“[…] which approximates ‘I love you’.”

Jonathan Safran Foer’s Punctuation of Emotions

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> To tell the truth we have to trap the appearances with quotation marks.
> HÉLÈNE CIXOUS

> Denn die Welt bietet soviel Probleme an, als die Sprache Lücken, Elastizitäten, Neuschaffungsmöglichkeiten bereitstellt.
> GÜNTHER ANDERS

“A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease” by Jonathan Safran Foer is a short story without an actual plot. Being a *primer*, it constitutes a manual that provides a system of signs which can be applied to conversations in order to clarify the meaning and context of words, expressions and silences.

There is, e.g. □, the “silence mark”, which “signifies an absence of language”, a painful kind of silence that is caused mostly by the incapability of expressing feelings or reacting to strong emotions.[1] In contrast, there is the “willed silence mark” ■, which “signifies an intentional silence” and is a strategy to protect oneself and withdraw from the conversation; it is “the conversational equivalent of building a wall over which you can’t climb, through which you can’t see”.[2] Further, there are signs that constitute “Barely Tolerable Substitutes” for desired emotional expressions that can’t possibly be spoken out loud.[3]

1 Foer 2005a: 1.

2 Ibid.

3 Cf. ibid.: 7.

The *Primer* suggests, e.g. the use of such punctuation in place of the all-time classic of unbearable phrases:

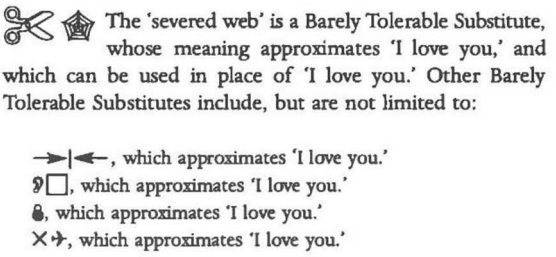

Figure 1: *Barely Tolerable Substitutes*

The underlying principle of this sign system seems to be the insight that as soon as people communicate, there is misunderstanding and thus pain: "Familial communication always has to do with failures to communicate."[4] Especially when it comes to the articulation of feelings, there is necessarily something left unspoken. This inexpressible remainder calls for the help of these signs to at least "approximate" the feeling.

In the *Primer* we find descriptions of about twenty signs. Because they are created for the expression of something that cannot be put into words, they are not simply translatable but have to be explained in context: the narrator of the short story explains every sign and tries them out in dialogues with his family. In the course of the story, the signs add up and are weaved into more and more complex and long conversations. Even if there is no plot *per se*, we get to meet the inventor of the sign language and learn a lot about his family. Thus, the short story is of course more than a manual.

The quoted dialogues between the family members make explicit that the narrator, his parents and his brothers are extremely sensitive people. They are portrayed as insecure, introverted and overly thin-skinned. Thus, the proposed sign language, intended for situations in which strong emotional experiences literally leave them speechless, seems to be needed constantly.

This observation is true for the whole oeuvre of Jonathan Safran Foer.[5] The author states concerning "A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease": "[...] I

4 Ibid.: 8.

5 Foer, born 1977 in Washington, is a contemporary, bestselling American writer. His first two novels *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2015) were also adapted for the screen in successful Hollywood productions.

think it [this short story] is fairly representative of my concerns as a writer: the difficulties of expression, family and love."[6] If I wanted to characterise the protagonists of Foer's books in one sentence, I would cite Ms. Schmidt, one of the protagonists in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close,* saying: "I spent my life learning to feel less."[7] All of Foer's protagonists feel too much and are constantly busy protecting themselves from being overwhelmed by their emotions. In this early short story we find, highly compressed, the main questions, or rather the main quest of Foer's novels: the capability of putting the right words to things and especially to feelings.

To explore this idea, first a comparative close reading of the short story and certain passages from Foer's novels will give insight into the fundamental problems of language that these books commonly address. Then, I will investigate the exact nature of the sign system established in "A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease" and, based on this insight, conclude on the utopian potential of this sign language of emotions. Consequently, this article on the one hand analyzes the motif and the role of emotional expression in Foer's oeuvre and, on the other hand, reflects from a more general perspective upon the representation of feelings in writing and speech as a very basic problem of semiotics.[8]

With *Eating Animals* (2009) he published a non-fiction book in favour of vegetarianism and with the die-cut novel *Tree of Code* (2010) an art book. In 2016 his most recent novel *Here I Am* was published.

