Aphasic regression has proved to be a mirror of the child’s acquisition of speech sounds: it shows the child’s development in reverse. (Jakobson & Halle 2002:71)

Science fiction, linguistics and education might seem incompatible, as the title of Beverly Friend’s article “Strange Bedfellows ...” indicates, but in fact they are not. Friend (1973:1003) concludes, “Surely, with all of the speculation and interest in language analysis in the real world, the speculations presented by science fiction are relevant to youth today – a valid jumping off point for the study of language ... and the whole art and field of communication.” Although I am interested in literary aspects in addition to those Friend brings up, which is evidenced by the brief discussion below of the short story as a genre, my thoughts about using science fiction in the classroom have run along similar lines. Consequently, I begin the A distance Modern Literature course for teachers with Octavia Butler’s short story “Speech Sounds” (1983), which will be the focal point of my discussion here. One of the most important conventions of science fiction and closely related genres, such as dystopian fiction and fantasy, is estrangement, as Anne Cranny-Francis (1990:110) has observed: “Another world … is constructed in the text and the reader, in the process of (re)constructing this figure, is positioned to see her/his own society from a different perspective.” In schools, then, science fiction may help to defamiliarize everyday life and offer a different point of view and some safe distance from which to address problems that are relevant to pupils and their environment. Science fiction stories also often have a strong focus on one or a few major ideas, an aspect that could be helpful in classroom discussions.

“Speech Sounds,” a dystopian science-fiction story,\(^1\) centers on one important theme that can easily serve as a starting-point for discussion in the classroom: communication, or more specifically lack of verbal communication and its relation to violence and social disorder, social breakdown. Set in a near future in a recognizable but crumbling Los Angeles with dystopian traits, the story does not belong to the category “hard” science fiction that includes

\(^1\) “[D]ystopias feature a society apparently worse than the writer’s/reader’s own” (Cranny-Francis 1990:125).
spaceships and fantastic machines; the technology that the story investigates is human language, human communication.\(^2\) Most people in this story have lost their ability to speak and/or write, and/or their ability to understand speech and/or writing due to what is tentatively described as an illness, which has also killed many people. In other words, in Butler’s story, “the two functions in speech exchange, the encoding or the decoding of verbal messages” (Jakobson & Halle 2002:77),\(^3\) are severely impaired or totally destroyed. The consequences of the language impairment are loss of intellectual abilities, constant misunderstandings, murderous jealousy, violence, and the dissolution of society.

Butler is in good company in addressing the relationship between verbal communication and society, because, as Walter Meyers states in *Aliens and Linguists: Language Study and Science Fiction*, even in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (which today is often considered to be the first science-fiction novel), “we see a concern with problems of communication; communication, with language as its chief discipline, is centrally important to an enormous portion of science fiction, and crucial to its understanding” (Meyers 1980:1). Apart from its affiliation with other science-fiction stories in this respect, “Speech Sounds” is an excellent example of the short-story genre, and I will highlight some of the story’s features in this context before going on to a more thorough investigation of its major theme.

Butler’s short story starts in *medias res*: “There was trouble aboard the Washington Boulevard bus. Rye had expected trouble sooner or later in her journey” (Butler 1995:89). Rye is the protagonist and the story is limited to her point of view, although it is told in the third person. The journey she has undertaken is a desperate attempt to break her isolation, as she believes that she might have some relatives left alive in Pasadena, twenty miles from where she lives in L.A. Michal Anne Moskow and Britta Olinder (2002:41) point out that “[w]hile the novel normally traces the development of a character, the short story reveals him or her to the reader at a decisive moment,” and this is the case in Butler’s story. It traces Rye’s thoughts and actions over a few action-filled hours in which she meets a man in conjunction with the multiple fights that break out in the bus due to people’s impaired ability to communicate verbally; she goes with him in his car, they make love, and she convinces him by using nonverbal means of communication to stay with her; she loses him as he is

\(^{2}\) Here, of course, we have a strong connection to linguistics, since this field “is concerned with language in all its aspects – language in operation, language in drift [i.e. language as historical product], language in the nascent state, and language in dissolution” (Jakobson & Halle 2002:69).

