Research question:

How does Jonathan Safran Foer use silence and omission in his metafictional novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* to deepen his readers’ understanding of the relationship between language and identity?

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Session: November 2017

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Word count: 3987
Abstract

Foer’s novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, is a representation of the post 9-11 condition; a movement towards the ineffable in expressing traumatic experiences. This investigation focuses on Foer’s comprehensive treatment of the relationship between language and identity. Criticised as being convoluted, some believe Foer’s originality and deeply imaginative representation of suffering to be weakened by his hyperactive, ‘loud’ narrative style; too overwhelming to facilitate his reader’s understanding. I argue the contrary: Foer utilises significant silences and omissions throughout his novel; the effects are magnified by the intense anxiety, which his three narrators often write, providing the reader with opportunity to reflect on the nature of each narrator’s identity crises. Thus, my research question is: How does Jonathan Safran Foer use silence and omission in his metafictional novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* to deepen his readers’ understanding of the relationship between language and identity?

Analysis has been conducted with regards to the respective journeys of Foer’s three narrators, interrogating their identity crises and the nature of their use of language to attempt to overcome their traumas. My primary source has been the text itself. However, I have consulted secondary sources on language and identity to support particular interpretations.

This essay explains how Foer’s use of silence and omission enlightens his reader of the abilities and limitations of language in reconstructing identity. Expression may be used to assert oneself or to successfully unburden oneself of traumatic experiences, thus facilitating the grieving process. However, loneliness can render language ineffective, imprisoning an individual in their own consciousness. Foer ultimately leaves the reader pondering the ways in which one’s expression relates to their identity while exploring the wider role of love and family, in presenting three narrators whose degradation or repair of social identity renders them either lost or liberated.

297 words
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I. **Introduction**

How can we know who we are? How can we affirm this knowledge and efficiently communicate it to others, so that we may feel a valued, connected member of society? Language is, most basically, the means of communication that makes us human; the means by which we know ourselves and know others. However, what are the consequences when our language fails us? How does one progress when language is lost; when the expression of something and the identities attached to it appear impossible, particularly in the case of severe trauma?

These questions developed from observations I made in Québec city in July 2016. Being there to learn French, I became intrigued by more than the language itself, perplexed by all it represented for the Québécois. In Québec, surrounded by English-speaking places, I wondered: why does this language survive and remain inextricably linked to the identities of the Québécois? Research informed me that the French language had a four-hundred-year struggle for recognition within Québec, and in its reconquest in the *Quiet Revolution* of the 1960s, it became the “fundamental constituent of identity” and the “principal value of modern Québec” (Thériault, 2008).

I wondered what the universal implications of this were for language and its relationship to identity. I observed that our language reflects who we are and where we belong. Indeed, “language determines the specific identity of a people. It defines their culture. Their sensibility, their perception of the world” (Sen, 1997, p. 12). As individuals, “under the weight of a new language”, our “whole set of...ideas we have about ourselves...may change or simply collapse” (Kallifatides, 1993, p. 113). Extending this knowledge, I wanted to investigate the significance of language’s limits in this relationship; what does silence signify? What are the consequences of the loss of language?
Jonathan Safran Foer explores this question throughout his novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Foer, 2005). The text, an epistolary narrative, is suggestively a copy of the scrapbook of the nine-year-old boy, Oskar Schell, who describes his burdensome journey towards recovery following his father’s death on 9/11. Additionally, Oskar’s grandparents, displaced victims of the 1945 Dresden bombings, also narrate their traumatic journeys in first person, providing the reader with parallels to Oskar’s own identity crisis.

Foer’s novel has been widely discussed as a “representation of the post-9/11 condition” (Bryan, 2015), and an attempt to move towards the “ineffable” (Safer, 2006) in expressing traumatic experiences. Mixed critical reception has seen some praising its “imaginative…engagement of suffering” (Saal, 2011), and others indicating that “a little more silence … fewer messages…might let Foer’s…good will resonate all the louder” (Updike, 2005). I agree, fully aware of the irony of investigating silence in a novel whose title announces its volume. However, I argue that Foer’s hyperactive and loud narrative style serves as a comparative tool to further highlight his hidden messages.