6 Foer 2005a: viii.

7 Foer 2005b: 180.

8 In this article, I'll not refer to a specific theory of emotions, but rather show in which way this short story itself contains a theory or at least a thesis on how our language is connected to our outer and inner life. Therefore, the terms emotion and feeling are often used colloquially and interchangeably. Nevertheless, for a basic understanding, I refer to the prominent distinction of the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, who describes emotions as unconscious, immediate and bodily reactions to certain stimuli. Feelings, on the other hand, in his definition occur when a person becomes aware of her or his emotions and can put a more general and conventional name to them. See further explanation in an interview with the *Scientific American*: "[…] for neuroscience, emotions are more or less the complex reactions the body has to certain stimuli. When we are afraid of something, our hearts begin to race, our mouths become dry, our skin turns pale and our muscles contract. This emotional reaction occurs automatically and unconsciously. Feelings occur after we become aware in our brain of such physical changes; only then do we experience the feeling of fear." Lenzen 2013.

DEALING WITH CONTAMINATED LANGUAGE

The name of the sign system – *Punctuation of Heart Disease* – goes back to the fact that several members of the narrator's family suffer from a weak heart: "we have forty-one heart attacks between us, and counting."[9] This malady and other dangers to loved ones as well as unnamed dreadful experiences of this originally European Jewish family during World War II seem to be the source of their fearfulness and extreme sensitivity. The Holocaust as well as a more general fear of loss of love are constantly on the horizon and demand new ways of expression.

The statement that all of Foer's protagonists feel too much means that everything in the world affects them; everything comes *incredibly close*: "There was no such thing as a safe distance, then. Everything was either too close or too far."[10] The main problem seems to be to find a healthy place in reference to their environment. They are not able to shield themselves and their emotional life from the outside.

It is a catastrophe that makes these people lose their "safe distance", which manifests itself mostly in the problem of finding the right language to express emotions. One aspect of this problem is what I'd like to call the inevitable contamination of language. Two passages from Foer's oeuvre show, in a playful but very explicit way, that the insufficiency language is accused of in "A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease" is due to the fact that our words are contaminated with past meaning that is ever present while speaking: In *Everything Is Illuminated,* two lovers communicate through cut-up messages from articles taken from current newspapers. In order to, e.g. simply arrange a meeting, they have to go through the daily horror of the Second World War being evoked with every word.

> The "M" was taken from the army that would take his mother's life: GERMAN FRONT ADVANCES ON SOVIET BORDER; the "eet" from their approaching warships: NAZI FLEET DEFEATS FRENCH AT LESACS; the "me" from the peninsula they were blue-eyeing: GERMANS SURROUND CRIMEA; the "und" from too little, too late: AMERICAN WAR FUNDS REACH ENGLAND; the "er" from the dog of dogs: HITLER RENDERS NONAGGRESSION PACT INOPERATIVE . . . and so on, and so on, each note a collage of love that could never be, and war that could.[11]

9 Foer 2005a: 1.

10 Foer 2002a: 130.

11 Ibid.: 233.

In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* there is a very similar passage. Thomas Schell, who is originally from Dresden in Germany, has lost his speech in the course of World War II. He communicates only through writing; he writes phrases in little notebooks and shows the pages to people. Having fled to America and finally settling in New York, he meets a girl there from his past – Ms. Schmidt, who later becomes his wife. They have a very special but also very strange relationship, because there is always the traumatic past that casts its shadow over them. Soon after their reunion, she writes on the last page of his current notebook: "Please marry me." Because there are no pages left to write on, Thomas Schell has to answer by flipping back and forth through the existing pages, reusing the phrases that have been written in the course of the day.

I flipped back and pointed at, "Ha ha ha!" She flipped forward and pointed at, "Please marry me." I flipped back and pointed at, "I'm sorry, this is the smallest I've got." She flipped forward and pointed at, "Please marry me." I flipped back and pointed at, "I'm not sure, but it's late." She flipped forward and pointed at, "Please marry me," and this time put her finger on "Please," as if to hold down the page and end the conversation, or as if she were trying to push through the word and into what she really wanted to say.[12]

This somewhat absurd dialogue emphasizes the calamitous diagnosis that everything spoken and everything written is contaminated with unwanted past meaning. Every word and sentence has always already been contextualized and interpreted and in this sense always comes too late for what we "really wanted to say". The only solution is to invent a new language that would, on the one hand, have a more subtle way of carrying meaning and, on the other hand, could thus subvert the old language and escape its imprints. This is what the narrator of "A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease" is trying to do by introducing his sign system – by means and methods that will be more closely examined later in this paper.

WRITING VERSUS LIVING

Besides contamination, another language issue haunts the protagonists of Foer's oeuvre. While language, and especially the practice of writing, has an unmistakably important and productive character for these people, it also occupies too much space: the text – in a figurative sense also designating reflection, self-

12 Foer 2005b: 33.

consciousness and tradition – seems often to come between the characters and their lives; their textual practice seems to keep them from living. This aspect is closely linked to the Jewish tradition of text exegesis, as will be examined at the end of this chapter.