\(^{3}\) Impairments of these two functions are also termed emissive and receptive aphasia (Jakobson & Halle 2002:77).
Loss of words

killed while unsuccessfully trying to help a woman who is attacked by a man with a knife; and she decides to take care of the woman’s two small children. Thus, Butler’s short story takes place at a particular place during a very limited time and centers on one specific character. Referring to the short-story genre in general, Moskow and Olinder (2002:41) suggest, “For the short story one may think of the classical unities of drama, of time, place and action, possibly replacing them by the unity of character, of event and of emotion.”

The dystopian tone or emotion of “Speech Sounds” is unified up until the end of the story, which as many short stories has a twist or turnabout. As Moskow and Olinder (2002:42) put it, “While the novel rarely ends with a sudden and total surprise, that is what the short story is all about. The ending gathers all the interest to illuminate the rest of the story.” In Butler’s story, Rye realizes that the two children she has decided to take care of, like her, can speak and understand speech. There is hope then that children born after the illness are unimpaired and may be able to function verbally and intellectually. The very last lines of the story are Rye’s reported speech: “‘I’m Valerie Rye,’ she said, savoring the words. ‘It’s all right for you to talk to me’” (Butler 1995:108). This is the first time the pronoun “I” is used in the story, which as indicated above is told in the third person although it is limited to Rye’s point of view. The choice of third instead of first-person narration underlines Rye’s isolation in a speechless world, since in verbal communication an “I” implies a “you.”

In these last lines, the reader also discovers that Rye is actually the protagonist’s last name and that her first name is Valerie, which means that the references to her as Rye throughout the story have to do with the limitations of nonverbal communication. Some of these limitations are demonstrated in the scene in which she and the man she meets exchange name symbols in the form of small objects. His is a pendant of “smooth, glassy, black rock.” Rye decides to call him Obsidian: “His name might be Rock or Peter or Black, but she decided to think of him as Obsidian. Even her sometimes useless memory would retain a name like Obsidian” (Butler 1995:97). Without verbal means of communication, there is no way to know what the man’s name is. Rye’s object is “a pin in the shape of a large golden stalk of wheat. … [I]t was as close as she was likely to come to Rye. People like Obsidian who had not known her before probably thought of her as Wheat. Not that it mattered. She would never hear

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4 The focus on Rye as the main character is also significant in regard to the story’s dystopian traits: “Dystopian narratives usually feature a member of the dystopian state as main character. In describing her/his life the text details the horrific nature of the state. The textual strategy of the dystopia combines empathy with this main character and recognition of the contemporaneity of the social formation described to produce a critique of the writer’s/reader’s own society” (Cranny-Francis 1990:125).
her name spoken again” (97). So, although the exchange of the name symbols is an indication of a wish for mutual interaction and communication, the story emphasizes the shortcomings of this method compared to the use of spoken or written language and Rye’s sense of loss when she thinks that she will never hear her name spoken again.

