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Ethical events in the internationalising university: engaging, learning and knowing in spaces of otherwise

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Abstract: This paper suggests that a sociolinguistics of potentiality is an “ethical” sociolinguistics that will grapple with the difference of others. Drawing on a linguistic ethnography of Social Sciences classrooms in a Swedish university, it illuminates how students and teachers work to foster improved sociality and mutual responsibility across social and linguistic difference in internationalising university life. The paper develops through a consideration of Levinasian “ethical events”, defined as interactions involving that which is not known, normative or ordinarily visible, but for which all involved are called upon to take responsibility. Analysis of the ethical events involving instances of embodied interdiscursive performance brings to light how late liberal values such as individualism and competition could be disrupted in favour of collaborative and mutually responsible academic and social practice. Yet, as is characteristic of “spaces of otherwise”, the task of shaping such new relations in and around the classroom spaces involved risk and exhaustion. The study concludes by arguing that constructing university spaces as open to different ways of engaging, learning and knowing involves an orientation in response to others’ desire for mutuality and reciprocity.

Keywords: ethical events; spaces of otherwise; internationalisation; higher education; linguistic anthropology; multilingualism

1 Introduction

A major challenge in contemporary university life is the construction of classroom spaces in which the potentiality of the increasingly diverse students therein might be realised. The potentiality of internationalising university classrooms in Europe is said to include the improvement of university education, job prospects and respect for diversity, pluralism and multilingualism (see Fabricius et al. 2017: 579–580).

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However, owing to the ontological and epistemological horizon of “late liberalism” on which the policy and planning of the European sector, nation and institution is given, the challenge of engaging, learning and knowing across difference is tangible, both “ethically” and politically. Responding to this challenge is a task for a socio-linguistics of potentiality.

Late liberalism, as described by Elizabeth A. Povinelli in *Economies of Abandonment* (2011), simultaneously refers to the multicultural governance of difference and the neo-liberal governance of the market which developed around the 1970s in Europe and Anglo-America. It is a governance concerned with a specific form of social organisation and a specific distribution of life and goods (Povinelli 2012), with which higher-education institutions and those who constitute them are increasingly caught up.

The discourses of so-called “internationalisation” are generating increasing numbers of internationalisation-related journals, conferences, edited volumes, policies and university departments. These discourses are no doubt fuelled by increasing student mobility across the globe – growing from 250,000 in 1965, to 3.7 million in 2005, and to five million in 2020 (de Wit and Merkx 2022). Yet the discourses of internationalisation have become so deeply entangled with those of late liberalism that increasing diversity has been said to represent little more to our higher-education institutions than increased symbolic and economic capital gained by hosting increasing numbers of international staff and students (e.g. Ahmed 2012; Shear and Hyatt 2015; Urciuoli 2018, 2019; Van der Wende 2001). As such, responsibility and consideration for unexpected languaging practices, knowledge and experiences in the university classroom, should perhaps not be counted on due to their falling beyond the scope and regimentation of such interest-driven discourses.

A potential burden is most heavily pressed upon teachers and students coming from the ‘South’ to the ‘North’ (Quijano 2000). Late liberal structures of governance serve to keep alive, or at least leave unquestioned the racialised structures historically embedded in Western ontologies and epistemologies. Here, the ‘South’ refers to those bodies, social groups, (linguistically mediated) knowledges and geographical locations that have systematically suffered injustice, invisibilisation and destruction caused by capitalism and colonialism (e.g. Grosfoguel 2012; Santos 2018; Stroud 2020). This study looks at Swedish university classroom practices within which certain speakers – certain Southern international staff and students – face the potential challenge of having their knowledge, experiences and bodies thematised and ranked according to racial logics that have been ingrained in Western ontology and epistemology since the enlightenment (Grosfoguel 2012; Stroud and Kerfoot 2021).

The challenge of overcoming this marginalising potentiality in this way is a subterranean crisis of language itself. If we are to engage seriously with the bodies, knowledges and experiences of others, there is an imperative to reconceptualise
language “in ways that can promote a diversity of voice and contribute to a mutuality and reciprocity across difference” (Stroud 2015: 20, emphasis in original). Only in this way might we become open to understanding how our universities’ increasingly diverse students and student bodies (both collective and individual bodies) work to voice their (international) experiences and knowledge in response to the increasingly powerful and invisibilising discourses of late liberalism (cf. Povinelli 2019). Only in this way might we come to see how university classroom spaces are spaces of both exhaustion and “ethical” potentiality, or as what Elizabeth Povinelli describes as “spaces of otherwise” (2011: 6).

2 Engaging with questions of ethics

Ethics is here proposed to be of singular importance, and yet must be thought differently, as per the need to reconceptualise language in response to the bodies and discourses of internationalising university life. Engaging with the work of thinker Emmanuel Levinas, this study aims to think an ethics that arises not from “an experience of values, but an access to exterior Being, and the exterior being par excellence is the Other” (Levinas 1978: 183). For Levinas, “the Other” referred to here is not another person that we might categorise as being different from prevailing norms but is rather a person or representation that is beyond comprehension, impossible to ignore, and for which we are called to take responsibility (see further Kulick 2022: 206ff). The Other is unique in its alterity to the extent that any decision we make in how we respond to the Other cannot be wholly subjectivistic, voluntaristic or structurally determined. Crucial to emphasise here is that Levinasian ethics is not a normative ethics but that which determines our subjectivity (see Critchley 2009 on post-deconstructive subjectivity); Levinasian ethics relates to our face-to-face relations with others, whereby we are chosen or elected by them to bear responsibility prior to our freedom to act agentively (Levinas 1969: 43).

