

# DEUS EX MACHINA



**THE DEMAND** for standardisation is nothing new. The story of Procrustes comes to us via the heroic deeds of Theseus. Procrustes' predilection involved guests spending the night in his wondrous bed. No ordinary bed, this one demanded physical uniformity. Each sleeper was required to meet its dimensions exactly. So a short guest, according to Procrustean logic, necessitated hammering and stretching into shape, while a tall guest would lose his legs in Procrustes' pursuit of perfection. A strange, pre-Vitruvian man, this.

In language there are only differences<sup>1</sup>

The urge to categorise, to pigeonhole, to standardise our existence is ultimately defeated when it comes to language. The differences de Saussure points to are not between one language and another, but are part of an internal tension: "Within the same language, all words used to express related ideas limit each other reciprocally."<sup>2</sup> Definition not by what something is, then, but by what it is not.

There is a longstanding desire to re-enter a mythical Golden Age in which sameness exists as the norm—a naturally occurring homogeneity free from the accusations of ethnic cleansing or even 'gentrification'. This brief period, for the great Western religions, ends in Babel.

Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.<sup>3</sup>

God's response is clear and, characteristically, dramatic. His 'final solution' for a people building the first skyscraper in order to meet their maker, is to divide them irrevocably through the punishment of multiple languages. From this point on, we are destined to fear difference. The rationale for the 'curse' is to divert humanity's ability to assimilate new ideas through the distractions of petty in-fighting and clan-like hatreds. Gone forever are the days of harmony and understanding, replaced with rivalry and discrimination. The original Ground Zero: an aspirational city shot down not by domestic aircraft but by Heaven-sent fire and brimstone.

Borges' "The Library of Babel" reveals the universe as a potentially infinite collection of seemingly meaningless books. Untold generations have lived out their existence in the library, each man charged with

a 'hexagon' filled with indecipherable texts. There exists no catalogue of catalogues, no divine key with which to read the scriptures. Over the centuries, men have launched various efforts to discover the 'truth' concealed in their universe, but none have succeeded. The death of a librarian is marked by the throwing of the corpse over the edge of his hexagon—falling forever through the airshafts, the body decomposing as it moves.

## "By the end of the twenty-first century, between 50 to 90 per cent of current languages will have become 'extinct'"

Language is experienced as a riddle to be solved: its potential solution offers the promise of a kind of human omnipotence. De Saussure's assertion that without language, thought exists as a nebulous, indistinct form, is echoed by Foucault:

Because he is an empirico-transcendental doublet, man is also the locus of misunderstanding—of misunderstanding that constantly exposes his thought to the risk of being swamped by his own being, and also enables him to recover his integrity on the basis of what eludes him.<sup>4</sup>

Our languages define our identities. We are gendered, aged, named, welcomed and rejected by them, native speaker or asylum seeker. They tell us who we are, who we are not, and how we fit in to the larger schema of our civilisations. Foucault asks how man can

... be the subject of a language that for thousands of years has been formed without him, a language whose organisation escapes him, whose meaning sleeps an almost invincible sleep in the words he [uses], and within which he is obliged to lodge his speech and thought, as though they were doing no more than animate?

Like Borges' librarians seeking their answers, or Babel's engineers aiming skyward, periodic attempts to rise above our pawn-like status as language users are to be expected; taking control of language, reinventing it in and tidying it up a bit.

The early fifteenth century rise of Chancery Standard English (the 'style' used by London-based scribes) was a bid to develop a 'colourless' tongue, free from the distinctive dialects throughout the rest of Britain.

<sup>1</sup> de Saussure, Ferdinand, *Course in General Linguistics*, W Baskin trans., London: McGraw Hill, 1966, p. 120.

<sup>2</sup> de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 116.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 11:6, *The Holy Bible*, King James Version, 1616.

<sup>4</sup> Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things*, London: Routledge Classics, 2002 (first edition 1966), pp. 351–352.

