# Loneliness and Language in Althusserian Thought
### Yanos Soubieski

The purpose of this paper is twofold: firstly, to help explain how loneliness can be accounted for within an Althusserian theory of interpellation. Secondly, to explain how Althusser's theory of interpellation is concerned with the forming of subjectivity within language. By explaining how interpellation occurs within language, I shall be able to situate loneliness within Althusserian thought. As such, I shall appeal to Herculine Barbin's autobiography as a literary example of loneliness. Herculine's experiences and eventual suicide appear to call into question an Althusserian reading of those experiences. Only by recognising that interpellation is concerned with the power dynamics within language and the linguistic creation of subjectivity in the language of others can Althusserians hope to account for Herculine's experiences of loneliness. In order to reconcile Herculine's experiences and Althusser's theory of interpellation, I shall appeal to Roman Jakobson's theory of similarity aphasia, which is the archetypal interpellative model; however, in so doing, this shall require amendments be made to Althusser's theory, namely with the introduction of 'weak' and 'strong' interpellation. These categories are essential for Althusserian thought to account for the experience of loneliness.

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is twofold: to help explain loneliness within an Althusserian theory of interpellation and to explain how interpellation is principally concerned with subjectivity within language. By emphasising the primarily linguistic nature of interpellation, I shall be able to help explain how loneliness can be accounted for within an Althusserian perspective. In this paper I shall use the case study of Herculine Barbin (Foucault, 1980), a 19th Century French hermaphrodite whose feelings of loneliness precipitated her suicide. Furthermore, I shall appeal to Jakobson's theory of similarity aphasia (Jackobson, 1954) to firmly situate interpellation within the domain of language, in order to account for Herculine's experiences. That is not to say that the appeal to Jakobson's theory of similarity aphasia leaves Althusser's theory of interpellation unaffected, in fact I shall go on to explain how an appeal to Jakobson necessitates the incorporation of 'strong' and 'weak' interpellation, categories which are essential for Althusserian though to account for loneliness. This paper is not designed to be a defence of Althusser and his work, but rather is an attempt at reconciling loneliness with his theory of ideology.

The structure of this paper shall be as follows: in the first section I shall briefly outline Althusser's theory of interpellation, emphasising two characteristics of interpellation which are particularly problematic for an account of loneliness. Additionally I shall explain how interpellation is concerned with the power dynamics forming subjectivity within language, paying particular attention to Rastko Močnik's (2014) account of interpellation as identification with the language of the other. In the second section I shall introduce loneliness with respects to the experiences of Herculine Barbin and explain why this is initially a problem for an Althusserian explanation of loneliness. In the final section I shall outline Roman Jakobson's

theory of similarity aphasia as an archetypal example of interpellation within language. In this section I shall explain how Jakobson's theory of aphasia requires the incorporation of 'strong' and 'weak' interpellation and in so doing bring this back to the case of Herculine Barbin, reconciling her experiences of loneliness with an Althusserian reading of those experiences.

## 2. Althusser, Interpellation and Language

As mentioned above it is the purpose of this section to briefly outline Althusser's theory of interpellation and situate interpellation within the context of language. This is in order to situate Herculine's loneliness and eventual suicide within the interpellative framework and to demonstrate how Herculine's experiences *prima facie* challenge the interpellative model of subjectivity.

Althusser, the founder of Structural Marxism during the 1960s, succinctly outlines his theory of interpellation in his paper 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses; *Notes Towards an Investigation*' (Althusser, 2006). In this paper Althusser explains that the dominant ideology serves to reproduce the economic mode of production that currently encapsulates and determines material life. Ideology functions by ensuring there is a suitable supply of subjects who will populate the production process (Althusser, 2006: 88). For Althusser the focus is not so much on illusion of consciousness but the distorted creation of a consciousness which ensures that 'skills of labour power [are] provided for in a capitalist regime' (Althusser, 2006: 88). Ideology is fundamentally not about distortion but rather the creation of people, the creation of *subjects* with a specific purpose (Althusser, 2006: 115).[1] Ideology is about subjectification, becoming subjects.

