bottom. As I write in the story, I had always sung some, and fairly musically in tune, but the quality of my voice was not great. What I wanted from the lessons was to be able to sing more musically. I never got very far. As the story shows, it's not just the quality of your voice but of your whole being. If you're very reserved most of the time, it's hard to produce a nice sound.

**You write that singing makes you imagine that you could be bigger than you are. A bigger woman.**

And to sing more like a woman.

**Did singing make you want to be bigger?**

Oh, sure. Generally, I don't feel like I have to be bigger. But for that purpose it

would be fun to inhabit that large, operatic persona. Oh, just less reserved or withheld and more generous. But I don't think I'd want to live that way all the time.

Despite my voice not being great, I love singing with people. There's a group that sings shape singing, which is an early American form of singing. People who didn't read music could tell what the notes were by the shape and the notes. But they still print the shape-singing books, with music, too. On a historical day, at a historical site near here, they had a shape-singing activity. I did that on that day. And they said, "Oh, you should join our shape-singing group." I was very happy. It made me think, O.K., I could be a screechy old woman and be in a group and be screeching and not singing in tune and my voice may be awful but I don't care.

**It occurred to me as we were eating that I had forgotten to tell you that "The End of the Story" is one of my favorite novels. I've never read anything that captures the torque of consciousness as it does, from the beginning to the end of an agonized love affair. I wonder how you managed to achieve this, because it's the kind of experience that seems impossible to get a grip on when you're in it, and impossible to remember once you're out of it.**

I'm really glad you like it, because it is not mentioned often just because it doesn't fit in. It's not a story. It's a novel. "She's not a novelist," people said. But I worked very hard on it. And I thought it was really good.

**I'm surprised that it doesn't get mentioned more, because it's truly excellent. I give it to many heartbroken friends as a gift.**

You can imagine that it was based on an experience. And it started, really, as scenes. I will write something, whether it's very small or that novel, if the material just interests me so much. All the observations in the novel, all the perceptions she has about this or that or all the strange things that go into it, it just interested me so much. I have to write about it.

But it started out as two different novels. I don't know if I've talked about this anywhere before. I thought, I'll write a story of this love affair. But then I was kind of bored by it as just a straight story of the love affair and the breakup. It just did not captivate me. At the same time, I started writing what I called Novel No. 2, which was about the process of writing Novel No. 1. And I kept Novel No. 2 a secret. My

publisher was waiting for Novel No. 1. But I was at the same time writing Novel No. 2, and they didn't know about that.

And then Alan, who doesn't usually play a crucial part in my work, strangely enough said, "If you're kind of bored with that one, why don't you write a second one that you don't tell anyone about?" He guessed what I was already doing. He didn't suggest it. I was already doing it. That was odd. And, at some point, I realized, Oh, I can merge them, and then I'll be perfectly happy with Novel No. 1 because it serves the purposes of Novel No. 2.

A friend was disappointed that there wasn't any sex in it. I just never wanted to have sex in it because it's almost demanded: writing about this passionate love affair, you have to have the crucial central scene with very good sex. But I just never wanted to because it seemed so rote and so required and so uninteresting. So I had a sort of negative sex scene with a later lover who doesn't do this and doesn't do that, to imply all that went on in the other one. It amused me to do it that way, but my friend—well, he should have been more sophisticated and not disappointed in my sex scene.

**I can remember the mood of the entire novel. But the detail I can visualize most clearly comes at the end, when the narrator feels the love affair is maybe finally over and is given a cup of tea by a stranger in a bookstore.**

I wonder why.

**I was hoping you could tell me.**

I really didn't know how to end the novel, until I thought of this grim, sad tea ceremony. The narrator is tired. She's sitting in a bookstore for a tea ceremony, and although the tea is comforting, it isn't very good. It's strong, Lipton tea. But the gesture is comforting. So that can become the end. But it was very hard, especially since I had never written a novel. So how do you end it? And then what are the very last words of the ending? I labored over it.

**Perhaps I remember it because it is the gesture of a stranger who can choose to be kind to her or not. So much depends on that choice.**

Yes, and he comes in from outside the story. He doesn't know the story. He doesn't

know her. He just intervenes.

**It makes me think of the story “Judgment.” Maybe because his decision to give her the tea is a very small act of judgment.**

You mean my story about the ladybug? I thought maybe you meant Kafka’s story about judgment.

**I suppose I could have meant Kafka’s story. But I meant yours. “Into how small a space the word judgment . . .”**

—“can be compressed: it must fit inside the brain of a ladybug as she, before my eyes, makes a decision.”

**And the judgments that ladybugs or strangers make can be small, but they can also be momentous.**

I was thinking of that story again, because just now there was an ant on the sink, deciding to go this way or that way. They do have to make a decision, however they do it.