Moreover, the reference to Rye’s “sometimes useless memory” is one of the traces in the story that indicate that Butler has modeled the “illness” on symptoms of aphasia. For example, “[i]n less severe cases of aphasia the patients, because they cannot tell of their past owing to their lack of words, and because their relations with others are diminished, are likely to maintain only a vague sense of time, persons, and places” (Halbwachs 1992:45). These traits of aphasia are an integral part of “Speech Sounds” and they are highlighted, for instance, when Obsidian wants Rye to show him on the map where she would like him to drive (Butler 1995:98). The story is mainly told in short, simple sentences and in a language almost entirely devoid of metaphors, which accentuates the theme of language impairment. The only instances of simile and metaphor, before Rye talks to the children at the end of the story, are in connection with her thoughts about children growing up without language and memory, without a future – “They ran through the streets chasing one another and hooting like chimpanzees. …They were now all they would ever be” (101, my emphasis); “children who would grow up to be hairless chimp[s]” (105, my emphasis) – and in connection with her disgusting neighbor, “the animal across the street” (103, my emphasis). Linguistic regression or inability thus turns people into animals, at least from Rye’s perspective, and, interestingly, this perceived process triggers some of very few instances of metaphoric usage in “Speech Sounds.” On the last few pages of the story, there are two additional examples of metaphor, but here they are used in the context of successful communication, emphasizing the turnabout of the ending towards hope. When the little girl who Rye has decided to take care of speaks, she “unknowingly gave Rye a gift” (106, my emphasis), and when Rye speaks she is “savoring the words” (108, my emphasis). As a whole, though, in spite of its realistic style and the dearth of clear instances of metaphor, the language of the story and by extension its protagonist is closer to Jakobson and Halle’s description of aphasic contiguity disorder, which is closer to what they term the metaphoric pole, than similarity disorder, closer to the metonymic pole. The short sentences tend towards “telegraphic style” (Jakobson & Halle 2002:86), and Rye seems to have no problems producing synonyms or near-synonyms, as shown
for instance in her choosing to call the bearded man Obsidian instead of Peter, Rock, or Black.

Similar to the use of objects as name symbols, pictures are another attempt to communicate without words in the story. The bus driver has “pasted old magazine pictures of items he would accept as fare” on the sides of his bus. “Then he would use what he collected to feed his family or to trade” (Butler 1995:94). The pictures, then, are signs of what could be seen as social regression to a kind of bartering society that does not use money. It makes sense that money, in the form we know it, would be useless in a world where people cannot speak, read and write. More importantly, as Mary Ritchie Key (1980:7) has observed, the use of money and language constitute similar social systems: “Money (or lack of it) binds people together in a kind of way that language does.” Thus, the absence of money in the story underlines the loss of words, the problems of communication, and social disintegration, or to use Jakobson and Halle’s expression, the loss of “a common code” (2002:72).

The breakdown of society’s infrastructure is signaled early in the story, when Rye expects that her twenty-mile journey, one way, to Pasadena will take at least one day, and the arrival of the bus is described as “unexpected” (Butler 1995:89): “Buses were so rare and irregular now, people rode when they could, no matter what. There might not be another bus today – or tomorrow” (91). Cars are also rare “– as rare as a severe shortage of fuel and of relatively unimpaired mechanics could make them. Cars that still ran were as likely to be used as weapons as they were to serve as transportation” (91). So when Obsidian, who at first is only referred to as “the bearded man,” shows up in a battered blue Ford on the scene where the bus has come to a halt because of the fighting inside it, Rye moves warily away when he beckons to her. She is not reassured when he takes off his coat “revealing a Los Angeles Police Department uniform complete with baton and service revolver” (92). In this disintegrating society, “[t]here was no more LAPD, no more any large organization, governmental or private. There were neighborhood patrols and armed individuals. That was all” (92). Loss of words has apparently led not only to severe problems finding means of transportation but also to loss of social organizations. When Obsidian wants Rye to come with him in his car, she does not want to “[r]isk getting into his car when, in spite of his uniform, law and order were nothing – not even words any longer” (94). Key (1980:13) states that “[l]inguistic and nonverbal signals have been called ‘regulators’ and ‘control mechanisms,’” and, in Butler’s story, it is obvious that loss of the control
mechanisms of verbal language has meant loss of law and order, loss of social regulation and organization.

Although nonverbal signals play a large part in “Speech Sounds,” they are shown to be severely limiting when not accompanied by any verbal expression. As Key (1980:8) observes, “[i]f language as a tool is used ... not so much for information, but for establishing relationships, then verbal skills become more important for survival ...” In Butler’s story, the connection between verbal skills, human relationships, and survival is made clear in the increased difficulty to establish relationships and to survive due to the loss of verbal means of communication. Misunderstandings abound and more impaired individuals kill less impaired people out of jealousy and frustration.

