

# Identity and Language in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*

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**Abstract**—*Zero K*, as a half-scientific and half-realistic novel, reflects manifold aspects in contemporary American and world life, in which the problem of identity and language is more striking. This paper investigates the relationship of language and identity by the sense of loss as an outsider of community, the sense of confusion as an unconscious wanderer, and the reconstruction of order as a namer. Don DeLillo has the intention to explore and inject an organic relationship between language and identity by means of humanist language.

**Keywords**—identity; language; organic relationship; humanist language

## I. INTRODUCTION

Name is a significant subject to discuss in novels by Don DeLillo who always expresses a strong preference for naming the surroundings and looking for the meaning of language in the previous works, such as *Underworld*, in which Father Paulus has Nick Shay named the parts of his boots and *The Names*, where Owen and James are interested in the letters of the cult members, and *White Noise*, in which many brand and commodity names appears in daily life. The presence of names in DeLillo's novels is more frequent than other writer's, which is also fully displayed in *Zero K*.

As a frequent word in DeLillo's novels, the implied meaning of name is worthy of studying. As this paper is an investigation of the relationship between language and identity behind name, it follows the attitudes towards language by DeLillo. In a 1982 interview conducted by Thomas LeClair, DeLillo mentions "it's possible for a writer to shape himself as a human being through the language he uses. This is mysterious and subjective territory." (DePietro 7). For DeLillo, language is brimming with wonder and mystery which relates to the identity and construction of the self rather than only a simple collection of letters, which intrigues him to dig out the essence of language. As the critic Mary K. Holland claims in this essay "Dead Souls Babbling: Language, Loss, and Community in *The Names* and *White Noise*" from *Succeeding Postmodernism* that "These novels are warnings of what we lose when we lose access to or belief in a language that can connect us to the real world" (51) in which characters explore the implication of language, Jeffrey in *Zero K* experiences confusion about the loss of connection between symbols and things and constructs the relationship with the world by naming as well. Since the notion of signified and signifier was put forward by Ferdinand de Saussure, language becomes the heated topic in the academic area. Then, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Martin Heidegger begin to deconstruct the absolute

relationship of things and symbols in the fictional world created by language, which mostly influences the postmodern writers. Different from the Heidegger's assertion of anti-humanity of language that "is neither expression nor an activity of man" (194), DeLillo still insists that language constructs the human's identity as same as the saying "language is the calling into being of both human and world" (26) by Holland in *Succeeding Postmodernism*. As this paper unfolds, DeLillo's investment in the relationship between language and identity becomes obvious in the process of naming, which is divided into three parts: the sense of loss as an outsider, the confusion as an unconscious wanderer and Jeffrey's construction of the order as a namer, by which a humanist language world is set up.

## II. THE SENSE OF LOSS AS AN OUTSIDER

As a new novel with surreal hues by DeLillo gets attention in 2016, *Zero K* depicts Jeffrey's confusion and consideration about life when his father Ross Lockhart and step-mother Artis Martineau goes on the process of cryonic suspension in the project of *Convergence*, which creates a fictional world people eager to enter into where Jeffrey endlessly looks for means to establish the identity-system in his own words. The change of places is the process of seeking identity by Jeffrey. One of reasons of Jeffrey looking for identity mainly comes from the loss by his father Ross.

As *Gatsby* by Fitzgerald in the novel *The Great Gatsby* changes his name from James "Jimmy" Gatz who is ambitious for creating new wealthy identity to wipe out the ghastly past and pursues his American dream, Ross Lockhart, a more robust fake name changing from Nicholas Satterswaite, brings Jeffrey's father "closer to self-realization" (81) and achieves the successful enterprise. Different from Ross who gets the fame and sense of success from the invented name, Jeffrey lacks of sense of belonging from this fake name that "was wrong for him and excluded him" (83) and cultivates a feeling of alienation and desperation which excludes him. As Charles Taylor claims that "Language originally comes to us from other, from a community" (237), language weaves a web connecting people together in a speech community where someone can identify who he or she is. The invented name cuts off Jeffrey's relationship with the family and the origin or ancestry of the community he belongs to, which leads him to explore the genealogy of Satterswaite, "to locate the people and places embedded in the name" (83). It is the family history and culture implied in the family name that attracts Jeffrey to wedge himself in and locate his place in the

community and the world, not as a wanderer or drifter in the broken world.