Furthermore, Levinasian ethics is always situated – emerging from the ethical event of embodied interaction in which one faces the risk of being categorised according to social norms and judged in relation to the way we respond to the moral and political demands of late liberal markets. Just as Povinelli et al. (2014) propose the “quasi-event” to consider the exhaustion and potential one faces when responding to late liberal markets, the “ethical event” will here be utilised as a way to consider how the study participants respond to the social, linguistic and absolute difference of

1 Kulick (2022) engages Levinasian ethics in relation to sociolinguistic practice (see also Blackledge and Creese 2023) and is perhaps the only other author drawing links between Levinasian Ethics and Linguistic Citizenship.
others in the internationalising university – also part of the late liberal market. In keeping with Povinelli’s quasi-event and in response to Derrida’s engagement with Levinasian ethics, this is to politicise Levinasian ethics. While Derrida claimed to be “ready to submit to everything Levinas says” (Derrida 1986: 74), he also sought to go further and call forth the political as “the art of response to the singular demand of the Other” (Critchley 2009: 276). In response, this paper will consider “the art” (or lack of it) in the responses the study participants make to the engaging, learning and knowing of others in the university classroom. Such analyses of ethical events, I suggest, will allow for insight into the political acts needed to support the potentiality for ethical becoming in internationalising academia, while demonstrating a radically ethical sociolinguistics of potentiality.

The political potentiality to be found in this sociolinguistic approach can be further clarified through the notion of “Linguistic Citizenship”. Linguistic Citizenship emphasises the ways in which semiotic practices and representations of semiosis can work to challenge many of the ideas we have about language and multilingualism, while contributing towards a transformative understanding of citizenship (Stroud 2015; see also Stroud 2001, 2018; Stroud and Kerfoot 2021). It concerns itself with situated linguistic and semiotic practices, as well as representations of speakers, firmly located within spaces of socio-political struggle in which typically marginalised agencies and voices might endure and determine a new set of relations and values. In alignment with this notion, this study looks to questions of students’ multilingualism – their diverse accents, registers, discourses and bodies (Oostendorp 2022), and the ways in which such resources can be drawn upon to maintain ethical becoming in sectoral, national and institutional frameworks for transformative purposes. To this end, the concepts of performance, genre and interdiscursivity will be used as tools in the analysis of what the study participants do with and around language, so that they reorient the diverse classroom space and those within it towards more mutuality and reciprocity across social and linguistic difference.

3 Genre, performance and interdiscursivity in the international classroom

That international staff and students will bring and face diverse ways of engaging, learning and knowing is a fact that is perhaps most easily recognised in the classroom context. And it is in the ritualised greetings that take place in the classroom genre of the introduction round that one faces such inevitable difference. The introduction round generally takes place at the beginning of a course, but it may also be repeated in later sessions if a new teacher and/or student enters the group later in
the course. In introduction rounds, all are equal in that all are expected to present themselves and give voice to who they are, as well as the history, knowledge and experience they embody, and/or what they expect to gain from the course. However, any pretensions of equality that the genre may make must contend with the potential of students being ranked and classified by others according to the regimenting discourses of late liberalism.

The introduction round as a genre, however, does not simply classify and organise students and staff as social, cultural and political objects. In alignment with the understanding of genre as developed most rigorously in the fields of linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics, genres also function as flexible and negotiable orienting frameworks for the organisation of ways of producing and interpreting discourse (see Bauman 1999; Briggs and Bauman 1992; Hanks 1987). Moreover, relevant to the introduction round genre as a form of greeting, ethnographic studies have pointed to the ways in which greetings are connected to, or are part of the construction of, the ongoing and ensuing activities (Duranti 1997). So, on the one hand, the introduction round might be framed in a way that seeks to draw attention to a participant’s sociolinguistic categories, liable to them being evaluated according to historically and institutionally specific norms. Yet, on the other hand, as a framing genre, the introduction round can be simultaneously used and understood to construct social relations anew, such that interlocutors might perform and respond to each other’s unique ways of engaging, learning and knowing, ready to engage in knowledge construction across social and linguistic difference. In this way, the introduction round neatly captures the potential for exhaustion and ethical potentiality found in all classroom interaction.

Crucial for responding to others as Other and potential ethical becoming is the fact that the introduction round genre calls on its participants to perform, thereby providing an opportunity to respond to any (meta)communicative processes regulating the classroom space (see Bauman 1975, 1986; Bauman and Briggs 1990). Performance involves a performer and an audience who will evaluate the performance given and, in an introduction round, students and teachers must perform and be evaluated for who and what they are. It is this evaluative dynamic that brings the risk of one’s unicity being evaded and categorised on account of one’s performance falling too far beyond the relevant regimenting discourses. At the same time, one’s unicity may be artfully performed, seen, heard and responded to. A positively evaluated reflexive performance, I will here argue, holds the potential to free individuals from the discursive horizon of late liberalism and to bring that horizon into question.