**Do you think they do it differently from the way we do it?**

They’re certainly not thinking in words. They’re reacting. We do some of the same instinctive things, like choosing a chair in the living room. You don’t think in words, but you go for the chair that feels comfortable for you. I’m sorry to deprive you of what is obviously the best chair. We make instinctive decisions, which they must make.

I meant to tell you that there were a lot of daddy longlegs in the bathroom, in case you were bothered by that.

**I wouldn’t have been, but I didn’t see any daddy longlegs in the bathroom.**

They’re pretty small. But that’s another one of my principles. I don’t dust away cobwebs. I just let the bugs live. Like, the spiders can live here and the ants can live here and the ladybugs upstairs could live there.

**Bugs, like strangers, can be small and large, important and not so important. You**

**put strangers front and center in this new collection. Why?**

I noticed after I chose the title that the word “strangers” recurs in other stories. But those particular strangers are neighbors. We’re thrown into relationships with these people we don’t know just because we live close to them.

I think that “Our Strangers,” it may have been born from a story that impressed me very much, a true story, a news story. It was years and years ago. Three brothers living on the edge of a town together in a house, and they were kind of a little crazy or mentally not all there. And they were slovenly, and they were this and they were that. They were very much rejected by the townspeople. But then somehow—I don’t know the story exactly—the authorities came down to move them, to force them out in some way. And the people of the town rallied behind them. There was the sense that, yes, they’re outcasts, but they’re *our* outcasts. I thought this was the craziest paradox. They’re strangers to us. But they’re *our* strangers.

**There’s a phrase that I like from linguistic anthropology, “entextualization”: the process by which speech is extracted from its original context and turned into a text that others can read. I wonder if your genre of overheard conversations entextualizes the speech of strangers to make them *your* strangers, or, for you and your reader, *our* strangers.**

I know that this has happened to me a few times, like with those two old ladies on the train. That wasn’t the only thing I heard them saying. They were probably waiting, standing up in the aisle waiting to get off. They were talking to each other. But I really liked them. And I thought, Boy, I would really like to spend time with these women and get to know them. I would just love to get off the train and sit with them. That’s not true of other scenarios. But I see what you mean. It’s not that I want to make them my friends exactly but just possess them for a while.

**That’s what’s charming about it. It’s dubious and off-putting to want to possess people for a long time, but it is all right to want to possess them for a very little bit.**

Yes, people react to that. I’m careful to ask friends, like the other Davis in the village. Because I didn’t have to use our names. I could have said the two Harrises. But I wanted to use Davis. He didn’t mind. He was fine with it. But people are very

sensitive about being appropriated that way and being used, even if you do it in the friendliest way or the most positive or complimentary way. Because you are taking them and using them. That's tricky.

### **When did you make the decision not to sell “Our Strangers” on Amazon?**

I've boycotted Amazon for many years. I shouldn't say “boycott” because it's not very effective when one person does it. But I have not bought anything from them. But what triggered it? I think it may have been Dave Eggers's decision to publish his last book—it's probably not the last one by now—by not selling through Amazon for the first six weeks. It was limited, but it was only available from bookstores. It was right around the time that the second book of my essays came out, and I regretted that Amazon would be selling that book. I thought, Oh, well, why don't I just not have Amazon sell it, period. And I vowed this out loud at a dinner table. And then I thought, Oh, well, now that I've vowed this out loud at a dinner table, I will not go back on this decision.

### **Was there an exclamation mark at the end of the vow?**

Yes, there definitely was, and there was a very angry face. And then I heard various arguments like, well, if Amazon sells, it's widely available to people who don't have as much money. But the trouble is, you're still going along with a system that's very oppressive. They're selling it at a low price at the expense of the workers. There was an earlier version of a book called “How to Resist Amazon and Why,” and I read that, which gave me more reasons and more information. But you know how bad they are. And it goes beyond the business practices. And it goes beyond the bad working conditions, to the very idea of community. I think they're community wreckers, and I think now more than ever we need community. In every way, I wouldn't want to support them.

### **Would you want other writers to do the same? How should we reseed the community they've wrecked?**

It should be government-led, and I don't know if that ever will be because of the way our government functions, especially now. In France—and we found this out when selling foreign rights to the book—if you say, “We want to avoid Amazon,” the publishers say, “Oh, that's no problem. The government already doesn't allow

Amazon to undersell and underprice.” It’s *our* government that allows this monopolistic situation.

As for other writers, everyone’s at different points in their careers. There might be a young writer who is so eager to reach an audience that she or he doesn’t want to bypass Amazon. I’m not blaming anyone. I understand people’s different reasons. I have friends who buy books through Amazon, and they know that I don’t approve, but they want the book fast. And I disagree with that whole idea, too. Getting things fast and conveniently is a value that I don’t subscribe to. Occasionally, in an emergency or some vital situation, you need something the next day or the same day—O.K. But a book you want to read, you don’t have to get it the same day or the next day.