The alienation between father and son is not only caused by the fake name, but also results from the different language community. Since God creates different language communities to separate people for fear that they are united to one to fight against his divinity, people has a deep affinity with members of their own group. As Sharon and Caroline mentions, “language is performed, or constructed if you will, in particular language interactions.” (10). that’s to say, one group is distinguished from others by a particular language where people feel estranged in accompany with the variation of language. When Jeffrey sees his father on TV who speaks French, he feels amazed and questions that “Was I sure that this man was my father?” (14), French gives Ross another successful and international identity which Ross longs for, which is also a means to get other groups’ approval to win the business, while Jeffrey doubts the truth and experiences the strangeness in that he cannot find the original identity of father and the familiar things.

In another triangle relationship among Jeffrey, Emma and Stak, Stak also gets the feeling of loneliness and abandonment in American community which is not his birthplace. So, place-names of the map reminds him of “strong personal recollections of abandonment” (187) and he is also eager to have a conversion with native speakers where Jeffrey wishes the taxi driver to “have a Ukrainian name and accent to speak with Stak” (181) to fill the void of life and closely link with others to establish his unique identity. In the final part of this novel, Stak still determines to return to his birthplace to find the sense of belonging, no matter how dangerous the place is.

At the same time, Convergence convinces people to come there by creating a language unique to this special project which invents a supernatural scientific language in the future to enables people to “express things we can’t express now, see things we can’t see now...that unite us, broaden every possibility” (33), which is like one language before the fall of Babel. This invention of the supernatural language is an exploration of the possibility of one language community by Don DeLillo who aims to get rid of the feeling of loss and confusion. There is no doubt that this idea is hard to achieve in that people “lose their names in a number of ways” (32), which further deconstructs the identity of people collecting in Convergence and arises a more serious confusion.

In the world created by language in the eye of postmodernists, people experience the loss and rift with the real world, but they have to locate themselves by means of language in a speech community. Jeffrey and Stak as outsiders who lack of the information and culture of the supposedly familiar things need to establish their identity by naming or speaking the native languages. As DeLillo says in Zero K that “Once you know the local names and you spell them, you’ll feel less detached” (29) by words of Ross, the so-called sense of belonging by names is the affirmation of the identity in the world, which closes the distance and establish a relationship with another culture or history.

### III. THE CONFUSION AS A CONSCIOUS WANDERER

As Jeffrey cannot find his identity in the invented name, Artis expresses the confusion and uncertainty of her existence as well, which is displayed in an inner monologue in the middle part in Zero K. She questions endlessly “am I who I was” (157) and gradually realizes that “I am made of words” (158). Given that two voices appear in her body, she isn’t sure of her original self that is still her or another man, which induces the ambiguity of her identity and existence.

Language is a non-referential system that “never connects signifiers to the concepts they signify, let alone the natural thing they seem to reference.” (Mullins 105), which collapses the absolute relationship between signified and signifier. More exactly, structuralists mention that language is non-referential in that it has no reference to things, but has referential meaning to concepts, while deconstruction claims that they even have no reference to concepts. And the same argument also appears in Heidegger’s essay, “Man speaks, then, but it is because the symbol has made him a man.” (65), which intrigues man to doubt the authenticity of the physical world and have another view about language. In the postmodern world, the signifier gradually dominates the world and detaches from the thing, that’s to say, the world is constructed by words instead of things, which also obliterates the signification of the subject.