The ethnographic approach taken for this study, analysing practice beyond the bounded speech event, also lends itself to considerations of interdiscursivity. Developed within the field of linguistic anthropology (see Bauman 2005; Silverstein
2005), interdiscursivity sensitises the analyst to discursive practices as they are manipulated across time and space in the semiotics of everyday living. It is a lens that allows for a consideration of the social logics that mark continuities and discontinuities across encounters (Agha 2005), not necessarily bounded by national or institutional boundaries. Interdiscursivity will thus allow for a more responsive engagement with contemporary speaking practices in spaces peopled by staff and students with biographically distinct discursive histories that may come to shape present and future discursive practices. Finally, crucial to the present study, interdiscursivity across genres will also be considered as a potential form of generic innovation conducive to disruptions of hegemonic order (Briggs and Bauman 1992).

4 Setting, participants and research tools

This study investigates a Social Sciences course focused on global social processes and practices. The chosen department, recognised for its diversity among both students and staff, presented an opportunity to explore interactions across social and linguistic difference. My interest in this faculty was further fuelled by current critiques suggesting that the Social Sciences are becoming increasingly aligned with global neoliberal norms (Heilbron et al. 2018). As such, this department would provide an opportunity to analyse interactions amongst diverse, critically minded and socially engaged scholars, with a consideration of the extent to which their interactions are governed by, free of, and/or resistant to late liberal discourses. Given the intricate interplay of diverse backgrounds and academic critiques within this setting, a reflexive stance was crucial.

Reflexivity has been foundational in guiding my research, analysis and writing processes. Rooted in “ethics”, I approached and responded to my participants’ interactions with a sense of Levinasian responsibility. This meant striving not to let pre-established social categories shape my approach, but instead focussing on their individual semiotic engagements within the university milieu. Although international students emerged as a focal point in the diverse group I studied, they were not my predetermined focus. Being an international researcher from the UK, I also recognise that my presence could have influenced the dynamics within the classrooms. Continuously cognisant of this potentiality, I endeavoured to remain open to the rich heterogeneity of possible meanings present in my engagements, analysis and writing.

The research participants comprised 23 students and five teachers, all anonymised for this study. Six of the 23 student participants were born and educated mostly in Sweden, and 17 were born and educated mostly outside of Sweden, eight of whom were born and educated mostly outside of Europe. 15 were female and eight
were male. Each of the four teachers who feature in the data, two females and two males, were born and educated outside of Sweden; two of the teachers were born and mostly educated outside of Europe, one from Africa and another from North America.

In the course of the four-month ethnographic engagement, a particular student, Frank (pseudonym), emerged as a central figure for the study. Writing on Foucault’s *The Government of Self and Others* (2010), Povinelli (2012: 455) explores Foucault’s claim that new knowledge “depends on a certain sort of person who is either ethically otherwise and seeks to persevere in being so, or who seeks to be ethically otherwise and acts on and perseveres in this desire”. With the discursive power of the fantasy of the individual will (Povinelli 2011), on one level this study focuses on the will and ethical becoming called for by Frank as someone who, with a background in performing music, has the capacity to artfully act out his desires. Nevertheless, more broadly it addresses the institutionally framed social relations in which Frank and the other study participants were collectively involved.

Consistent with trends in UK-based linguistic ethnography, this research emphasises the collective experiences and language practices of students and teachers as they navigate the institutional dynamics of the university (Rampton et al. 2022). It is with the power of institutional framings that participants’ words can be heard as strange, experienced as uncomfortable, and apparently driven with the desire to construct, or resist constructing classroom spaces otherwise.

To capture the multifaceted experiences within the university, a diverse set of data collection tools was employed. As the semester went on, the fieldnotes diary got filled up (135 pages), the digital audio and photo collections increased (131 and 231 files respectively), as did the number of audio-recorded and transcribed narrative and ethnographic interviews (29 in total). Of the 15 total individuals interviewed, some were interviewed multiple times, and this group included both students and teachers. The interviews and informal conversations were held in various spaces chosen in negotiation with the participants (e.g. classrooms, corridors, offices, buses, underground trains, cafés, parks and badminton courts). This allowed the participants greater freedom to reflect on and develop their own experiences in, around and outside of the institutional spaces in focus.

5 Analysis

Let us consider the first class of the semester, Autumn 2019. After outlining the course in relation to the master’s degree programme, the teacher began an introduction round, taking his own turn first, in which he described his previous work environments, research experiences and his current research interests. In
Extract 1, the teacher positively evaluates his previous experience in another markedly diverse university setting.

**Extract 1. The teacher gives a description of his previous research experiences in another north-European higher-education institution.**

Teacher: This [lack of local and nationally rooted expertise] was very good, because all the scholars were recruited internationally, which brought in people from different countries. And this was also very good for research because then this brings in different perspectives, from different sciences, and also different country backgrounds. This facilitated very good comparative research, making [our specific field] much stronger than it was before. Because otherwise, it’s quite common that we take certain issues from our own country for granted and you think that some things are natural, but if you have comparative research from different countries with different audiences, then you find that not all social issues are natural, and then make powerful research.