Althusser's hypothesis is that ideology creates subjects by interpellation, which is a process whereby an authoritative figure (God, a policeman, parents) hails or names an individual, and in recognising that hail or name as being for them, the individual becomes what the authoritative figure demands. Althusser uses an example of a policeman hailing "Hey, you there" to a pedestrian who, in recognising the hail as for them, turns to the policeman's call (Althusser, 2006: 118).

In the case of interpellation, the individual in the example above recognised the hail was for them and that the hail was produced by an agent in some way authoritative over the receiver. In so doing the individual adhered to the demands of the policeman and became a subject positioned in subordination to the authoritative policeman.[2] One point I wish to note here is that interpellation is, for Althusser, zero-sum. We either become subjects through interpellation or we do not, in which case interpellation has not obtained and the subject cannot be said to exist. That is to say that Althusser does not in any way consider variability within subjectivity once it has obtained, a point I shall return to in the final section when I discuss subject stability.

There are two fundamental characteristics of ideology through interpellation which need to be addressed, as it is these which cause a problem for Althusser in terms of loneliness. The first is that we are '*always already* subjects' (Althusser, 2006: 117), the second is that 'ideology *has no outside*' (Althusser, 2006: 119), whereby he means there is no perspective outside one of an interpellated subject. I do not think these two characteristics need a large degree of explanation; indeed, to say that there is 'no outside ideology' is to feed into the notion that we are '*always already* subjects' formed in ideology. Althusser dedicates time to explaining that there is no single point of origin of subjectivity (Althusser & Smith, 2014), claiming that the

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[1] Although it is clear that Althusser is concerned with subjectivity *in general* (Althusser, 1964: 22).

[2] This is one directional inasmuch as we are only concerned with the hail that produces subordination and domination between the constructed subject and the authoritative figure in whose hail that that subject is formed.

individual born is always thoroughly engaged in this process of interpellation. At the same time there is no point or perspective beyond ideologically formed subjectivity (Althusser, 2006: 116). In summary, we are *always already* subjects and in line with that hypothesis, there is no perspective beyond an interpellated one.

For the remainder of this section I shall outline how Althusser's process of interpellation is concerned with power dynamics and subjectification *within language*. Language for the purposes of this paper is understood as the communicative action whereby 'meaning is produced and exchanged' (Hall, 1997: 1). Language is the communication between two or more people of 'signs' which are themselves the connection between a 'signifier' and the 'signified', the thing and the concept or idea it connotes (de Saussure, 1990). Language can therefore come to mean essentially anything which involves the communication of these signs, from paintings (Foucault, 2002: 3-18), television broadcasts (Morley, 1995), fashion (Behnke, 2017), mythology (Barthes, 2009) to, of course, verbal language. I think it is particularly telling, however, that the examples of interpellation Althusser provides us are always in the domain of the verbal, namely, hailing.

Interpellation in the example of hailing is clearly a concern of language precisely because it is about ensuring a signifier (the hail) connotes the specific signified (subject position). The example of verbal language is the most explicit variant of interpellation, namely that which is spoken between two people.[3] In his own example it is the policeman who hails (speaks) to the individual and the individual who recognises the hail as being for them, and this successfully connects in their own mind the signifier, the hail, with the signified, their respective subject position. In his paper Močnik describes interpellation in the context of verbal utterances and suggests that within an utterance there exists silent links which, although not explicit, exist in order to situate the receiver within that utterance. Consider the following utterance made by one person to another:

> Without Crimea, Ukraine probably has an even better chance to become a reformed democratic state. It will be more pro-European, since it lost so much pro-Russian population. (Močnik, 2014: 42)

On its own, the statement appears non-political. Despite this, within the utterance exists a '*different text*, present as a necessary absence in the first' (Althusser & Balibar, 1972: 28), a text which is absent from the explicit text or utterance but the existence of which is necessary for a subtle meaning to obtain on the part of the receiver. Močnik continues with the example:[4]