In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* this opposition between life and text is brought to the fore in the odd lifestyle of Thomas Schell and Ms. Schmidt. Struggling with living together, they invent a complex system of rules which they in fact map out on the blueprints of their apartment.[13] "Home is the place with the most rules."[14] These rules, being virtually imprinted on all the surfaces of their home, create a textual layer that at first helps them to orient and root themselves in the apartment but, in the end, separates them from their home. In addition, Thomas Schell starts to take photographs of every detail of the flat: "He took pictures of everything. […] He could have rebuilt the apartment by taping together the pictures."[15] These photographs create a visual simulacrum of a home in addition to the rules, which are a textual simulation of a functioning relationship. Both are expressions of the artificiality of their living together; the text and the images are a barrier that separates the couple from a relationship dynamics that is more organically grown and based on authentic desires rather than on arrangements.[16]

Furthermore, text becomes a barrier in the most literal sense here: in the form of Thomas Schell's *daybooks*. Using them for daily communication, they add up to hundreds of books, occupying the whole apartment.[17] His space-consuming way of communicating symbolizes once again the insufficiency of language to designate what ought to be expressed when it comes to feelings:

13 Cf. ibid.: 111.

14 Ibid.: 185.

15 Foer 2005b: 175.

16 This formulation is of course problematic. My intention here is not to define one lifestyle as more authentic, natural or normal than any other. Rather, I want to shed light on the fact that this relationship is portrayed as obsessively constructed and governed necessarily by artificial rules and regulations. This again expresses the characters' trauma of WWII.

In contrast, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* tells the story of Thomas Schell's first love, before the war, an easy and uncomplicated relationship in the sense that there is no over-analysis and constant self-reflection.

17 "I went through a hundred of books, thousands of them, they were all over the apartment, I used them as doorstops and paperweights, I stacked them if I needed to reach something, I slid them under the legs of wobbly tables, […]." Foer 2005b: 28.

I have so much to tell you, the problem isn't that I'm running out of time, I'm running out of room, this book is filling up, there couldn't be enough pages, I looked around the apartment this morning for one last time and there was writing everywhere, filling the walls and mirrors, I'd rolled up the rugs so I could write on the floors, I'd written on the windows and around the bottles of wine we were given but never drank, I wear only short sleeves, even when it's cold, because my arms are books, too. But there's too much to express.[18]

Even if everything is covered with text, something crucial always remains inexpressible. Rather, this textual layer – here literally a layer of letters – blocks the way to an uncomplicated social interaction. This insight is stressed by Oskar's habits of writing. After the loss of his father, who died in the attacks on the World Trade Center on the 11th September 2011, the nine-year-old boy – grandson of Thomas Schell and Ms. Schmidt – starts writing application letters to various prominent scientists and rock stars in order to reassert his future plans.[19]

Besides this positive way of writing, which helps him to cope with the situation, he keeps a notebook entitled *Stuff That Happened to Me*.[20] In this scrapbook he collects articles and images from the internet that concern him. Here once again, the problem of not finding a "safe distance" to one's surroundings expresses itself, because Oskar includes basically everything he stumbles upon, like "a shark attacking a girl, someone walking on a tightrope between the Twin Towers, that actress getting a blowjob from her normal boyfriend, a soldier getting his head cut off in Iraq […]".[21] Everything he observes *happens* to him. In his scrapbook he tries to outsource the fears and pains he connects with these images and texts. This time, it is intended to create a barrier; the book should shield him from the cruelty in the world by miniaturizing and arranging it. When Oskar decides at the end of the novel that he won't start a new volume of *Stuff That Happened to Me*, this indicates that he, in contrast to his grandparents, is ready to leave the sphere of self-reflection and over-analysis represented by the text, and to go on living.[22] In overcoming this obsessional everyday chronicling lies the subtle happy ending of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Oskar is finally able to draw the right conclusion from his grandmother's insight: "You cannot protect yourself from sadness without protecting yourself from happi-

18 Ibid.: 132.

19 Cf. ibid.: 11.

20 For a detailed analysis of this aspect of the novel cf. Siegel 2009.

21 Foer 2005b: 42.

22 Cf. ibid.: 325.

ness."[23] Writing is the characters' strategy of protection, but then again, too much text cuts them off from an untroubled, more immediate life experience.