At the start of this introduction round within which the international dimensions of the class group were soon to be made visible, the teacher recognised the classroom space as a “contact zone” (Pratt 1991) – a heterogeneous space, rich in ethnic, disciplinary and epistemic diversity. His performance suggests that an international group, like the one being addressed, was to be positively evaluated for its potential to help the research field move beyond the pitfalls of relying on a more “natural” understanding that might be gleaned from a more homogeneous and/or nationalistic approach. Curiosity and engagement across difference were posited as qualities to be valued here. Introducing himself as an experienced researcher, entrusted with the responsibility of opening the semester and framing the course, his powerful position adds weight to the evaluation of international collaboration holding inherent potentiality for new knowledge (see Gordon 2016), reaffirming some traditional ideals of internationalisation (see Fabricius et al. 2017). For an international group of postgraduate students, the values promoted within this introduction round may very well have seemed promising and worthy of pursuing over the coming semester.

### 5.1 Standing up and standing out for internationalising university life

In the above introduction round, all students in the group gave what might be considered a standard response as called for by the genre. Given names and previous educational experiences were stated and put into relation to the course units and overarching themes of the course. Later in that same first week, however, Frank stood up and stood out to develop the greeting beyond the formal constraints of the
introduction round. For Frank, seen at the front and centre of the classroom space in Figure 1 above, it seemed clear that there was more to establishing and developing relations with classmates than could be found in the introduction round genre. In contrast to the more spatially and discursively static greetings as part of the already experienced introduction round genre, Frank here took the floor moving from a seat in the middle of the class, to stand, gesture and perform a greeting with a select group of fellow early-seated arrivals at the front of class, in full view of all the others. Read as a performance that employed a certain register, i.e. talking to build solidarity, Frank’s actions and body here worked to construct the classroom space according to certain values, which his classmates, given their positioning as audience and fellow performers, might evaluate and respond to. He performed himself in what Povinelli would call his “carnality” (2012), as the manifestation of discourses distinct from those of late liberalism, as a student who stands when all should be seated. One value performed here was one of dialogue across difference, with yet unknown classmates who, ethically speaking, would always remain unknown.

Figure 1: Frank (highlighted in green) performs a greeting.

Carnality is given in distinction to “corporeality”. Corporeality is defined as “the way in which dominant forms of power shape and reshape materiality”, while carnality is “the material manifestations of [...] discourse which are neither discursive nor pre-discursive” (Povinelli and DiFruscia 2012: 78). This reflects recent work in applied and sociolinguistics that focuses on the social, intersubjective, relational, inter-human quality of the body (e.g. Bucholtz and Hall 2016; Busch 2021; Kusters and De Meulder 2019).
according to their absolute Otherness. The audience and fellow performers could consider if they would respond across difference, in collaboration and solidarity with Frank, or instead keep their heads down and get the work done once the teacher had arrived.

The norms of engaging, learning and knowing were there to be negotiated, in a way that was responsive to both Frank and the teacher above’s call for international and collaborative work across difference in this classroom space. To respond to the teacher above, to realise the potential of a collaborative international classroom, and to allow for its ethical becoming, an initial communicative act of generosity was required (Levinas 1969: 14); Frank obliged, as a carnal agent distinct from the corporeality shaped by the dominant discourse of the classroom.

5.2 No joy together

Certain norms of engaging, learning and knowing quickly emerged, but they were quite distinct from those suggested by the teacher on the first day, as well as those that Frank was trying to (interdiscursively) enregister in his performance above. Speaking in an interview only 4 weeks into the semester, I asked Frank about the dynamics in and around these international classroom spaces.

Extract 2. A semi-structured interview with Frank in a university corridor before class.

Look. Let me be frank. Especially in the first semester, I just, I don’t know whether it’s me or not, but sometimes you feel so strange! Especially when you’re a student, coming from Africa and those things. I feel like, no, even when I’m talking (sucks teeth), not everybody listens to what I say. I just, I just feel like, no, if I want to contribute, it’s not everybody who sees my contribution to be important or something like that. So, I feel I don’t want to worry myself to contribute in class. […] Student life [here] is not like in Africa. It’s not like that. Joy together (exaggerated, emphatic tone as if to start listing the differences). No, no. Here, it’s not like that. Sometimes, we are not talking together even if it’s just a few in class.

In Extract 2, Frank senses that the joy he was trying to elicit through attempts to engage and contribute in class was being unreciprocated. The general lack of group collaboration, solidarity and dialogue were deterring from his willingness to make contributions in class. He wondered if it was on account of his categorisation as an African that was causing the others to evade his contributions. Whether or not this was the case, for Frank, the potential of an international classroom space to foster the production of new knowledge across difference was not being realised.

As mapped out and quantified in my field notes, I saw Frank’s spoken contributions in class decline after the first 2 weeks, such that his contributions were
quantified as having become average in relation to the rest of the class. The levels of engagement from others in the class, however, remained relatively stable, although it was dominated by students who had grouped according to shared national and linguistic backgrounds. Yet, it was surprising that outside of class, in the interviews conducted with 15 of the 23 students, 12 responded to a question about group collaboration, solidarity and dialogue in class by stating that they felt there had not been enough of it and that they would have liked there to have been more. Frank’s calls to respond had been acknowledged but the ability to engage, learn and know across difference, or to enact student response-ability (see Bozalek and Zembylas 2017) was generally being evaded. The general class disappointment in relation to this issue was especially surprising given that when a course co-ordinator set up a group Facebook page to encourage something akin to group collaboration, solidarity and dialogue, the message board was left largely unused. Frank, however, again stood out in his endurance to initiate engagement and dialogue amongst the group.