I’m slightly afraid that if there were suddenly a growing movement, and no authors or most authors would not want their books to be sold by Amazon—which is hard to believe—that Amazon would retaliate in some awful way. They’re very retaliatory. I didn’t do it to set an example or to lead the way or anything like that. I did it because I was just unwilling to let a company like that sell something that mattered to me.

**What you said earlier about a young writer who has a desire to reach a larger audience made me wonder if reaching an audience was ever something that felt important to you.**

Even as a young writer, I never said, “I want to reach a large audience. I want to be famous.” It was more like “I want to do something as good as Beckett.” I would have high ambition, but it was not for fame and glory. I don’t think you can chase after that. My ambition was to do something really good, like my heroes. Right now, I would like to have readers because I enjoy that kind of communion. People warned me, they said, “You might only have fifty per cent of the readers you would have, if you pull the book from Amazon.” I’m willing to do that based on principle. If you steal from someone, maybe you get a lot of whatever you stole, but the principle is wrong.

**Speaking of principles of judgment, do you prefer the early Beckett to the late Beckett?**

I like both. I don't know how I would have reacted if there had been only late Beckett available. I think I would have been intrigued by it, because it's very intriguing. I think "Ill Seen Ill Said" is in one of my stories, the one about taking the bus down to the airport or something.

**"Southward Bound, Reads *Worstward Ho*."**

Yes, I like having a very thorny text to just mull over like that. But I think the later texts can be too withholding and narrow, if fascinating and wonderful. I wouldn't emulate them.

**What do you mean by "narrow"?**

They're so stingy. "Ill Seen Ill Said"—this is not writing for the people. How many people could read this? There's a part of me that doesn't want to write things that no one can read or that only a small sector of people can enjoy. You and others can enjoy the particularity of the title "Southward Bound, Reads *Worstward Ho*" because it's Beckettian already. It's just using a few words to construct a title. A very different title stylistically but that gives you a similar feeling is "On Their Way South on Sunday Morning (They Thought)." The language and the syntax for the title is very different, much looser and more open and easier: "On Their Way South on Sunday Morning (They Thought)." Whereas "Southward Bound, Reads *Worstward Ho*" is thornier.

**Another one of my favorite stories of yours is "Kafka Cooks Dinner." I read it at the same time that I read his letters to Milena Jesenská, which are passionate and beautiful and tortured, as well as quite tedious and irritating in their absolute neuroticism. But it's wonderful to imagine that neuroticism attending Kafka's preparation of "Kartoffel Surprise" for the woman he is obsessed with. Did writing it make you think differently about Kafka?**

I used to read his diaries very closely and very often when I was younger. I think I felt very close to him. He was never proud or arrogant. I'm sure he had many facets to him, but I found him a very sympathetic, lovable person. I felt very comfortable appropriating him for this dinner situation.

The story started as just a neat idea, because I was having trouble thinking what to

make for dinner. And I thought how much more trouble he would have had because he was such a hesitater. It was going to be just a page or so, but then I decided to incorporate his language into it. It grew and grew because I went to his letters, too. And I wanted to incorporate all the wonderful things he says in them, like “Someone once said I swim like a swan, but it was not a compliment.”

This closeness can happen with translation, too. I felt very close to Proust. And even rather closer to Flaubert. Flaubert is not a very lovable person. Proust is, I think, even though he’s weird. He may have his perversions, but I felt that he was very lovable.

### **What about Michel Leiris?**

He’s different. I did meet him once in person. He was very standoffish. No, he wasn’t exactly lovable. But I would definitely feel in very close sympathy with anyone that I was translating that I respected and liked.

### **You have translated the essays and fiction of Maurice Blanchot and Leiris’s “The Rules of the Game,” which are marvellous on early language acquisition. Does the way we use language change at the extremes of life?**

At the early extreme, it’s very dramatic and very interesting. I remember, when we took a trip to Florida, I said, “We’re going to Miami,” and one of my sons—I think he was about seven or eight—didn’t know Miami was a city and said, “When are we getting to your ami?” On the same trip, I talked about the co-pilot, and my son thought that was a pilot of a co. In the beginning, they’re trying hard, but they might get it wrong.

In the end—it’s a cliché, but I think it’s true—old people are more outspoken. They’re quicker to just say what they think. And then, all the way through life, there’s the factor of misunderstanding: one person says this, but someone else misunderstood and thought it meant that. I know that, at the end of life, that can get very interesting, especially the last words on the deathbed. The last word could be something you can’t quite make out. Or that you misunderstand. And, at the end of life, that misunderstanding can be crucial in a way that it isn’t in the middle of life.

**My grandmother's last words were instructions to my grandfather about which woman he should marry next. My grandfather listened to her, but he and his second wife never got along, divorced quickly, and she stole all his good silver. I thought it was extraordinary of my grandmother to use her last words to misunderstand what would make him happy.**

I thought that you were going to say that he misheard her. He heard "Please be with Anya," but what she really said was "Please be with Anna. She would have been wonderful." ♦



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