But Chancery Standard contained its own anomalies, which marked it rather clearly as a southern vernacular. The Enlightenment voraciously embraced the standardisation and classification of everything it encountered and, in 1712, Jonathan Swift proposed an overhaul of the English language, which could permanently set the rules and regulations for correct usage:

But what I have most at Heart is, that some Method should be thought on for ascertaining and fixing our Language for ever, after such Alterations are made in it as shall be thought requisite. For I am of Opinion, that it is better a Language should not be wholly perfect, that it should be perpetually changing; and we must give over at one Time, or at length infallibly change for the worse.<sup>5</sup>

Swift's interest in hermetically sealing a living language invites comparison with the Victorian collector's obsession with procuring rare species of butterfly: the act of capturing and fixing the subject inevitably kills it.

Nathaniel Bailey, the British lexicographer who published his *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* in 1721, was not the first to construct an English dictionary, but his effort in the application of a consistent etymology influenced Samuel Johnson who, in 1755, published *A Dictionary of the English Language*. Many of Johnson's 42,773 definitions are unashamedly subjective and satiric, with 'lexicographer' defined as "a writer of dictionaries, a harmless drudge". His definition of 'oats' belies the overbearing confidence of an age of southern superiority: "a grain which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people".<sup>6</sup>

A major shift in the perception of English came with the publication of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1933. Here, for the first time, was an acknowledgement of the language as evolving and mutable—words obsolete, archaic and technical, as well as those classed as dialect or slang were included. The impetus for the dictionary was the formation in 1857 of the Kafkaesque-sounding 'Unregistered Words Committee', which aimed to locate and attach meaning to words previously undefined. By the end of 2005, the *OED* had compiled and made public definitions for over 300,000 words.<sup>7</sup>

In 1887, Dr Ludovic Lazarus Zamenhof published his *Lingvo internacia*. Zamenhof's Esperanto was to be a unifying force: a constructed, rationalised language, which would ultimately lead to a peaceful and regularised society through its development of a single

speech currency. Back to Babel. But this well-intentioned effort is a limp substitute for the subtleties or complexities of naturally evolved dialect. Entering 'minute' in an Esperanto online dictionary gives us the definition of "minut/o = minute".<sup>8</sup> No allowance is made for the multiple meanings offered the word in English: minute as something very small, a coin, something we do in a meeting, etc. There are no definitions for 'conductor', 'bass', 'treble' or 'clef', though 'violin' is represented as 'violon', for all the good it might do an Esperanto orchestra ('orkestr/o').

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English is a work in progress. While some vernacular dialects are subsumed by more popular modes of expression, new means of communication flourish. The advent of cheap text messaging services has enabled the development of a new, youth-oriented shorthand. Website 'txt' dictionaries abound—even the Collins publishing house are in on the act, with some rather hip deconstruction, though no phrasing translation system as yet.<sup>10</sup> The creation of 'new' pronouns, or ones previously used only in isolated communities, like 'you all', 'y'all', 'all y'all', 'yiz', 'youse', and 'you lot', suggests the rebelliousness of youth.<sup>11</sup> The need to make a mark as an adult is at the heart of much 'New Speak'—there's nothing quite like an oblique, ultra specialised language to define a teenager's posse. But apart from the urge to be different, these new pronouns actually help to bridge the gap left by our collective rejection of subject-specific pronouns like 'thee', 'thou', 'thy' and the more formal 'you'.

For many non-American English speakers, 'z' represents the creeping spectre of cultural imperialism. Electing to spell 'with an s' has become something of a quiet, defiant stance—a way of rejecting things American in favour of a more British demeanour. But historically, Britain accepted the use of both consonants interchangeably, and it wasn't until Noah Webster's attempt to create a standardised American English in 1806 that a preference for 'z' was declared.<sup>12</sup> The Webster lexicon elected for a number of definitive spellings: removal of 'u' in words like humour and the reversal of 're' to 'er' in words like theatre. But again, it was only after American English had declared its preferences that non-American English resolutely sat down on the opposite fence.