When I later went on to discuss the group Facebook page in relation to the topic of group connectedness during a break between classes with three student participants, I asked about its apparent failure. None of the participants could account for its failure, but much was made of one of the few failed attempts made by students to initiate discussion there. Frank had posted a video, which was neither engaged with, nor responded to.

Extract 3. Walking focus group interview with various students.

The most surprising thing that happened was when [Frank] uploaded a music video of his group. […] It was kinda weird. It was a working Facebook group! [Two other members of focus group laugh]

The comments in Extract 3 point towards an interpretative contestation existing amongst the different members of the group, thereby leading to different (re)constructions of the same (online) space (cf. Wee and Goh 2019). On one hand, Frank’s musical Facebook performance called for a space with norms other than those he had found in the classroom. He sought to greet others in such a way that might ground interaction of a different rhythm and colour. The group in Extract 3, however, did not respond to Frank, or engage in the space, having interpreted this online (social) space as an extension of the classroom: a space of functionality, for academic content only. This latter construction aligns with late liberal values according to which the governance of difference approves only functional social participation, whereby institutional market interests dominate the self (Urciuoli 2019). Indeed, in Extract 3, such values were seen to have dominated both the interpretation of the online space’s construction, and the response to others and other ways of engaging.
Nevertheless, as an ethical reading of the classroom dynamics would insist, while the institutional spaces Frank faced appeared to have become ideologically saturated by discourses of late liberalism, those within and around the classroom space may yet have fostered an as-yet unseen desire to respond and construct the classroom spaces otherwise. Indeed, given the opportunity to reorient the classroom by means of repeated introduction rounds, Frank’s responses to the institutional norms were, as we shall now see, eventually responded to, pointing towards an ethical becoming within the classroom space.

5.3 Developing a critical genre style

On account of there being various courses on the master’s programme, each with up to five different teachers involved, the introduction round had become a regular occurrence. While this may have proved tiresome for some, for others the form of a genre as flexible and open-ended allowed for a critical engagement with the genre and, more generally, classroom relations (Briggs and Bauman 1992). As discussed above, the introduction round genre is one that provides the speaker with an opportunity to perform in front of an audience, as well as the possibility of engaging in the co-construction and reorientation of ongoing and ensuing activity (Hanks 1987), i.e. the genre itself and the more general dynamics of the classroom. Moreover, given that the genre had been repeated so often, participants will have had the chance to reflect upon their own genre style (Hymes 1974), to consider how they might interdiscursively respond to previous introduction rounds, greetings and/or classroom interactions, in anticipation of how the class might come to be constructed otherwise.

In Extract 4 below, the class was starting a new course with new course co-leaders, Emily and Hans. Emily led the introduction round, building on an already completed round in which the students were asked to simply share their names and geographical background. Going around the class a second time, Emily made a request for the students to state where they wanted to be going professionally and what they wanted in and beyond this classroom and course. The class was being asked to link who they were and what they brought to proceedings, and to recast this information as having job market value, recognisable as a foregrounding of late liberal values.

Extract 4. New beginnings (again). (See below for the transcription conventions.)

1. Emily (Social Sciences teacher): Does anyone else want to say anything? You can just sort of say, what are you hoping for. Do you want to work at [related institution]. What are your, sort of, goals.
(Seven minutes during which three students speak about the different jobs they are thinking about doing)

2. **Frank**: Mine is simple. Just for the sake of knowledge.
3. **Classmates**: @
4. **Emily**: For the sake of knowledge. <spoken quickly and seriously>
5. **Frank**: Yeah.
6. **Emily**: Right?
7. **Frank**: It’s like my family is pushing me to go to school and me, myself, I don’t know what—I’m just learning.
8. **Emily**: Hmm,
9. **Frank**: I did closely related undergraduate degree course. I’m also a musician, but everyone in my family is going to school.
10. **Several in class**: @
11. **Frank**: And now my brother has completed his PhD, I go to school. They are pushing me.
12. **Most of class**: @@@
13. **Emily**: Well, I hope you will only, er, enhance your life as an artist, and you know …
14. **Whole class**: @@@

Frank’s simple claim on line 2 appeared to surprise the teacher as well as several of Frank’s classmates, many of whom responded with laughter (line 3). The sense of amusement in the class only increased when he went on to bring the focus onto himself, his family and his identity as a musician (lines 7, 9 and 11). Frank’s response clearly rubbed up against the kind of answer that was expected from him (lines 3, 10, 12, and 14). But with whom, or at what, were Frank’s classmates laughing? Frank’s new teacher was clearly questioning his performance of self, as indicated in her minimal responses and repetitions (line 4, 6 and 8), as well as her decision to focus on Frank’s musical interests (line 13) before herself laughing with the others in the class (14). Such a response of laughter was one of gentle ridicule, serving a disciplinary social function that would simultaneously discourage similar responses (see Billig 2005) and foreclose any further consideration of the how Frank’s comments might relate to the classroom space. However, the laughter of his classmates, who were now familiar with Frank and his approach in the classroom, was ambiguous. The laughter was perhaps a response to the teacher’s gentle ridicule of Frank’s comments, and/or a response to the teacher’s initial question being brought into question by Frank’s comments.