This detachment disturbs Artis’ identity about herself and arises the doubts of the future world. When she is frozen in Convergence, she becomes the separate thing and feels two voices in her body, the first person and third person joining together (160) in which she cannot decide whether still belongs to the original body. Even if she still exists as a pure consciousness, she only feels the present instead of having the notion of the location and uniqueness from others, which arises a problem that she can represent everything and others can replace for her. Can anything be in itself significant? This kind of no-referential or all-referential language is hard to stand for something, which only causes meaninglessness and the alienation and confusion of the subject, which expels the clear identification of the self.

The same confusion and doubt of Artis pervade everyone in Convergence who forgets names and loses their own uniqueness. As Michael Lewis mentions the idea, “every individual is defined in its individuality by its difference from all of the other signifiers in the same system of reference.” (24) By Lacan and Derrida claims that one of characteristics of language is “the meaning is the result of difference by which we distinguish one signifier from another” (Tyson 253), the difference of signifiers is an inevitable and essential way for getting meaning in the postmodern world. Everyone gets their own identity by the uniqueness and difference and locates themselves in comparison with others so as to attain their own meaningful life.

But people in Zero K gradually lose their names and know nothing, which creates a depressing and gloomy world where new language is self-referring and refers no things, which induces Jeffrey to question and warn his father that “you can forget your name in this place” (31) and tries to

warn his father to remember his mother's name that relates to the reality and the past. In this condition where no windows exist and all the doors and halls are same, people exist as supernatural persons who have no disparity, which causes the detachment and indifference as "subjects, submissive and unstimulating" (93) instead of the satisfaction, where the expectation of creating a new one to get rid of the previous one finally proves an illusion, finally brings about a larger suspect. When Jeffrey meets a man in *Convergence*, he was asked about the same question twice that "who are you" (93). People who are supposed to accept a more advanced and pure language suffer from more doubts about identity instead of the sense of belonging, trustworthiness and positive attitudes about the future world which DeLillo takes a good interest in. DeLillo once expressed his expectation about this scientific language, which is found in the conversation with Thomas LeClair that "science is a source of new names, new connections between people and the world." (DePietro 9). The question about the pure language creating a new world is raised after what Jeffrey sees and thinks in *Convergence* who is eager to achieve the continuance of identity beyond death where language maybe cause another cycle of identity crisis.

Just as Emile Benveniste mentions, language enables the speaker "to express the feeling he has of his irreducible subjectivity" through the "unique and mobile sign, I" (220), people in *Convergence* are depersonalized as models or separate parts of bodies kept in the pod through the technology of Cryonic suspension where they are not able to speak their voice as an object losing the language, which is also suitable for human beings in the film without voice to express the emotion and they are reduced into images without meaning. Of course, there is another instance like Artis who has the voice instead of a body. But this pure consciousness without physical body loses the meaning of existence, further inducing the confusion of identity. The separation of signified and signifier produces a voracious identity-eating system where people experience the loneliness, meaninglessness, confusion, and desperation. On this condition Jeffrey explores different ways to locate himself and prove the existence, choosing to dwell in the embodied and webbed reality instead of staying in the fictional world as a counterweight to trans-humanist ideals.

#### IV. THE PURSUIT OF ORDER AS A NAMER

One way of Jeffrey's exploration of identity is to locate himself and connect with others by naming the surroundings in *Convergence*, the fictional world. For Taylor, "Human beings are above all language animals and our sense of self is inherently and fundamentally tied with language." (281-302). Language is still a possible way to indentify and prove the existence of human beings. It is by language that Jeffrey aims to set up a logical and ordered world where everything has its own rule and position to look for meaning.

Jeffrey's continuous behavior to name others, the so-called language game played by DeLillo, is to give meanings to things he sees to make sure of his presence, which is based on the outlook of language in the postmodern world in which language has no-referential function where he longs for

reaching the essence of language. In *Zero K*, there is a scene that Jeffrey endlessly defines the word fishwife which his father called his mother. He traces this source of the word from "shrewmouse" to "insectivorous" (25) and the implied meaning of these words, he still cannot find the exact meaning or clear notion of the word, which is the process from one signifier to another signifier and so on which is no concrete things to refer to where the consequent result of tracing the root is only the confusion and helplessness. As Lois Tyson describes the saying of the famous deconstructionist Derrida in *Critical Theory Today*: "every signifier consists of and produces more signifiers in a never-ending deferral, or postponement, of meaning" (252), language is a self-referential game that gives no meaning to the concrete entity, which Jeffrey's persistent action to defining word is ascribed to two reasons.