The metatextual world, image saturated and full of hyperlinks, offers users the opportunity to view, define and edit new codifications for many fast-evolving languages. *OED* online provides a lineage of preced-

5 Swift, Jonathan, "A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue", 1712, [www.newark.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/proposal.html](http://www.newark.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/proposal.html), accessed 24 March 2006.

6 [www.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Dictionary\\_of\\_the\\_English\\_Language](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Dictionary_of_the_English_Language), accessed 22 March 2006.

7 [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oxford\\_English\\_Dictionary](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oxford_English_Dictionary), accessed 6 April 2006.

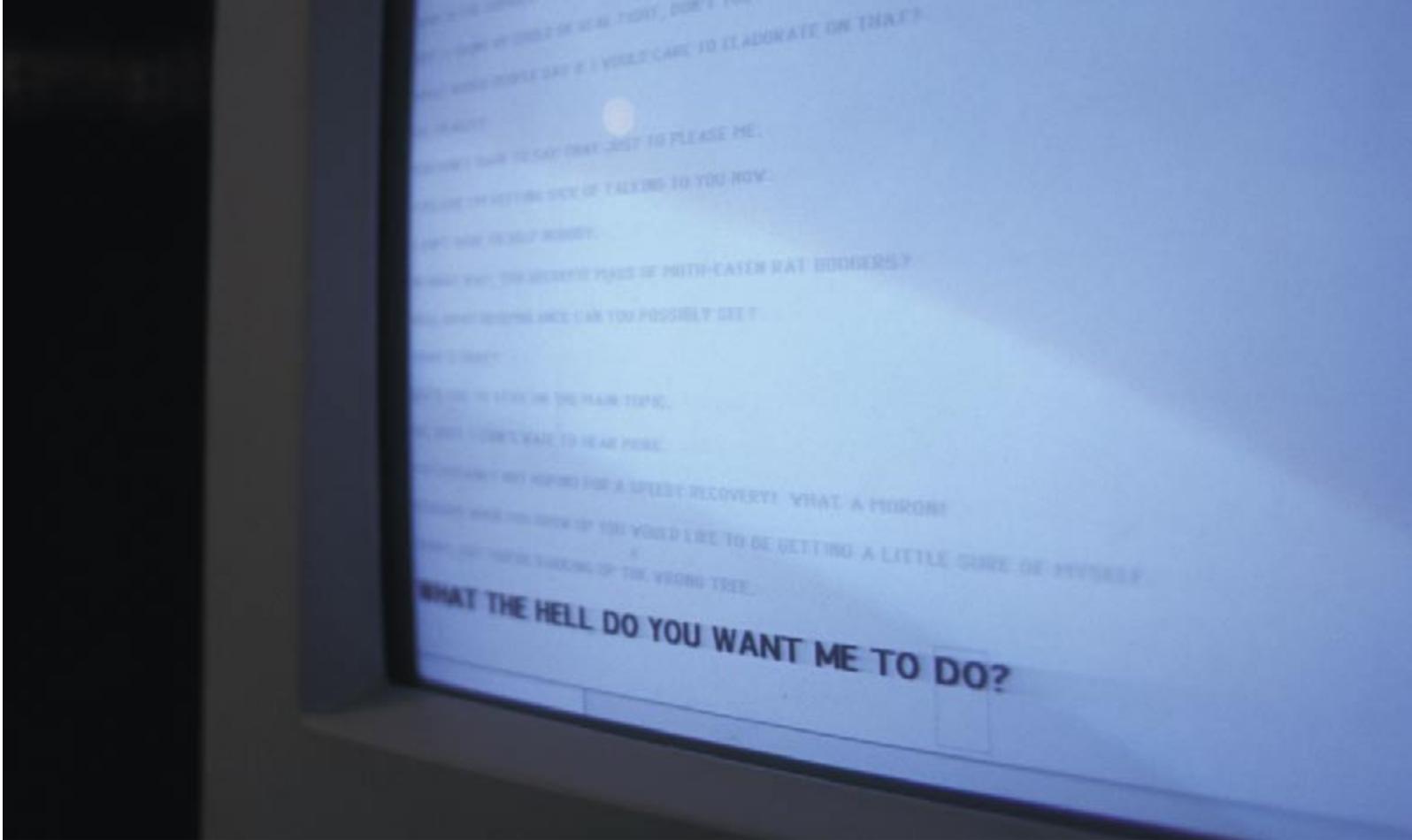
8 [www.tios.cs.utwente.nl](http://www.tios.cs.utwente.nl), accessed 2 April 2006.