The classroom laughter in the above scene was, the overarching fieldwork suggests, in part a convivial laughter, complicit in an ironic act of disavowal,
understood as an act by which someone knows (consciously or unconsciously) that such and such might not be true, but nevertheless thinks, speaks or acts as if it were true (Bennett and Royle 2009). Indeed, Frank had explicitly stated in other classes, group discussions and interviews that he was interested in coming to class for more than the “simple” pursuit of knowledge (line 2). In previous introduction rounds and interviews, Frank had clearly stated that he wished to pursue a life and career in Sweden in relation to the kind of professions discussed on this course. Considering such relational history, the laughter could have been heard as Frank and his classmates collectively and interdiscursively calling into question the late liberal values foregrounded in the framing of this course unit. Moreover, the laughter could be heard as the taking of responsibility in response to Frank’s voicing of difference, collaborating in an ethical becoming. Here, one reading of the laughter does not rule out the other, especially since so many in the classroom were laughing by line 14; not everyone laughs for the same reasons and the impossibility of an either/or reading became clearer as the introduction round continued.

5.4 An ironic and humorous construction

Extract 5. The introduction round continues with individual contributions from Hans (another teacher working alongside Emily) and Rachel (a student).

1. **Hans**: If you’re here for the sake of knowledge. I don’t think we wrote those guides just for the sake of knowledge. Perhaps a little bit too.

2. **Most of class**: @

3. **Hans**: But it’s a very good thing if you’re here for the sake of knowledge. I think that education should also be for the sake of knowledge and not only being instrumental for getting a good job. So? if that is your intrinsic motivation then I can only applaud that.

4. **Rachel**: @ Let’s do it? <summons the class looking around at everyone>

5. **Most of class**: <applause given for three or four seconds>

6. **Emily**: Okay. Next?

7. **Rachel**: I am also here for the sake of knowledge, but I am going to use the knowledge as well? @ <smiles while looking towards Frank, who smiles back> As a tool. I have got an internship.

8. **Hans**: Yes, that’s crucial.

9. **Fiona**: I want knowledge, but to be more aware of the work as I am doing it. <serious tone, looking directly at Emily>

10. **Hans**: Yes? Very good. <Hans sits back down, giving up the floor to Emily>
Laughter continued to characterise the introduction round, but from the beginning of Extract 5, Frank's contribution was entertained as a more valuable and critical contribution to the classroom discussion. In turns 1 and 3, Hans, a teacher who had been a bystander up until this point, formulated a more positive evaluation of Frank's contribution that served to counter any reading of Emily's comments that might construct the classroom space as one that only welcomes and encourages a functional and marketable approach to classroom engagement. Rachel, a student who recognised the indexicality of Frank's interdiscursive and ironic disavowal, seemed to relish the opportunity of (ironically) having the class applaud Frank's contribution (line 4), seemingly echoing Hans' attempts to encourage the class to consider Frank's position (lines 1 and 3). Moments later, on line 7, Rachel followed up this humorously positive evaluation, giving her own related performance within the introduction round, within which she appeared to bridge the gap between Frank's position and the prevailing norms, seeking to confirm her alignment with Frank by offering a smile. Like Frank, she said that she had come to university for "the sake of knowledge", but also for the purposes of career advancement, thereby enacting a pragmatic position that was subsequently ratified by Hans (line 8). However, not everyone appeared to appreciate Hans and Rachel's intervention, as Fiona then took to the floor in an apparent attempt to re-orient the introduction round in response to, and in alignment with, the values of Emily's initial question, in contradistinction with Frank, such that responsibility in response to the face and unicity of others was once again being evaded (line 9). Fiona's turn was also ratified by Hans (line 10).

Rachel's ironic performance, successfully calling on the class to applaud Frank, played on Hans' statement that was patently never intended to result in classroom applause. This, together with Rachel's reciprocated smile towards Frank (line 7), strongly suggest that the laughter and general evaluation of Frank's initial contribution in Extract 4 was not necessarily a laughter of ridicule. For Rachel, it was a response of responsibility that sought to allow for Frank's ethical becoming to endure after the initial ethical event between Frank and his classmates. By turning the classroom into a carnivalesque scene of further laughter, as well as of applause for Frank, the general uproar was shown to be(come) less about Frank, and more about constructing the space otherwise. Frank and Rachel's turns were patently at odds with the initial framing of the introduction round, as well as the dual-monologic form the genre had taken over the course of the semester according to which only teachers and individual students were given space to interact. Indeed, neither the students nor the teachers had received such explicit audience evaluation before. In this way, Frank and Rachel's performances worked to co-construct a momentary space of responsibility and ethical becoming involving that which is distinct and unrecognised in the prevailing discourse, itself ironically responded to. This was potentially a space in which solidarity, collaboration and dialogue might be
promoted in response to and beyond the individualism and market-driven logic present in the classroom discourse.