Foer’s polylogic narrative, consisting of three narrators, offers a comprehensive engagement of the role of language in reconstructing one’s identity following traumatic experiences. Through Foer’s attention to silence and omission, the reader becomes convinced of language’s abilities to liberate and imprison, its bearing on personal and social identity, and the predication of recovery through the support of others. This engagement will be explored through the following research question: **How does Jonathan Safran Foer use silence and omission in his metafictional novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* to deepen his readers’ understanding of the relationship between language and identity?**
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Analysis will explicate each narrator’s attempts to use expression to recover from their trauma. Given the parallels between Oskar and his grandparents, he will be examined both at the beginning and conclusion of his journey.
II. Anyway.

The novel consists of seventeen chapters, nine told through the central first person narrator, Oskar Schell. The reader receives segments of each of the three narrator’s journeys sequentially in a repetitive pattern, where Oskar’s chapters are connected by either a chapter of his Grandfather or Grandmother’s narration. While his Grandparents’ journeys cover significant time and space, Oskar’s lasts only eight months. Like his Grandmother, he learns to accept his loss, and value his remaining family. Oskar’s scrapbook “Stuff That Happened to Me” (Foer, p. 52), includes pictures interspersed throughout the text, accompanying the events that occur. Being a metafictional novel, these images suggest to the reader that the novel itself is a copy of this scrapbook. Furthermore, the inclusion of his grandparents’ letters suggests that they have become things that have “happened to” Oskar; the traumatic paths of his grandparents have informed and supported him on his own journey, as he learns to unburden himself by repairing his social identity, so that he may begin to reconstruct his personal identity.

This identity is, at first, heavily fragmented; a consequence of his father’s death. Opening the novel with a plethora of unrelated information, Foer establishes this narrator as hyperactive, anxious, and, while precocious, naïve. In paragraphs of extended, fast-paced sentences, Oskar oscillates between a variety of fleeting, yet emotionally encumbered thoughts. Going from longing to hear his “father’s voice” through his “teakettle” to asserting another “good thing”: the absurd image of his “anus” being “[trained] to talk” (p. 1), Foer juxtaposes tones of solemnity and immaturity. Oskar’s distinction of what he perceives as “good” alludes to his shattered emotional wellbeing which leads him to express his thoughts as quickly as they come to him. He denotes profusely “[what he] love[s]” and “[what he] know[s]” and what he “would” do, even quoting his anus’ joke “wasn’t me!” in French, “*c’est n’étais pas moi*”, because doing so serves to remind himself of who
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He is and what he is capable of doing (p. 1). The reader observes that language is Oskar’s means for asserting his identity, and, in his emotionally traumatised state, these affirmations are his means of survival.

Oskar’s silences then reveal the inadequacy of this sole means of survival in facilitating recovery. Through a single-worded paragraph, “Anyway.” (p. 2), Foer alludes to the cause of Oskar’s grief as well as the limits of language in expressing it, despite his considerable proficiency with written expression. This adverb, punctuated by a period, halts Oskar’s otherwise unrelenting pace to create an immense implied silence. Oskar, wanting to “pass over” these thoughts and “change the subject”, diverts his attention from what brings him the greatest anguish (Oxford University Press, 2010). Pondering how humans “don’t have their own wings” for “so many times when [they] need to make a quick escape”, he presents one of his many ludicrous inventions to his reader: “what about a birdseed shirt?” (Foer, p. 2). This shirt pre-empts the flip-book of a rising body at the conclusion of the novel; had Oskar’s father been wearing one, he would have been saved. Oskar only admits its purpose a page later, as he imagines “everyone [being] safe, even if [they] left their birdseed shirt at home” (p. 3). Foer juxtaposes inherently ‘loud’ narration with total silence, silence resulting from the pain Oskar endures reimagining his father’s death. Additionally, as is explored throughout the novel, Oskar lacks knowledge of the nature of his father’s death and the words to express the trauma he has experienced. In the context of an otherwise overly forthright narrator, Foer uses Oskar’s silence to convey his struggle with the limits of language and the limitations of his own understanding regarding his trauma. Accompanying this struggle is an anxious boy whose fragmented identity takes the entire novel to heal.