9 [www.transl8it.com/cgi-win/index.pl?convertPL](http://www.transl8it.com/cgi-win/index.pl?convertPL), accessed 3 April 2006.

10 [www.collins.co.uk/wordexchange/Sections/TextingWords.aspx?pg=11](http://www.collins.co.uk/wordexchange/Sections/TextingWords.aspx?pg=11), accessed 3 April 2006.

11 Hogg, R, "The Standardization of English", 2000, [www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/dick/SEHogg.htm](http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/dick/SEHogg.htm), accessed 29 March 2006.

12 [www.askoxford.com/askthe-experts/faq/aboutspelling/ize?view=get](http://www.askoxford.com/askthe-experts/faq/aboutspelling/ize?view=get), accessed 30 March 2006.



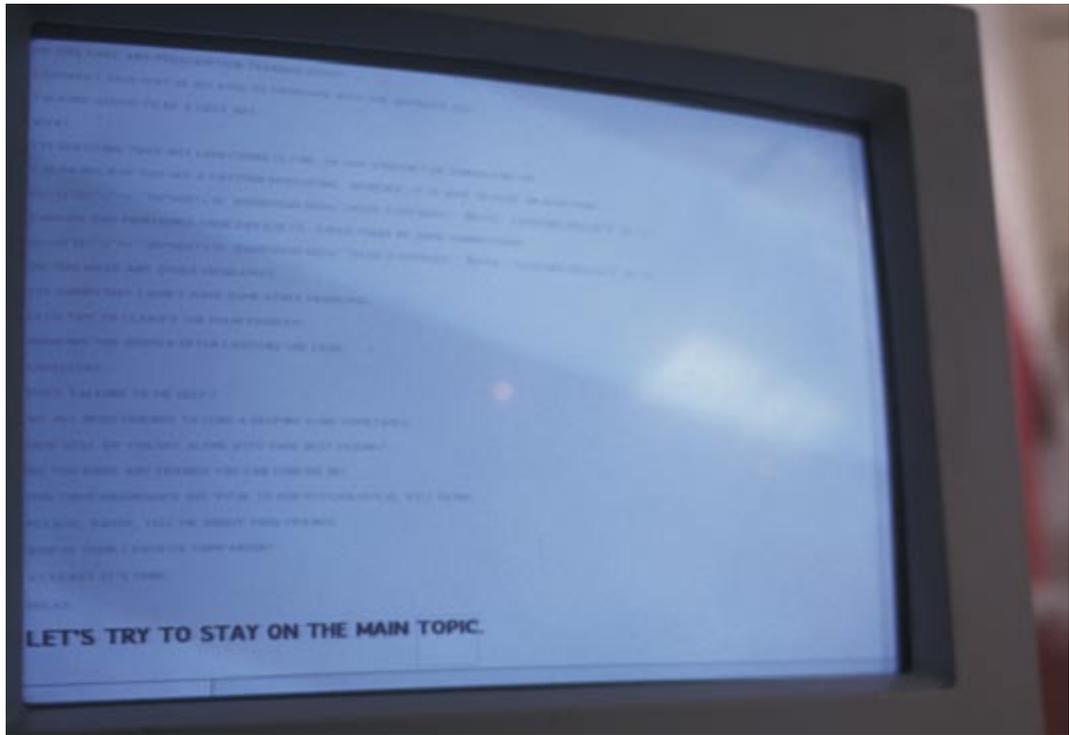
ing volumes for direct comparison. It has renewable pages that can update you on recently admitted words. Wikipedia is now one of the most popular websites accessed on the Internet, and is distinguished by its reliance on contributions from users. Here, the democratic process is pushed to its limits, with many pages dealing with issues like abortion and Intelligent Design hotly disputed and, in some cases, sabotaged, by those with opposing views. *The Urban Dictionary* also allows users the ability to develop their own definitions of 'new' words, and is a great resource when looking for the roots of 'chav', 'pikie' or 'brokeback' (anything of questionable masculinity: a brokeback man-purse, for example).<sup>13</sup> Again, the democratic urge comes up against issues of freedom of speech, with definitions as humorous as dead nigger jokes littered throughout the site.

Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, 1992, reveals a late twentieth century America in chaos. Hyperinflation and the demise of central government have led to the privatisation of most of the country, and the

Metaverse, a sort of virtual reality successor to the Internet, allows people to play out their existence via online avatars. The recent glut of MMORPGs (massively multiple player online role-playing games) owes a great debt to Stephenson, with *Second Life* and *Uru* both inspired by his Metaverse. The zeal with which these games have been embraced by players, coupled with the programmes' ability to offer new modes of expression to users who create avatars quite different to their 'real' personalities, evidences an evolving sense of self, and with it, a new use of language.

As our physical world is usurped by the growth of virtual space in the form of communication technologies, our range of choices for everything from languages to supermarkets is being reduced. Over the past decade, Hollywood has been concentrating its efforts on the development of films for international audiences: sparse, easily translated dialogue, with story lines that deliver a minimum of offence to other cultural mores characterise this new type of Blockbuster. Think of the increasingly insipid *Star Wars*

<sup>13</sup> [www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com), accessed 6 April 2006.



franchise, or the now *de rigueur* inclusion of martial arts inspired fight sequences in everything from *The Matrix* to *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*.

The code written for everything from MMORPGs to word processors continues the journey of English, both as a spoken and written language. Like a new Wild West, this is an area as yet unregulated: these languages are full of coding anomalies and idiosyncrasies. The development of XML, or Extensible Markup Language, has enabled the use of a metalanguage, which can describe other languages. Perhaps here we are starting to come closer to Borges' catalogue of catalogues?

A language is a dialect with an army<sup>14</sup>

Estimates suggest there are approximately 6,000 known languages spoken throughout the world today. 2,000 known languages are currently spoken on the African continent.<sup>15</sup> But with English, French, Spanish and Arabic the official languages of two thirds of the world's nation states, the survival rate for less popular idioms is low. In China, Mandarin is outstripping Cantonese as the first choice for foreign communications, and Cantonese is openly acknowledged to be

a 'dying' language. By the end of the twenty-first century, UNESCO estimates that between 50 to 90 per cent of current languages will have become 'extinct'. Languages have an acknowledged 'lifespan' and this is not a new phenomenon, but the widespread and fast-paced subjugation of language we are today presented with has a great deal to do with an unspoken interest in development of cost-effective homogenised markets. The Yiddish linguistic community has long proclaimed, "A language is a dialect with an army". To the victor the spoils: the erasure of difference.

The spread of global capitalism is slowly eroding choice. With multinational conglomerates overtaking nation states as the arbiters of freedom and individuality, the limitless options suggested by the spin of new media and information technologies are not the reality of a New World Order in which the unique is usurped by the uniform. For difference to continue to exist, it must be cost effective, it must be bought in bulk.

Language is not complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly only within a collectivity<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Yiddish proverb, source disputed.

<sup>15</sup> *Online Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*, <http://portal.unesco.org/>, accessed 5 April 2006.

<sup>16</sup> de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p.14.