Nevertheless, Key (1980:4) suggests that both “verbal and nonverbal expressions are a means of establishing and maintaining contact or interaction between people and the environment, as well as rejecting and breaking relationships”; and the reader can find many examples of different kinds of nonverbal expressions in the interaction between different characters in “Speech Sounds,” many of which are used to reject or repel other people, but also as ways to make contact with another human being. For example, Rye and Obsidian manage, with some difficulty, to interact and establish a relationship by using nonverbal means of expression: they use different kinds of body language such as gestures, eye movement, and touch. Initially, though, it is how Obsidian gestures, rather than what he means by his gestures, that awakens Rye’s interest: “He pointed with his left hand toward the bus. … His use of the left hand interested Rye more than his obvious question. Left-handed people tended to be less impaired, more reasonable and comprehending, less driven by frustration, confusion, and anger” (Butler 1995:91-92). This is another clear indication that Butler has modeled the “illness” in this story on aphasia. In discussing strategies in verbal productions of brain-damaged individuals, Brigitte Stemmer and Yves Joanette (1997:97) use the term aphasia “to refer to language impairments based on lesions in the central nervous system, most commonly located in the left hemisphere of right-handed individuals.” Although he cannot speak or understand speech, left-handed Obsidian can read and is indeed more sensitive, reasonable and comprehending than most (if not all) of the other characters in “Speech Sounds.”

In contrast to most of the communication between Rye and Obsidian, in the first seven pages of “Speech Sounds,” body language is repeatedly used to express strong disapproval and obscenities and to warn people to stay away; it is a form of rough social control mechanism and it stands for some kind of
interaction, but often with negative or destructive undertones. Before the fight on the bus starts, the two young men who start it have been involved in “a disagreement of some kind, or more likely, a misunderstanding” and they use grunting and body language to express their animosity: “their gestures stopped just short of contact – mock punches, hand games of intimidation to replace lost curses” (Butler 1995:89). Body language does not only stand in for lost curses: “Loss of verbal language had spawned a whole new set of obscene gestures” (95). When Obsidian starts to draw attention to Rye outside the bus by indicating that she should come with him, one of the men, by using gestures, groups Rye with Obsidian, accuses her of sex with him and suggests that she “accommodate the other men present – beginning with him” (95). Rye makes him stop approaching her by gesturing once, but she is afraid that people would not help her if he should try to rape her. Like Obsidian, though, she carries a gun for protection: “And in this world where the only likely common language was body language, being armed was often enough” (93). Rye’s belief in the importance of being armed in this future version of American society seems to be justified when Obsidian manages to stay out of a physical fight with the ungrateful and uncomprehending bus driver, whose bus he has just saved from being totally destroyed: “The bearded man’s revolver was on constant display. Apparently that was enough for the bus driver” (93). However, the two main characters’ investment in guns as a means of protection and a deterrent is questioned later in the story. To begin with, Rye almost shoots Obsidian when she realizes that he can read and probably write. For a moment, she feels intense hatred and jealousy: “And only a few inches from her hand was a loaded gun” (98). Hence, Butler’s story shows that in a society where guns replace verbal communication, there are never any guarantees that they will only be used for protection, as deterrents.

Although Rye does not shoot Obsidian, it is his own revolver that kills him. When Rye touches him to let him know that the woman they have tried to save is dead, Obsidian turns away from the wounded man who killed her to look at Rye and to find out what she wants. The man grasps Obsidian’s just-holstered revolver and shoots him in the head. The tragedy of Obsidian’s death is thus also a function of the loss of verbal means of communication: since Rye cannot tell him by using verbal language that the woman is dead, he has to turn around to see what she wants to tell him and as he does that he is murdered.

In conclusion, by depicting the dystopian violence, misery, and literal and figurative poverty of a world deprived of verbal exchange and by ending with renewed hope for human communication, Butler’s “Speech Sounds” pays
tribute to the power of words. Thus, Butler’s story is not only an excellent introduction to the short-story genre; in the language classroom it also offers a starting-point for a vital discussion of the value of verbal communication.

References