> Argument [1] Ukraine lost a lot of pro-Russian population.
>
> *Conclusion [1]* [therefore] *it will be less pro-Russian.*
>
> Argument [2] [as] *Ukraine will be less pro-Russian,*
>
> *Conclusion* [2] it will be more pro-European.
>
> *Argument [3] Ukraine will be more pro-European,*
>
> *Conclusion [3] it will be more democratic.*

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[3] Admittedly Althusser's materialism appears to preclude this understanding of ideology. Although at first glance this appears correct, it is clear when we read his published essay on ideology and the recently translated manuscripts (2014) to which that essay belongs, Althusser defines the 'material' to take the form of multiple different 'modalities' (ibid: 184). As a result, his notion that ideology only exists in the material does not necessarily foreclose the verbal as a material practice for interpellation.

[4] The text which is emphasised indicates the underlying links in the utterance, and that which is not emphasised pertains to the original explicit utterance.

*Argument [4]* [As] *Ukraine will be more democratic,*

Conclusion [4] it has a better chance to become a reformed democratic state. (Močnik, 2014: 42)

At the point of the explicit utterance there is no obvious indication as to what it may signify. The individual words cumulatively in the first text do not yield a specific politicised sign. As Močnik shows, however, within the text are underlying links which form a politicised utterance constituted by a dichotomy between Russian/European and non-democratic/ democratic. It is precisely the uptake of this underlying text within the utterance which constitutes the interpellative moment. Once the individual who receives the utterance is able to recognise the politicised underlying links behind the utterance, the individual becomes a form of subject (Močnik, 2014: 43-44). Admittedly, it would appear that Močnik has confused the interpellative scene with one whereby interpellation simply means understanding the implicit political message within an utterance, whereas for Althusser interpellation involves the very creation of subjects. Nonetheless, what Močnik has achieved here is an analysis of the hail within the interpellative scene. Močnik is explaining what it is within the hail of the policeman or God which creates the particular subject. Althusser's own example of the policeman does not after all explain in detail what it is about the hail which creates the particular subject whereas for Močnik it is the absent content of the message.

Močnik describes precisely how Althusser understands the hail, made clear in his example of Peter, whereby Peter is first named as 'Peter' by God, but in that naming exists a series of underlying links corresponding with what it means to be 'Peter' and a servant of God (Althusser, 2006: 120). Hall (1973) best situates interpellation within the context of language with the model of 'encoding' and 'decoding'. He claims that to decode a message in the way the author intended (if this is possible) would be too uptake the message as it was encoded by the author, or as he calls the '*dominant-hegemonic position*' (Hall, 1973: 515). In this case, the interpreter comes to link the signifier with what it signifiers, and as a result the communication of the sign obtains. Interpellation functions precisely because the receiver, whether they agree with the hail or not, has *always already* decoded the hail and continues to decode subsequent hails, by extension constantly being situated within the framework of meaning communicated by the authoritative agent.[5] In *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (Althusser, 2014), Althusser situates the hail as the communication of the dominant 'State Ideology', of particular meaning structures and the creation of the subject from within that ideology (Althusser, 2014: 82). In this sense Hall's theory of encoding and decoding adequately situates communication of the dominant (state) ideology through interpellation and the subsequent formation of subjects.

For Althusser, language is not about equal communication between author and receiver of the utterance, rather, language is a situation of disparity. That is to say Althusser clearly situates interpellation within a dominating framework between the authoritative author and the recipient whose subjectivity is located in their decoding the hail of that author. The entire interpellative model is only possible because shared language is not a condition of parity but a condition of dominance and authority of the author (God, the policeman, our parents). In other words, Althusser's depiction of interpellation demands we recognise that who we are is always the result of the language of the *other*, that the language we speak and through which we understand ourselves is not inherent to us, but rather the language of an authoritative agent. This directly conflicts with Barthes' notion of the 'death of the author' (Barthes, 1977) inasmuch as Barthes assumes meaning is derived from the interpreter and thereby misconceiving the interpreter's subject positionality as anywhere other than already in the

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[5] Indeed one can still disagree with a hail or a statement in general but in doing so one understands the conceptual framework of the speaker and is subsequently situated within that framework inasmuch as they navigate their position within it.

language of the author, here the authoritative agent. For Althusser, subjectivity is completely dependent on the language of an authoritative figure whose authority ensures the hails effectiveness in interpellating the subject. Thus emerges the dominating relationship endemic within language according to the interpellative model of subject formation.