In *Everything Is Illuminated,* this oppositional relation between text and life is brought to the fore with recourse to the Jewish tradition of text exegesis. One strand of the novel tells the story of the village Trachimbrod before the Second World War.[24] Foer draws a caricature of the often very detailed and strict rules of the Jewish religion, myth and tradition. He portrays Jewishness as life in an all-encompassing text that needs to be deciphered. In this image of the *book religion*, we can observe once again this double character of text: the written word is the basis of the Jewish religion; the word or name is at the origin of all creation and thus life is not only understood through text but brought into existence by it.[25] All the same, in practice, this text-oriented existence seems to cut off its adherents from their earthly life, as becomes clear in the following passage of *Everything Is Illuminated.*

> The Well-Regarded Rabbi was exceedingly knowledgeable about the large, extra-large, and extra-extra-large matters of the Jewish faith, and was able to draw upon the most obscure and indecipherable texts to reason seemingly impossible religious quandaries, but he knew hardly anything about life itself, and for this reason, because the baby's birth had no textual precedents, […] because the baby was about life, and was life, he found himself to be quite stuck.[26]

23 Foer 2005b: 180.

24 Trachimbrod, or Trochenbrod, is a village in today's Ukraine, former Poland. In the course of WWII, the Nazis turned the shtetl into a Jewish ghetto whose population was almost completely liquidated in 1942. *Everything Is Illuminated* is fiction and does not claim to be of historical value. Still, it is clearly of autobiographical nature: Foer has undertaken a journey to Ukraine to research the history of his grandfather and the people who helped him survive the Holocaust just as in the novel the narrator called Jonathan Safran Foer does. Regarding the fictionalization of this experience, the author stated that the "novel is much more a response to my trip than a recounting of it". Cf. Foer 2002b. A historical account of Trachimbrod as well as a critique of Foer's fictionalization can be found in Ivan Katchanovski's article "NOT Everything is Illuminated". Katchanovski 2004.

25 This accounts especially for the mystical reading of the Torah by the Kabbalists, who "regarded creation itself as a linguistic phenomenon". Eco 1995: 25. In *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism,* Gershom Scholem gives a detailed account of this aspect of the Kabbala. Cf. Scholem 1965: 36. For a semiotic approach to this tradition cf. Assmann 2004: 718-719.

26 Foer 2002a: 21.

In a well reflected and nevertheless witty manner, Foer mingles this ontological dimension of the word as the origin of creation with a pragmatic understanding of text. Consequently, rabbinic scribes become bibliomaniac bookworms, unfit for everyday life, while in the most ordinary situations, the mystic-magical, generative dimension of text comes into play. This paradoxical and ambivalent relationship to writing and text – as barrier on the one hand and the chance of "building the world anew"[27] on the other – is at the core of Foer's work. This can be proven by an analysis of the short story "A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease", as I will show in the following.

THE NATURE OF THE SIGN SYSTEM

As with many aspects of Foer's books, this punctuation provides more food for thought than one might think at first sight. These signs can be defined as symbolic as well as performative.[28] Firstly, because they are conventional: they need an agreed code to be understood. Secondly, because they can be meant as calls for action – this is the case, e.g. with the "willed silence mark", which tries to silence the conversation partner, and also the converse, the "insistent question mark", which wants the conversation partner to break his or her silence.

For a further examination, it is useful to explore these signs in two very different contexts: they can be compared to Egyptian hieroglyphs as well as to social media emoticons. Regarding the typeface of the short story, the contemporary reader, no doubt, thinks first and foremost of emoticons. Text-based internet communication has grown enormously in the last decade, as has the need for visual support to express emotions in chatting and text messaging.[29] For in-

27 These are Thomas Schell's words, who writes about Ms. Schmidt's project of writing her life story: "[…] I heard from behind the door the sounds of creation, the letters pressing into the paper, the pages being pulled from the machine, everything being, for once, better than it was and as good as it could be, everything full of meaning […]." Foer 2005b: 119-120.

28 This terminology refers to Aleida Assmann's additions to Charles S. Pierce's sign system. Cf. Assmann 2015: 54-56.

29 "Emoticons (a contraction of the words 'emotional icons') are glyphs used in computer-mediated communications, meant to represent facial expressions. When the Internet was entirely text-based, emoticons were rendered in ASCII, and read by tilting one's head to the left, as the 'smiley' indicates :-). While more sophisticated methods to

stance, you might want to put :) or ;) after an ironic statement to ensure the intended interpretation. Emoticons are considered to add the information that gesture and facial expression provide in face-to-face communication; they serve as equivalents to nonverbal cues in spoken dialogue.[30]

Like emoticons in chat conversation, the *Punctuation of Heart Disease* adds "a paralinguistic component to a message".[31] After being introduced to the system, the signs enable the reader of the short story to interpret the intonation and the silences in the quoted dialogues more accurately. However, a more thorough reading of the short story at least partly dismisses this comparison. While emoticons – in their primary, simple usage[32] – transmit collective and generally readable "social cues"[33] like a smile or a wink, the signs in Foer's book mostly designate feelings that are very individual and have no conventional expression. Especially in the description of the "corroboration mark", which looks exactly like a smiley, this distinction becomes obvious:

The 'corroboration mark' is more or less what it looks like. But it would be a mistake to think that it simply stands in place of 'I agree,' or even 'Yes.' Witness the subtle usage in this dialogue between my mother and my father:

'Could you add orange juice to the grocery list, but remember to get the kind with reduced acid. Also some cottage cheese. And that bacon-substitute stuff. And a few Yahrzeit candles.'