Furthermore, Foer asserts that Oskar’s adversity in overcoming his loss is not solely the result of the failure of language to express traumatic experiences, foregrounding that which will come to
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relieve Oskar’s internal conflict. Language is not only a means to our identity but also a means by which we give ourselves to others. Oskar’s written expression, whilst prodigious, lacks trust to allow others to recognise his experiences, holding no real value. Oskar distances himself from his mother, becoming socially dysfunctional following his trauma. Attending his father’s funeral, Oskar proposes another invention, where life would be a walk through a limousine from birth to death, to which his limousine driver ponders “but…no one would ever meet anyone, right?” (p. 5). Oskar’s single-worded and rhetorical response, “So?” (p. 5), forms another implied silence which serves the opposite purpose to that previously discussed. Oskar has nothing to say, genuinely having no concern for his social identity; his silence is dismissive rather than divertive. This is reflected by Foer’s placement of this word at the end of a paragraph, surrounded by fast-paced sentences; Oskar sees this silence as insignificant. Foer alludes to the consequences of this disregard for social identity through typography and omission; when, ending his second chapter, Oskar conjugates the French verb, être (‘to be’), in the present tense. Done “so he wouldn’t have to think about things” (p. 74), these conjugations are, to Oskar, a basic action he completes to manage his anxiety and inner conflict, an affirmation of his continued existence. The typography alludes to the futility of this action, where the words fall down the page diagonally, culminating in the absence of the word which would affirm the social identity Oskar requires, ending with the subject, “nous” (‘we’), and omitting the conjugated verb, “sommes” (‘are’) (p. 74). Oskar cannot continue ‘to be’, to truly achieve fulfilment, without others to support him. Foer’s use of bilingualism further reinforces Oskar’s current ignorance, as this significant omission occurs in a tongue he does not truly understand. Foer asserts that the repairing of personal identity depends upon social identity. He effectively employs silence in Oskar’s opening chapters to inform readers of the nature of his struggle with language; an ineffective means of recovery in the absence of the comfort of others.
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**III. It’s Unspeakable, Write It!**

Becoming increasingly aware of Oskar’s social isolation and its inhibition of his recovery, the parallel of such a condition to his grandfather becomes apparent. Having experienced the 1945 Dresden bombings and lost his family, his love Anna and their unborn child, Grandfather’s identity is, like Oskar’s, shattered, and he is rendered mute. Grandfather, displaced to America, later encounters and marries Anna’s sister, before abandoning her to return to Dresden upon the news that she has fallen pregnant with Oskar’s father; another thing he is “afraid of losing” (p. 216). Despite his muteness, he narrates four highly detailed chapters; parts of letters addressed to Oskar’s father, titled “Why I’m Not Where You Are” (p. 16). As the unchanging nature of this title suggests, Grandfather is the novel’s most stagnant narrator, characterised by an unfathomable, unchanging need for written expression, presenting an endless, undelivered and, ultimately, incomprehensible message. Unable to unburden himself, he cannot redefine his identity; he is physically and psychologically distanced from his second “unborn child” (p. 16) and its new family; a divide, like his verbal silence, he fails to overcome.