In this section I have explained Althusser's theory of interpellation, some of its primary characteristics and its manifestation in verbal language. Althusser explains that ideology creates subjects within certain power dynamics within language but also that there is no position outside the ideological. I shall now move on to explain how the above account of interpellation appears to contradict the idea of loneliness with respect to Herculine's experiences and suicide.


## 3. Herculine, Loneliness and Suicide

Herculine Barbin's memoirs were discovered by Foucault who subsequently uses the memoirs as an illustration for his already existing discursive framework of subjectivity (Foucault, 1980). His introduction, for example, is not so much an introduction into the contents of the memoirs but rather an attempt to position any subsequent reading of them through his own gaze. Nevertheless, for the first three quarters of the memoirs Herculine's experience can be adequately situated within an Althusserian framework.[6] Throughout her life Herculine is constantly interpellated by authoritative figures, from Mother Superior (Foucault, 1980: 7) to Monsieur de Saint-M (Foucault, 1980: 15) to her partner Sara (Foucault, 1980: 44-45). Herculine's social existence is always contingent upon a subordinate relationship with others. Roughly three-quarters through the memoirs Herculine meets a doctor, who again in interpellative fashion re-signifies her sex; she is no longer a woman but a man (Foucault, 1980: 78). This moment reiterates the claim that Herculine understands herself as the result of being situated within the language of the other, as she identifies herself with the wider signified meaning of what it is to be a man, which is latent within the doctor's utterance (to her mother, in her presence), 'you have lost a daughter… but you have found a son' (Foucault, 1980: 78). The problems pertaining to an Althusserian reading of her experiences develop after this event.

For the remainder of the memoirs the reader notices a remarkable change in Herculine. She is incredibly unhappy with her re-signification as a man and, after a scandal, is forced to leave all those prior connections she once had and move to urban Paris. She spends this final part of her memoirs trying desperately but failing to find suitable employment and fundamentally an authoritative agent to interpellate her. She writes: 'Oh! To live alone, always alone, in the midst of the crowd that surrounds me, without a word of love ever coming to gladden my soul, without a friendly hand reaching out to me! What a terrible, nameless punishment' (Foucault, 1980: 92). What she is experiencing, becoming clearer as those she loved cease to be in her life, is loneliness, a feeling of solitariness from others: '[c]an my isolation be more complete? Can my abandonment be more painful?' (Foucault, 1980: 103). From what the reader gathers, she is without companionship of the type which characterised the first three quarters of her memoirs. This does not appear to be a question of failing to decode the latent signified of subjectivity, but that it appears there is no hail in the first place from which to decode one's own subject positionality. Indeed her experience of loneliness does not present itself as remote or anomalous but rather is an example of what extreme loneliness can feel like for anyone who is uprooted in scandal and subsequently scorned by all: '[r]eality is crushing me, is pursuing me… Having returned to this Paris that I like because I am ignored here, will I have to lie in wait some evening for a fortunate man to pass by, who will do me the favour of insulting me,

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[6] I shall hereafter refer to Herculine as a woman when necessary.

while pointing me out to a policeman?' (Foucault, 1980: 104). So extreme is this loneliness that it precipitates in her suicide, the ultimate act against interpellation by foreclosing the possibility of any further interpellating relations: 'Oh, death! Death will truly be the hour of deliverance for me! Another wandering Jew, I await it as the end of the most frightful of all torments' (Foucault, 1980: 93), later remarking that '[d]eath is there, oblivion. There, without any doubt, the poor wretch, exiled from the world, shall at last find a homeland, brothers, friends. And there, too, shall the outlaw find a place' (Foucault, 1980: 103).