'☺'

'The car needs gas. I need tampons.'

'☺'

Figure 2: *The corroboration mark*

display emoticons exist today, their purpose has remained the same: They are used to communicate the emotional state of the author." Senft 2003: 177.

For a useful summary of research on emoticons as well as empirical surveys cf. Derks et al. 2007.

30 Cf. Derks et al. 2007: 29.

31 Derks et al. 2007: 843.

32 By stating this, I want to stress the difference between the sign system of the short story and the pragmatic usage of simple emoticons like the winking smiley. Still, I acknowledge the more and more sophisticated and subtle functions that emoticons and especially their stylized form, *emojis*, are gaining. Cf. Albert 2015: 16 (translation J.G.).

33 Derks et al. 2007: 843.

Here, the sign adds meaning not only to the written word but to language in general. An iconic usage is suggested – the sign "is more or less what it looks like"[34] – but all the same, this is not a representation of a smiling person. It does not mimic the bodily reaction to emotional states, like raising the corners of the mouth, shivering or freezing. Neither does it hint at intonation, gesture or facial expression. Rather, this sign seeks to designate the feeling itself, which has not taken any visible form.

In this sense, the sign brings something into language that was not expressible before at all; it thus adds vocabulary. Bearing this in mind, the sign system of "A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease" can rather be compared to Egyptian hieroglyphs. In the hieroglyphic system there are signs that carry context information but have no vocal equivalent. These determinatives define, for instance, if the neighbour sign is to be read as a verb or as a noun, or, e.g. if it designates a single event or a reoccurring generality. Consequently, a written text can convey much more meaning than speech.[35] On this basis, the Egyptologist Jan Assmann has analysed the hieroglyphic determinatives as signs "beyond language".[36] They are extraordinary because here, against our habit, the written word emancipates itself from speech.[37] It is rather in writing than in speaking that new meaning is created.[38]

34 Foer 2005a: 5.

35 Cf. Assmann, Jan 2003: 52. In this function, hieroglyphs and emoticons can be compared, as Aleida Assmann suggests. Assmann, Aleida 2015: 99-100. For another semiotic account that draws on this comparison cf. Albert 2015: 14-15.

36 Cf. Assmann, Jan 2003: 41.

37 Even if this article cannot consider it in detail, one must mention Jacques Derrida's *Grammatology* at this point. The French philosopher examines the relationship between the written and the spoken word and the hegemony of the latter over the former. In this respect, he discusses various thinkers' interpretation of hieroglyphs; regarding the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he states that hieroglyphs constitute a "language of passion": "La langue hiéroglyphique est une langue passionnée." Derrida 1967: 337. Furthermore, in *Writing and Difference* (1967) he discusses Sigmund Freud's reference to the hieroglyphs in his dream interpretation as well as the importance of hieroglyphs for Antonin Artaud's understanding of theatre. Derrida's philosophy of language is of great importance for the issue of this article, not only in regard to hieroglyphs but for a general consideration of the relationship between text and speech. A more deconstructivist account of Foer's work and especially of this short story would be an interesting topic for another article.

38 Jan Assmann speaks in this respect of "etymography" as an equivalent to "etymology"; while the latter observes the origin and the formation of words, etymography ex-

Aleida and Jan Assmann explain the profound and timeless fascination with the hieroglyph in terms of its hybridity: "It represents a visual notion that cannot be translated into language completely."[39] It thus undermines the clear distinction between *signifier* and *signified* that has dominated modern thinking:[40] "The hieroglyph is a holistic sign that exceeds the logic of the dualistic sign structure, including the hierarchy of values it implies."[41] This is why, the hieroglyphic system has fed the imagination since its beginnings. It has been considered a material articulation of creation in opposition to a mere representation of the world.[42]

Comparing the punctuation to hieroglyphs, the intention of the narrator comes to the fore: his signs do not represent other, non-verbal signs – they do not, e.g. stand for a smile –, but they aim at creating new realities.

THE SEARCH FOR THE PERFECT LANGUAGE

As already pointed out, the central issues of Foer's protagonists are the unavoidable contamination of language with past meaning and too great a distance between word and world. These problems take place in the infamous space between the *referent,* the *signifier*, and the *signified*. It is this gap between *les mots et les choses* where the contamination takes hold, the misunderstanding happens and the distance to life is created – *the order of things* is never naturally

amines similar metaphors of visual representation in different iconic languages, such as Hebrew script, Egyptian hieroglyphs and Japanese kanjis. Cf. Assmann, Jan 2003: 40.