Foer first depicts the psychological consequences associated with this muteness. Before he “lost everything” (p. 209), he was happy and purposeful, writing to Anna’s sister: “I want to be a sculptor, and I want to marry your sister. These are all my dreams.” (p. 80). These short, definite sentences have a confident, objective tone, expressing and asserting who Grandfather believes himself to be. Conversely, after his tragedy, his tone is solemn and emotional in dense prose of extended sentences, as he describes the “silence” that “overtook [him] like a cancer”; a “cancer of never letting go” (p. 18). Foer likens this condition to a deadly and draining disease through both simile and metaphor; the result of Grandfather’s abrupt exile from his former life and society to
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America with no means of return, leaving him “lonely, broken, and confused” (p. 28). Without language, Grandfather cannot share his losses with others; unable to reconstruct his identity.

To communicate, Grandfather resorts to short written phrases which reflect the inescapable nature of his predicament. Presented, each on their own page, as if the reader flips through the “pages of his life” (p. 17) as Grandfather would; these visual silences are the only reprieve from prose absent of paragraph breaks. A metafictional element, they form a disjointed, unintelligible narrative for the reader, reflecting the nature of Grandfather’s life. Foer’s contrast of silence and loudness, as with Oskar, portrays an immense inner conflict, yet contrastingly highlights his frustration at never being understood; his messages are never received. His life consists of the one-way conversation of his letters and the meaningless conversation of his notes, given without mention of the responses they illicit from others. Even with his wife, the only person who appears to understand him, he repeats “the same things over and over” (p. 81). Furthermore, this relationship is one of distrust, where he “never [admits] to who he [is]” (p. 81), consistently omitting his own name as well as that of his wife, leaving her unnamed for the reader. These omissions further reinforce his stagnancy; he is unable to affirm his personal identity because to do so would be to confront his loss. In Grandmother, he sees not an individual, but a shell of “Anna”, in whom he tries to “remake the girl he knew… years before” (p. 83). He writes hundreds of letters to his son, but unable to form trusting relationships with others. Thus, devoid of social identity, he never unburdens himself of all he “buried… inside [himself]” (p. 216).

The consequences of this inability are consolidated by the typography of Grandfather’s concluding chapter. Grandfather’s frustration at not being understood climaxes as he returns to New York after “40 years” (p. 233), two years after 9/11. He writes pages of numbers he typed into a phone upon calling Grandmother in an attempt to communicate with her with the letters they could
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represent. Only pages later, the weight of his expression becomes so great that his words overlap each other as he runs out of space on the page, creating an incomprehensible black mass. His story concludes by denying the reader its ending; its metafictional nature revealing the consequences of Grandfather's incessant isolation. Imprisoned in his own stream of consciousness until his thoughts overwhelm themselves, hundreds of letters have failed in conveying any significant message, the product of a guilt that only severed his connection to the family he needed. Grandfather’s unspoken advice to his wife, “it’s unspeakable, write it!” (p. 124), becomes ironic, endorsing an obsession that has proved restrictive rather than liberating. Foer exploits the reader’s frustration to encourage the realisation that language can be a burden itself and an impediment to recovery, unless one finds the courage to allow a two-way conversation to occur.
IV. My Feelings

In stark contrast, what proved a destructive obsession in her husband, becomes central to Grandmother’s recovery, accepting a new life where her husband could not; giving herself to others and unburdening herself through expression. Split into four chapters entitled, “My Feelings” (p. 75), she writes to Oskar a single letter recounting her turbulent journey, not to justify her own suffering, but in the hope that her lessons may assist her grandson in his recovery and remind him of the unequivocal importance of family. Unlike her husband, her unchanging title suggests an honest, direct connection to the grandson to whom she writes. She comes to accept importance of others in overcoming the inadequacy of language, having reconstructed herself through the family she began with her son.