Given her experience of loneliness it is clear why this is an issue for Althusser. Recall in the first section the two characteristics Althusser gives to interpellation, namely that we are *always already* subjects and that there is nowhere outside of ideology. Herculine's experience of loneliness requires that we enquire as to the whereabouts of the authoritative subject who shall interpellate her. Without an authoritative subject we can further ask: who is it writing the manuscript if not Herculine Barbin, the male subject? Whose language is she using if not the language of others to write that very text and present an account of herself? The absence of such authoritative agent constitutes her experience of loneliness but ought not to be possible within an Althusserian account. Her loneliness would appear to indicate a point in her life which is beyond the interpellative moment of subjectivity.

In light of the two fundamental characteristics of interpellation discussed above, we have to suggest that during this period Herculine is still interpellated either by those previous authoritative agents which punctuated the earlier part of her memoirs or by others we are simply not aware of in the text. She is, after all, lonely within a crowd and by extension no such contradiction between her account and an Althusserian reading obtains. Even so we still need to ask the question: what exactly is loneliness within an Althusserian framework? What is it to *feel* an absence of companionship of the type Herculine felt if Herculine was in the language of others, if we concede that Herculine was still interpellated?

Finally, I want to briefly raise the issue of her suicide here. Herculine's suicide pays credence to the severity and existential threat this degree of loneliness yields. If, as Butler reminds us 'intelligible' social existence is the precondition for any existence at all (Butler, 1990: 22), her suicide demands we look at her prior experiences as indicative of a troubled social existence and whether this is also indicative of a problem with the interpellative model of subjectivity. We therefore have to understand what is happening within the interpellative model which precipitates her suicide. If she is not alone, what are we to make of the apparent absence of authoritative figures manifesting itself in the feeling of loneliness? To truly appreciate the experience of loneliness in Herculine's case we have to appreciate the difficulties it provides to Althusserian reading of those experiences.


## 4. Loneliness and Aphasia

What then is loneliness in interpellation? In this final section I shall situate the phenomenon of loneliness within an Althusserian framework by appealing to Roman Jakobson's understanding of aphasia, thereby reconciling the phenomenon of loneliness within an interpellative framework of subjectivity.

Aphasia is essentially a problem of language surrounding the capacity to speak or understand verbal utterances. Aphasia's relevance to me here is that what Jakobson describes *is* the archetypal interpellative relation, but it requires certain amendments to how we understand interpellation. In his paper he explains that there are two types of aphasia, one based on similarity the other on contiguity. Due to its relevance I shall only discuss the former.

Similarity aphasia here is the condition in which the individual is entirely dependent on the interlocutor in order to create coherent sentences. The individual who suffers aphasia of

similarity is entirely dependent on the context in order to produce words (Jakobson, 1956: 77-78). For example the individual would not be able to say the word 'knife' on its own except in the specific context to which that word belongs for example '*bread-knife, knife-and-fork*' (ibid: 79). The signifier *knife* signifies nothing for the individual who suffers this type of aphasia except when it is placed into a context by an interlocutor, thus the hyphen in the example above linking the signifier to a context provided for by the addresser. What Jakobson is saying is that this is fundamentally a problem of metaphor (Jakobson, 1956: 90), whereby the individual is incapable of allowing the word to signify anything without the context given to them. Furthermore, we should recognise that aphasia occurs at degrees of satisfaction inasmuch as the addressee is dependent on the addresser and how often that dependence is satisfied. While constant interaction (and satisfaction) with others will allow for coherent speech, too little exposure to the other's language will result in the inability of the sufferer to speak beyond mere generalities like that of 'thing' or 'piece', rather than using specific nouns (Jakobson, 1956: 78). Falling short of ever being mute, the capacity to speak fluctuates in accordance to the degree to which one is engaged in the language of others.