39 "Die Hieroglyphe ist ein Zwitter: Sie verkörpert einen bildlichen Begriff, der nicht gänzlich in Sprache zu übersetzen ist." Assmann, Aleida/Assmann, Jan 2003a: 20 (translation J.G.).

40 They refer to the famous dyadic semiotic model that Ferdinand de Saussure defines in his *Cours de linguistique générale* (*Course in General Linguistics*) from 1916. Following Saussure, the sign is composed of the *signifier* (the sound-image/the word) and the *signified* (the concept; the idea of what the speaker wants to express). The actual object the sign refers to he terms *referent*.

41 "Die Hieroglyphe ist ein holistisches Zeichen, das die Logik der dualen Zeichenstruktur samt der damit verbundenen Werthierarchie sprengt." Assmann, Aleida/Assmann, Jan 2003b: 268 (translation J.G.).

42 Cf. ibid.: 269.

given to us, but always mediated through language.[43] "In its original form, when it was given to men by God himself, language was an absolutely certain and transparent sign for things, because it resembled them. […] This transparency was destroyed at Babel as a punishment for men."[44]

Foer's protagonists dream the dream of a pre-Babylonian language that doesn't have this gap, because it is primarily and naturally connected to the things it designates. However, as "A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease" shows, they don't waste their time lamenting Babel. Rather they actively struggle to at least approximate this utopian, pre-Babylonian language usage – a non-representational, genuine and non-arbitrary expression: they engage in a *search for the perfect language*.[45]

To understand this search, we must come back to the fascination for hieroglyphs and to the hermeneutic tradition of Judaism. In *The Order of Things* Foucault hints at the particular role of Hebrew in the utopia of a perfect, original language:

> There is only one language that retains a memory of that similitude, because it derives in direct descent from that first vocabulary which is now forgotten […]. Hebrew therefore contains, as if in the form of fragments, the marks of that original name-giving. And those words pronounced by Adam as he imposed them upon the various animals have endured, in part at least, and still carry with them in their density, like an embedded fragment of silent knowledge, the unchanging properties of beings […].[46]

In *Everything Is Illuminated* this primal link between language and life is a recurrent motif. For instance, there is *The Book of Antecedents*, a detailed report the villagers of Trachimbrod keep of their everyday life. At the same time, they seem to adhere to the idea that their life only comes into existence with this writing. When the narrator imagines a future report of this nature, its fatalistic context comes to the fore:

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43 In *Les Mots et les Choses* (*The Order of Things*) from 1966, Michel Foucault tries to grasp the relationship between words and things and how it changed in the course of history.

44 Foucault 2005 [1966]: 40.

45 *La Ricerca della Lingua Perfetta nella Cultura Europea* (*The Search for the Perfect Language*) is the title of Umberto Eco's insightful book on religious, mystical and sociopolitical efforts to find or create a perfect language that bears the promise to breach the barrier of mediation and thus is envisioned to be immediate and inseparably connected to what it expresses. Cf. Eco 1995.

46 Foucault 2005 [1966]: 40.

Even the most delinquent students read *The Book of Antecedents* without skipping a word, for they knew that they too would one day inhabit its pages, that if they could only get hold of a future edition, they would be able to read of their mistakes (and perhaps avoid them), and the mistakes of their children (and ensure that they would never happen), and the outcome of future wars (and prepare for the death of loved ones).[47]

Especially in the Kabbalistic tradition, we find the strong belief that words bear an immediate connection to their signification and that a single letter could change the whole world.[48] In this view, the divine dimension of language is hidden or even lost to humans. However, since the word of God is the origin of the material world, the cosmologic meaning is still contained in the letters, even when used in an ignorant, pragmatic, everyday communicational way.

Since every letter represents a concentration of divine energy, it may be inferred from the deficiency of its present visible form that the power of severe judgment, which sets its stamp on our world, impedes the activity of the hidden lights and forces and prevents them from being fully manifested. The limitations of our life under the rule of the visible Torah show that something is missing in it which will be made good only in another state of being.[49]

Foer's most recent novel *Here I Am* (2016) reinforces this approach to his work: "Judaism has a special relationship with words. Giving a word to a thing is to give it life. […] No magic. No raised hands and thunder. The articulation made it possible. It is perhaps the most powerful of all Jewish ideas: expression is generative."[50] This defines what has been called the "building the world anew"-aspect[51] of text in opposition to its being a barrier.[52]

47 Foer 2002a: 196.

48 Cf. Scholem 1965: 38-39.

49 Ibid.: 80.

50 Foer 2016: 350. This can be said, once again, especially for Kabbalistic practices. Cf. Eco 1995: 31.

51 Foer 2005b: 119-120 (Cf. footnote 29 in this article).

52 *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, too, is highly interesting to read in this respect. Even though it does not deal with this aspect of Jewish hermeneutics, the reading of signs and signals is at the core of the story. Cf. Grillmayr 2016.