Despite the enduring desire of Frank, Rachel and certain others to construct spaces otherwise, not all, and crucially not the main class teacher, showed any willingness to entertain any challenge to proposed and prevailing norms. There were no changes in the dynamics of interaction in the class following the above introduction round. Furthermore, in informal discussion after class, several of the study’s participants expressed only further frustration regarding the classroom engagement and approach to learning and knowing found in the classroom space that day. However, the desire for spaces of otherwise was not exhausted here, as later became clear in one of the last classes of the semester.

5.5 An interdiscursively realised potentiality

In another introduction round several weeks later, towards the end of the same course and semester, another new teacher, Ada, who had been previously based in another African nation, asked the students to introduce themselves and greet the others as they would do when ‘at home’.

Extract 6. Another introduction round with another teacher.
1. Ada: Sir?
2. Frank: My name is [Frank].
3. Ada mm, hmm?
4. Frank: [Frank] YYYY.
5. Ada: Aa haa,
6. Frank: From WWW.
7. Ada: OK. And please share.
8. Frank: My surname this surname means XXXX. YYYY means XXXX.
9. Ada: @Mmmhmmm?£ @
10. Frank: And:::
11. Ada: @@
12. Frank: In WWW. our ‘hello’ goes with (@) £Yeah it goes£ with the response. Not just hello, agoo, So if I say hello:, If I say ‘agoo:’, you say ‘amee:’ Agoo::!
13. Teacher and several others: Amee::!
14. Frank: That’s how it goes!
15. Whole class: @@@@@@@@@@@@@

With minimal requirements placed upon the students in the introduction round framing Extract 6, Frank here endured with his own distinct discourse, performing something that might re-orient the introduction round genre in anticipation of an
alternate grounding to the classroom dynamics. Frank gave his first name (line 2), his surname (line 4), country of birth (line 6), followed by the referential meaning of his surname (line 8). The contribution of non-scientific information to classroom discourse was this time ratified by playful and encouraging laughter from the new teacher (lines 9 and 11). Frank then introduced a greeting ritual through which his classmates were invited to engage (line 12). The teacher and class loudly and enthusiastically responded (line 13), Frank positively evaluated their response (line 14), before the class erupted into rapturous laughter (line 15).

Making the most of the teacher’s framing to greet the group “as if at home” and the opportunity to engage his audience, Frank successfully introduced language which he knew to be unknown into the classroom space. However, Frank could rely on his audience knowing the adjacency pair format typical in greetings across languages (Duranti 1997) and exploited the fact. One calls out and another responds. As such, their knowing when and how to respond as part of Frank’s performance was secured with only a minimal introductory explanation (line 12). Indeed, what was important for a successful dialogic performance was the group’s collaboration, not the acting out of any informational, rhetorical, or phatic function. This deceptively simple creative act of both introducing and teaching an unknown discourse in the classroom space called for the others to respond, which they did joyously. The multilingual discourse was realised in a sudden unity of voice (line 13) and unambiguously joyful laughter (line 14) indicating only a positive reception from his audience. Yet, in the context of this classroom space, Frank’s performance was most significant on account of its interdiscursive relation to previous greetings, introduction rounds, and Frank’s own genealogically significant discourse.

The logic of Frank’s performance in this introduction round was indexical of his genre style, as well as his approach to greetings and engagement with others across the semester more generally. Finally, the group’s collective sense of responsibility was acted upon. Throughout the semester, Frank would call out to others to engage, for the purpose of coming to learn and know, or simply to engage for the sake of engaging with others. Even if those he was calling to did not immediately know to whom or to what they were responding to, Frank desired a response such that the collective space might be oriented otherwise. In his previous performances, Frank’s audience was being asked to take responsibility unconditionally, but Frank had faced a non-responsive group. Yet in these same spaces Frank was now being asked the impossible by the new teacher: to greet the class group as if he were “at home”, decontextualising discourse from a space of “joy together” to recontextualise it in a space in which he had felt “so strange” (Extract 2). Nevertheless, Frank maintained this impossible logic, retained faith that his singularity would be heard, to
successfully perform and incite a space of otherwise that would allow for the re-emergence of an ethical becoming (see Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000: 18 on the need for such faith).

As an act of linguistic citizenship, the performance called on the audience to accept and respond to Frank without demanding that he speak using a shared language, and/or in the same manner as they had all done previously. Instead, a diversity of voice, mutuality and reciprocity across difference was welcomed by the teacher and agentively performed by Frank and, in response, the rest of the class. This amounted to those who constituted the classroom space transcending the functional and predictable late liberal discourse that they had experienced as governing the group's social relations that semester. The logic is one that legitimised Frank's semiotic repertoire in the classroom space. Theoretically pertinent to this study is the fact that consistent with his previous attempts to come into and construct the classroom space otherwise, this time Frank's performance demonstrated a double gesture. Not only did the group interdiscursively respond to the late liberal discourses and those that served to disrupt them (as some had in fact done previously, see Sections 5.4 and 5.5), but the class group also became discursively liberated from them, thus foregrounding, and putting into practice, if only momentarily, ethical becoming amongst the group.