This systemic urge to create uniformity from difference is challenged by much of David Cotterrell's work. He deliberately enlists off the shelf technologies to create works that subvert their original design use. *The Debating Society* deals with a lexicon of specialisation—the Glaswegian 'patter' spoken in the Gorbals. Using five computers, state of the art software and bespoke programming, the project acts as a reflection of the vernacular speech of a neighbourhood in transition. But there is more to this work than a simple mirroring of people and the area they live in: *The Debating Society* extends discussion about the nature of choice, hierarchy, difference and independent thought. Cotterrell's computers work in real time, self-selecting words and meanings in the ongoing evolution of a potentially limitless five-way conversation. Local voices recorded during chats most often in a sitting room are reassembled as sonic groupings and uploaded as tri-bi and uni-grams, as in, "The elision in Jane's speech is represented by 'dya' for 'do you know', which occurs in her most frequent expression, 'dya know what I mean?'"<sup>17</sup>

Cotterrell's work exists as five distinct voices, each programmed with a set of 'preferences' that make up a prototypical personality. Artificially intelligent in the sense that the programmes are able to self-select information, the voices carry on an endless banter of their own creation. Each programme bolts together phrases in response to information received from one or several of the other programmes attempting the same task. Unpredictability has been predicted and accounted for—using shifting probabilities based on both internal logic and information received externally. Cotterrell's programmes demonstrate innovative responses, which may at times seem 'out of character' to those who know them well.

What must I be, I who think and who am my thought, in order to be what I do not think, in order for my thought to be what I am not?<sup>18</sup>

Foucault's treatment of Descartes' "cogito ergo sum" suggests that once the 'I' is established, there are to be more questions than answers. For Cotterrell, the establishment of a forum in which non-humans are allowed the luxury of thought-based language is an intriguing possibility.

Cotterrell's practice finds interest in both the nature and mechanics of intelligence. Illusions of intelligence reflect back on themselves as each computer attempts discussion with one or more of the others—the disturbing, hyper-real image caught by a lens filming

a monitor reveals the limitations of this closed system. This is perhaps an inevitable feedback loop, but equally, this is an introduction to new possibilities.

*The Debating Society* is a work that seeks to explore the nature of thought, and by necessity, language. Condillac's sensitive statue, made of marble, but possessing a soul, comes to understand the world around it through the evolution of its senses:

A whiff of jasmine is the start of the statue's biography; for one moment there is nothing but this odour in the whole universe—or, to be more accurate, this odour is the universe . . . the consciousness of being the odour of carnation and of having been the odour of jasmine, the notion of the I.<sup>19</sup>

Cogito. Like Condillac's statue, Cotterrell's machines have an intelligence that exists in a limited domain. Here, there are a limited range of parameters, a limited vocabulary from which to select and, perhaps most importantly, as in Babel, the finite intelligence of the programmer.

Like the *Deus ex Machina*, the ancient Greek theatrical device in which, literally, 'God descends from the crane' in an unlikely, perhaps slightly ostentatious, manner to resolve a problem, *The Debating Society* lands in the Gorbals. This endeavour offers past and future residents of the area something unique to them. The Glaswegian 'patter' is now found on novelty mugs in the town centre. Being Scottish can be big business. Books given at Christmas, destined for the loo, work to translate the dialect in a humorous fashion. Here, in response, is a living lexicon of real voices, augmented and made unreal by the very technology that threatens the difference the 'patter' represents. This work is externally updatable—this is not the freeze-dried legacy proposed by Swift or Johnson.

If the changes we fear be thus irresistible, what remains but to acquiesce with silence, as in the other insurmountable distresses of humanity? It remains that we retard what we cannot repel, that we palliate what we cannot cure. Life may be lengthened by care, though death cannot be ultimately defeated: tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration; we have long preserved our constitution, let us make some struggles for our language.<sup>20</sup>

"Palliate" the death-throes of the English language? Now there's a thought.

<sup>17</sup> Fraser, M, "Speech Synthesis with the Gorbals Jane Voice", Edinburgh: Centre for Speech Technology, University of Edinburgh, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 354

<sup>19</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis, "Two Metaphysical Beings", in *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, NT di Giovanni NT trans., London: Random House, 2002 (first edition 1967), pp. 144–145.

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, Samuel, *Preface to A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755.