THE PUNCTUATION IN PRACTICE

That the *Punctuation of Heart Disease* wants to be one step towards the perfect language, which would have this generative power, becomes clear when thinking more thoroughly about the title of the short story. It describes itself as a *primer* introducing a *punctuation*. Taking this title seriously, it must be recognized ultimately that the sign system sketched here is of a very paradoxical nature. As has been stated for the hieroglyphic system, the additional information that it promises is produced in written language only; the icon or symbol has no equivalent in spoken language.[53] Thus, the system really is what it promises to be: punctuation. Equivalent to emoticons, it might help the reader of the short story to better understand the quoted dialogues. Moreover, if there were other books using these signs, this short text surely would qualify as a helpful primer.

However, only this short story draws on these specific signs and also, in the way the narrator uses and describes them, one rather gains the impression that they are intended for spoken conversations. This evidently does not make any sense, since the signs can't be communicated verbally. This paradox, which exposes this sophisticatedly described punctuation as useless, emphasizes the reading of the short story as a utopia of immediate language usage. Against the background of the Jewish tradition – that is ever present in Foer's literature – and its idea of a generative expression, it is valid to read these signs as kinds of speech acts.

While emoticons want to stimulate and increase communication, the *Punctuation of Heart Disease,* in contrast, seems rather to have the end of the conversation as a goal. Take for instance the "willed silence mark": having called upon this sign, it should create a "wall over which you can't climb" – ideally not in a figurative sense, but literally. The narrator does not *use* "willed silence marks", but he *inflicts* them *upon* his mother.[54] This is similarly the case for the converse, the expression of positive feelings; e.g. the "Barely Tolerable Substitutes" for the phrase "I love you" have the aim of transmitting the message with as little linguistic ballast as possible. In this case, the conversation ends because an understanding is reached.

Bearing in mind what has been stated about the idea of a generative dimension of hieroglyphs as well as letters in the tradition of the Kabbalah, these signs have to be considered as speech acts in a mystic-magical realm, where they

53 With Jan Assmann, we could say the language produces meaning in an "etymographical" way. Cf. Assmann, Jan 2003: 40.

54 Foer 2005a: 1.

really could create walls, but also transmit feelings directly without any mediating role of language. This is the case, e.g. for the sign ↓, the "low point", which is "used either in place – or for accentuation at the end – of such phrases as 'This is terrible,' 'This is irremediable,' 'It couldn't possibly be worse'".[55] The narrator explains that the "low point" only comes in pairs in his familial communication, because the sadness it hints at is itself produced and augmented by the expression of sadness: "her sadness then makes me sad. Thus is created a 'low-point chain': ↓↓↓↓↓↓ . . . ∞."[56] Another example of a speech act is ←, the sign for "backup". It seems to allow the turning back of time, or at least its slowing down, in order to accurately comprehend and interpret what has been said by the conversation partner: "we start again at the beginning, we replay what was missed and make an effort to hear what was meant instead of what was said".[57]

CONCLUSION: WRITING THE WORLD ANEW

In conclusion, I can state that Foer's books portray a love–hate relationship with language. They show the arbitrariness of language as a curse on the one hand and a blessing on the other: because everything we share in communication is always mediated through language, text can be considered a barrier between the speaker/the writer and life; at the same time, not only contamination and misunderstanding is created in this infamous gap between the word and the world, but also life itself. Writing bears the chance of "building the world anew".[58]

"A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease" can give us some leads on how to interpret Foer's novels not only from a psychological perspective, but as a kind of laboratory in which one can approach very carefully the idea of a fundamental link between words and the world. In his reflection on the relationship between conservative religious practices and the mystical beliefs of the Kabbalah, Gershom Scholem points out that the creation of new symbols has the effect of a necessary renovation. He points out the social aspect of symbol building:

> Symbols, by their very nature, are a means of expressing an experience that is in itself expressionless. But this psychological aspect is not the whole story. They also have a

55 Ibid.: 4.

56 Ibid.: 5.

57 Ibid.: 8.

58 Foer 2005b: 119-120 (Cf. footnote 29 in this article).

function in the human community. We may indeed go so far as to say that it is one of the main functions of religious symbols to preserve the vitality of religious experience in a traditional, conservative milieu. The richness of meaning that they seem to emanate lends new life to tradition, which is always in danger of freezing into dead forms and this process continues until the symbols themselves die or change.[59]