Grandmother is also a displaced victim of the Dresden bombings and Foer urges the reader to ponder if her decision to abandon her native tongue for English, contributed to her success in accepting her loss when her husband could not. “An immigrant loses everything that makes a human being a social being...[creating] a tremendous need to restore yourself within the new language, while not knowing that…you will emerge a different person.” (Kallifatides, 1993, p. 119). Foer represents this process in Grandmother’s experience. Meeting Grandfather, the sole connection to her German social identity and former personal identity, they have “everything to say to each other but no means to say it” (Foer, p. 81). Their silence signifies the conflicting nature of their experience, finding no solace in this connection due to the American culture in which they now live. Grandmother later realises, as Grandfather requests “in German” that she “pose for him”, that they had been conversing “in English” the whole afternoon (p. 82). Grandmother’s momentary shift from poetic, deliberately arranged typography to prose, accentuates the temporary solace of one’s native language, the remnant of a life irretrievable from the moment of
their displacement. However, Grandmother accepts this relief is unsustainable, and “never uses German again” (p. 85). This adverb, “never”, conveys the resoluteness with which Grandmother forgoes that which she has lost. “Language…has its own identity” (Kallifatides, 1993, p. 117) around which we orientate ourselves. Speaking English allows Grandmother to begin anew, using language as an effective tool to reconstruct her identity.

This effectiveness is predicated upon understanding of language’s inadequacies. From the onset, like her husband does to his son, she has “so much to say” to Oskar, “[wanting] to start at the beginning” (Foer, p. 75). However, in the same paragraph, Grandmother asks: “But where is the beginning? And what is everything?” (p. 75). Unlike her husband, Grandmother understands that no amount of expression could hope to justify her suffering; language as a means of expression has its limits. The rhetorical nature of these questions both reinforces the depth of her understanding and creates a wistful tone which alludes to Grandmother’s knowledge of the restriction that endless, undelivered expression may provide, having witnessed the plight of her husband. In light of this, Foer embeds Grandmother’s prose with typographical ellipses. In contrast to her husband, Grandmother’s sentences are separated by significant spaces, and paragraph breaks are frequent; at times, even poetic. Accompanied by a measured tone and heavy punctuation, these typographical choices give Grandmother’s expression a quality of great care and deliberation. Following all she has suffered and learned, she has a specific message she intends to communicate. She approaches this message in her final chapter with largely unfilled pages and short sentences, concluding with “the point of everything [she] has been trying to tell [him]”: “It’s always necessary.” (p. 314). In typography and pace, this conclusion is the antithesis of Grandfather’s. Instead of writing with such haste that no message is delivered, Grandmother writes solemnly but purposefully: a symbol of her recovery. She writes not to justify her own suffering but in the hope of soothing her grandson’s own grief by bestowing upon him the difficult truths
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she has learned, further reinforcing Foer’s belief in the importance of others in recovery from trauma.

Grandfather’s narration is laced with a debilitating anxiety for trauma not being understood, an anxiety he counterproductively responds to through endless written expression. However, Grandmother’s development urges the reader to ponder if the reassurance of the delivery and appreciation of one’s message is more important than its comprehension. Before the conception of his child, which prompted Grandfather’s departure for Dresden, he gave his wife his “old typewriter” and “everything she’d need” for her “life story”, to provide a “way to relieve the burden” by allowing her to “express … rather than suffer” (p. 119). The past participle “thought” reveals that Grandfather believes this means of recovery ineffective, as Grandmother presents him “[Her] life”: “two thousand white pages” (p. 124) of silence. His revelation of the extent of his wife’s “crummy” eyesight, as he had “pulled the ribbon from the machine years earlier” (p. 124); it shatters him, and leaves the reader regarding blank pages upon which Grandmother’s story should have been written. Yet, Grandmother speaks “so proudly” (p. 124) of her book. As revealed through the adverb “so”, the simple belief that her life and all its misfortune has been recognised is enough to unburden her of her trauma and bring her joy. Unlike her husband, she believes she has expressed the “unspeakable” (p. 124), then put her trauma behind her due to the love of another. Foer’s silence is an effective subtle means to encourage his reader to comprehend the solace language may provide, yet also the value of trusting interpersonal relationships.
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V. A Simple Solution to an Impossible Problem