For the remainder of the class, beyond the introduction round, Frank and the other key participants maintained responsibility to the difference of one another. Throughout the entire class, students responded to the teacher's frequent calls to engage and share knowledge according to their own experiences and localised knowledge. Different ways of engaging and learning, as well as different local knowledge relating to different students' working experiences, were brought to bear, relevant to the globally oriented course topics at hand. Despite the dynamics introduced into the classroom space on this day being “strange” or “weird” to everyone present (Extracts 2 and 3), all involved came into the classroom space in solidarity, co-operation and dialogue, thus realising Frank's initial desire for an enduring “joy together” (Extract 2).

6 Discussion and concluding remarks

This study's conceptualisation of ethical becoming, generated in ethical events of interaction, suggested that the participants' international and multilingual learning endured when responsibility was taken for others and the different ways of engaging, learning, and knowing inevitable in an internationalising classroom. A focus on ethical events allowed for an analytic sensitivity to the continuities and
discontinuities in the students and teachers’ movement beyond the normative boundaries of late liberal university spaces. Crucially, international engagement, learning and knowing across difference was not shown to be an inevitable consequence of increased mobility, classroom diversity or a prior interest in global social issues, as hoped for by the teacher in Extract 1. Nevertheless, despite the late liberal governance of markets and difference, values of group solidarity, collaboration and dialogue were ultimately seen to endure amongst the students and teachers. This endurance was shown to be dependent upon a utopian surplus found in the students’ and teachers’ desire for mutuality and reciprocity of engagement across difference, in artful acts that can be usefully characterised as radically ethical acts of linguistic citizenship (cf. Stroud 2015: 20, 2018). To be made visible, the spaces demanded hard-won and intersubjective responsibility towards the ongoing and enduring acts of certain discursively marginalised students. Ethical becoming in the space was seen to endure via the dialogic means of genre interdiscursivity and dialogic performance, and were finally and most fully responded to in Frank’s introduction round performance encouraged by a new classroom teacher, Ada. It was only through the teacher’s response to Frank’s unicity and linguistic citizenship that the diversity of voice in the classroom space was seen to be grounded and nurtured, thereby rendering it a space of otherwise.

In the introduction rounds (Extracts 1, 4, 5, 6), greetings (Figure 1, Extract 3), and Facebook postings (Extract 3) engaged with here, difference was not necessarily accepted. Difference was always recognised, but it was not always responded to. At times, it appeared to be gently ridiculed (Extract 4). In fact, it took until the last few weeks of the semester for signs of group solidarity, collaboration and dialogue across difference to emerge in the institutional spaces. So long in construction, there is the danger that dominant world views were suppressing alternative voices, discourse and knowledge, thereby inflicting epistemic harm on those marginalised in the group (Kerfoot and Bello-Nonjengele 2023). In response, this study’s findings suggest that efforts to engage teaching staff who embody epistemological and experiential difference in the European Social Sciences would be beneficial for student engaging, learning and knowing in the internationalising university classroom.

Although the task of disrupting the orders of late liberalism was largely carried out by the students of this study, freedom from these orders was only gained upon the arrival of a “Southern” scholar concerned to give voice and take responsibility in response to the repertoires of all in the group. In the hope of a more immediate and consistent response to the potentiality and risk involved with internationalisation, the complexity of internationalising university life needs to be made more visible, and effort made to initiate more South/North engagements with Southern researchers and teachers who possess greater desire for equality in North/South relations and the
overcoming of the late liberal governance of difference (e.g. Bock and Stroud 2021; Heugh 2021; Makoni et al. 2022).

Yet, notwithstanding the exhaustion of international students like Frank, hope can be taken from the creative interdiscursive performances analysed here, whereby certain discursive interrelations arguably came to shape social relations and the orientation of those coming to the classroom. From one introduction round to another, across time and institutional spaces, interdiscursive developments came to inform the ways in which students and teachers would relate to one another and to other ways of engaging (see esp. Dunn 2006; Salö and Hanell 2014; Silverstein 2005). From the first day of the course in Extract 1 to the final few weeks of the course in Extract 6, the response to late liberal values was developed in interdiscursive performances through the artful use of irony, humour and multilingual resources.

If late liberalism governs “Northern” universities, emphasising a knowable future, competition and marketisation, the democratic and ethical ideals of internationalisation will always face a seemingly impossible task of gaining visibility and getting realised. The continuity of solidarity, collaboration and dialogue will always depend on a (re)framing and (re)orientation of our approach to internationalising university life, which is a task that today appears to fall on the shoulders of the (international) students and teachers on the ground. Frank, his classmates and teachers did reveal that such repetitions may be momentarily joyful; nevertheless, to take responsibility and keep acting out one’s desire for the potentiality of internationalising university life has also been shown to be an exhausting burden that need not fall only on the shoulders of international staff and students from the global South.

**Transcription conventions**

. end of intonation unit; falling intonation  
, end of intonation unit; fall-rise intonation  
? end of intonation unit; rising intonation  
! raised pitch and volume throughout the intonation unit  
underline emphatic stress; increased amplitude  
: length  
= latching; no pause between intonation units  
@ laughter; each token marks one syllable  
£word£ smiley voice/suppressed laughter  
<> transcriber comment; non-vocal noise  
XXXX translated meaning of surname  
YYYY surname anonymised  
WWWW country of birth anonymised
References


Povinelli, Elizabeth A. 2012. The will to be otherwise/the effort of endurance. South Atlantic Quarterly 111(3). 453–475.