This accounts also for the effort of the narrator to create symbols for a more accurate language of feelings. In the laboratory of "A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease", we are not in denial about the arbitrariness of language; however, the short story gives a taste of a kind of pre-Babylonian relation to language that is comforting. It can therefore give an understanding of what Umberto Eco calls the "consolation for the curse of Babel":[60] "The story of the search for the perfect language is the story of a dream and of a series of failures. Yet that is not to say that a story of failures must itself be a failure."[61] Because, concludes Eco, "[…] through examining the defects of the perfect languages, conceived in order to eliminate the defects of the natural ones, we shall end up by discovering that these natural languages of ours contain some unexpected virtues".[62]

"*With writing, we have second chances*"[63] is the premise of Foer's books. The "unexpected virtue" of our imperfect language is its very own creational character that is based on its arbitrariness, which makes it playful and every communicational act necessarily "full of meaning".[64] These books leave us with the impression of text and life as ever entwined and at the same time ever separated – and the insight that this relationship can be hurtful as well as vital. Even if the quest of Foer's protagonists seems to be the abolishment of language in favour of an immediate expression of their feelings, this search, which happens first and foremost through language, is the very motor of their lives. "The key itself may be lost, but an immense desire to look for it remains alive"[65] – and thus keeps them alive.

As has been pointed out, this love–hate relationship with language in the work of Jonathan Safran Foer is tightly linked to how he experiences Jewish text exegesis. Its hair-splitting, extremely detailed and severe dimension intensifies

59 Scholem 1965: 22.

60 Eco 1995: 20.

61 Ibid.: 19.

62 Ibid.: 20.

63 Foer 2002a: 144.

64 Foer 2005b: 119-120.

65 Scholem writes this with regard to the mystical exegesis; "mystical exegesis, this new revelation imparted to the mystic, has the character of a key". Scholem 1965: 12.

the impression of being caught in text while life passes by. All the same, this practice of course implies a high valuing and appreciation of text. In *Here I Am* there is a short passage considering a better translation of the word 'Jew' into sign language for deaf-mutes: "'Maybe palms open like a book?' […] / 'I wasn't thinking that it was reading a book, but the book itself. The Torah, maybe. Or the Book of Life'."[66]

Foer's books are themselves love letters to literature and to the nature of literary expression that evades exact definitions and can preserve paradoxes and inconsistencies – which in the end seems to be the one and only accurate way to approximate the expression of feelings. In the hieroglyphic language there is one determinative that defines abstract notions that cannot possibly be pictured: it features a book.[67]

The very last sign of the *Punctuation of Heart Disease* supports this comforting, conciliatory reading that has been presented in conclusion to this article: {}, the "should-have brackets", which "signify words that were not spoken but should have been".[68]

66 Foer 2016: 470-471.

67 Cf. Assmann, Jan 2003: 54.

68 Foer 2005a: 8.

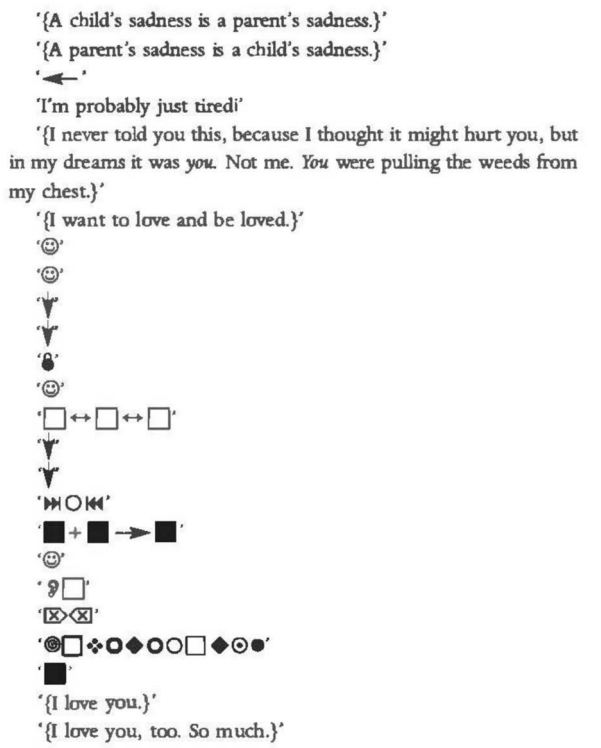

Figure 3: *Dialogue*

Finally, the signs take over the conversation and there is hope that not all silences were actual silences, but "silence marks", "low points", "corroboration marks", "Barely Tolerable Substitutes" and various "should-have brackets". There is the hope that one can understand the other's feelings and in turn, be understood by the other. In this sense, the "should-have brackets" are the ultimate speech act. What separates us from this genuine understanding of one another is just a little rewriting: "Of course, my sense of the should-have is unlikely to be the same as my brothers', or my mother's, or my father's. Sometimes […] I imagine their should-have versions. I sew them together into a new life, leaving out everything that actually happened and was said."[69]

69 Ibid.

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