Aphasia is the archetypal interpellative model rather than a speech pathology, indicating different degrees of subjectivity in accordance to difference degrees of dependence satisfaction. The sufferer can only articulate sentences when they are structured in a metonymic way by an addresser (Jakobson, 1956: 91). That is to say that the sufferer is only able to speak when in the language of others from which a context for conversation is derived. In the same way subjectivity which equally implicates the capacity to speak is contingent on the language of others and without them the individual is without signified concepts of the self. Similarity aphasia is therefore not a speech pathology but rather indicates the asymmetrical relationship between the speaking subject and the interlocutor/authoritative agent whose language provides the context and signified concepts of the self, whilst at the same time invoking a notion of degrees of satisfaction once the ability to speak has been obtained.

Drawing on Jakobson's focus on the degrees of dependence satisfaction by the sufferer of aphasia and their capacity to talk, we can see that subjectivity, when it obtains, obtains by degrees. To be or not to be a subject is, for Althusser, zero-sum: one either exists as a subject or they do not exist at all; however, there is nothing within his writings which precludes the notion of degrees of subjectivity once that subject exists. Therefore, much like the sufferer of aphasia, once subjectivity is said to exist, it exists in degrees of stability. The individual's subject positionality is continuously affirmed by perpetual hails which are decoded by the individual in order to grasp their signified latent content. We are continuously named and hailed in the language of the other and understand ourselves in that language, however much, like the sufferer of similarity aphasia, satisfaction of this dependence fluctuates. Subjectivity in total is never in question, much like the similarity aphasia sufferer is never mute, but like the sufferer who is eventually rendered speaking in mere generalities, ones subjectivity can be drawn perilously close to meaninglessness. Thus, subjectivity covers a broad continuum which I would like to describe here as 'strong' and 'weak' interpellation. In both cases interpellation occurs, the subject has been hailed and is in the language of the other. What varies is the degree to which the prolonged absence of an authoritative agent starts bringing into question the stability of the signifier-signified link, the degree to which their absence starts breaking that connection and the subject formed begins to loosen from the language of the other. This then causes instability in the signifier-signified, instability in the subject positionality itself.[7]

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[7] One might wish to ask where ideological struggle features here inasmuch as conflicting interpellations may yield instability in the subject. This is absolutely possible and is partly the preoccupation of Morley (1995); however, as it is clear now, the instability I am concerned with is that produced by the perceived absence of the hail in the first place.

Bringing this back now to the experience of Herculine and the loneliness she felt, we can see that loneliness in interpellation is important and moreover pertains to 'weak' interpellation. Loneliness does not point to a domain beyond interpellation or subjectivity but rather indicates a question of beginning to doubt oneself as the constitutive relations between subject and authoritative agent begins to wane. Herculine is still interpellated, the language of the other still resonates within her, but the prolonged absence begins to fracture that resonation as the link between signifier and signified is drawn into question, a possibility Althusser himself never proposed but certainly does not foreclose. Loneliness pertains to an unstable subject and the severity of that loneliness further pertains to the reduction of that subject closer to the meaningless floating signifier, similar to the 'thing' and 'piece' we witnessed with the sufferer of aphasia. Herculine's loneliness is very much a question of unstable subjectivity as she sought desperately to find someone who could further substantiate her subjectivity. To that end her suicide is the product of a failure to concretely re-signify the self in the language of the other, to quell her loneliness. The feeling of an absent authoritative figure that Herculine experiences is therefore not a contradiction for Althusser, but rather signifies the experience of 'weak' interpellation.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, my paper has both explained loneliness within an Althusserian theory and explained how Althusser's theory of interpellation can be understood to refer to particular power dynamics within language and the dependence of subjectivity as corresponding to those dynamics. Furthermore this was not an attempt at Althusserian apologetics, but flushing out certain problems within Althusserian thought. Only by fully recognising how interpellation is a question of subjectivity in language, and by appealing to Jakobson's theory of similarity aphasia can one situate Herculine's experience of loneliness within Althusserian thought. Herculine's feeling of loneliness and eventual suicide do not point to a violation of Althusser's theory of interpellation but rather points to 'weak interpellation' which Jakobson helps provide.

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**Bio**

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