Grandfather, Grandmother and Oskar all passionately use language in an attempt to unburden themselves of their traumatic experiences. Grandfather fails in this endeavour due to his inability to place trust in others, remaining imprisoned in his consciousness. He remains devoid of social identity, whereas Grandmother restores hers through her new family. Oskar, too, achieves such restoration through the individuals he meets on his quest for “the lock” (p. 52) that would fit the key he found in his father’s room in the first chapter. With one clue, the name “Black”, he searches for eight months, sharing experiences with similarly named people throughout New York. Early in the novel, he presented his business “card” (p. 99) to Abbey Black: it comprised of a white square filled with an extensive list of all Oskar thought himself to be. In contrast, at the end of the novel, Oskar finds a card that Mr Black, a war correspondent who accompanies Oskar for six months, wrote for him: a square, blank but for three words: “Oskar Schell: son” (p. 281). This visual silence provides a rare moment of absolute clarity: Oskar may be many things, including a “Francophile and an “amateur entomologist” (p. 99), but Foer omits them because they facilitate Oskar’s anxiety. Instead, Oskar and the reader are reminded that he is a son, to the memory of a father and a living mother, who, the reader learns, has covertly supported Oskar throughout his journey. At the beginning of the novel, Foer associates Oskar’s highly talkative nature with a shattered, socially isolated identity. Here, like his Grandmother, Oskar is defined solely by his family, a definition derived from the social relationships he has formed. Early in the novel, language, a means of survival, was also a great impediment to Oskar. Through a restoration of social identity, language becomes a productive tool for Oskar’s recovery; orientating him towards the support he requires rather than the internal conflict that permanently imprisoned his grandfather.
The emotional climax of the novel further cements this transition towards a productive use of language. Oskar forgoes the guilt the reader realises has tormented him since his father’s death: for “not picking up”, for remaining silent when his father called him minutes before his death. For Oskar, until he found the lock, “[he] didn’t love [his father] enough” (p. 251). The quest was one to “[get] closer to [his father]” (p. 52), yet also to atone for what he saw as his greatest failure. Oskar’s revelation at the conclusion of this quest, when he meets William Black, is that, this key found its way to Oskar’s father by happenstance, having belonged to William’s late father. Disheartened by this revelation, had he been “alone”, he “would have given himself the biggest bruise of his life” (p. 295). However, Oskar is now far from “alone”; the meaning of his quest lay not in its end-point but in its journey, to those individuals he sympathised with along the way. He and William exchange grievances over their dead fathers, and Oskar finally breaks his greatest silence: “Do you forgive me? ... For not being able to tell anyone?” (p. 302) With this simple exchange, as is the title of this chapter, “A Simple Solution to an Impossible Problem” (p. 285), Oskar’s seemingly “Impossible Problem” of the unspeakable, the same one his Grandfather failed to overcome, is solved through the “simple”, honest sympathy of a near complete stranger.
VI. Conclusion

Foer employs silence and omission throughout his novel to deepen his readers’ understanding of the relationship between language and identity. Through his three narrators, he offers a dynamic portrayal of the role of language in overcoming traumatic experiences. Grandfather represents a stagnant individual whose efforts to express his losses only contribute to his imprisonment within the silenced, one-way conversation which constitutes his life. Grandmother, whilst encumbered by the immeasurable weight of her misfortune, rather represents an evolved individual whose willingness to trust others facilitates the effectiveness of language in liberating her from her trauma. This willingness eventuates in Oskar, regaining his social identity to obtain a stronger sense of self by the end of the novel in surmounting his “unspeakable” silence through the love of others.

Silence and omission are the subtle means by which Foer is able to position his readers to ponder the intricacies of this relationship. I am better informed of such nuances and have learned to appreciate the value of silence as a literary device. Reflecting the process of conversation in tragic circumstances, silences and omissions compel the reader to actively interrogate inferences, profoundly engage with characters, and consider the impact of language’s limits on their own lives.
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**VII. References**


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