The first one is from the outside world about the confusion of the continuance of identity beyond death and the discontinuity of time that is called the "representational rupture" (21) in simplest terms by Ursula K. Heise in her *Chronoschisms: Time Narrative, and Postmodernism* that explains a split in alternative temporalities in the postmodern narrative, which creates a different sense of time that "in its discontinuity, its fragmentation into multiple temporal itineraries and its collision of incommensurable time scales" (6) fully displayed in *Zero K*. It is not only on the scenes in the halls creating multiple disasters in different time scales in *Convergence*, but most in the inner monologue of Artis imagined by Jeffrey. In the project claiming the identity beyond death, Artis expresses the suspect that "am I who I was" (157) to this timelessness where people lose their identity and cannot express themselves, even if they have a consciousness in the incommensurable time scale. In order to compensate the confusion and insecurity, Jeffrey only tries to name surroundings to relocate himself and make sure his existence to fight against the temporal rift in which everything lose meaning.

The other one is from the protagonist's inner mind in that Jeffrey's action to define words and give names accompanying with his growth, not only in *Convergence* with his father, which is closely combined with the unconsciousness to make up the void in psychology. Lois Tyson mentions the Imaginary Order, the Symbolic Order and the Real put forward by Lacan in the chapter of psychological criticism in *Critical Theory Today*. The Imaginary Order, "the Mirror Stage" (Tyson 27) swamped with images, is a world of fullness, completeness and satisfaction in which the child is united with the mother and develops a whole complete image of itself, while the child steps into the Symbolic Order, "for language is first and foremost a symbolic system of signification" (Tyson 28), they experience the sense of loss and lack and are eager to return to the previous union with mother in that the original world is collapsed and fragmented in the symbolic world that needs to be repaired. The unconsciousness always seeks to find the desire and fantasy of the original world by putting words or giving names into the subjects. The use of language is to know the world, recover the lost thing and "represent the concepts of these things" (Tyson 29). At the same time,

Jeffrey repeats this same unconscious action, “attempting to define a word for an object or even a concept” (55). The sense of insecurity in the symbolic life forces Jeffrey to continuously use the ways of language to reestablish his identity in the previously complete life getting rid of the meaninglessness of symbolic world.

To fight against the temporal rift and recover the Imaginary Order, the no-referential language is becoming the only way for Jeffrey to put himself in the right place who says in *Zero K* that “I tried to inject meaning, make the place coherent or at least locate myself within the place, to confirm my uneasy presence.” (10). Language is still an essential means to inject meaning and the existence, which also expresses DeLillo’s positive attitudes towards language, different from the view of the post-structuralist and postmodernist about it.

For poststructuralists and postmodernists, “language is the ground of being, then the world is infinite text, an infinite chain of signifiers always in play” (Tyson 257). They believe that people are multiple and fragmented growing in the society of all kinds of principles, desires, anxieties and beliefs, people in the postmodern world are hard to look for an identity that means one and singular self. DeLillo tends to find a way to recover the stable identity that structuralists establish the order in language in *Zero K*.

In comparison with Samuel Beckett despising the words who gives arbitrary and meaningless names to his characters and whose work, *Waiting for Godot*, including less and meaningless conversations, Don DeLillo still hopes that language can rescue the collapsed world and give his characters rights to seek for the meaning and mystery in his novels. As Peter Boxall suggests in his work, *Don DeLillo: The possibility of fiction*, DeLillo’s writing reflects “the depths of language, depths in which a kind of humanity is preserved, and a kind of spirituality, that is disavowed by poststructuralist thinking” (14) and Holland in *Succeeding Postmodernism* claims that DeLillo injects choices into the meaningless world by “structuring his novel around several conscious and radically differing reactions to this crisis of language and culture” (41), which also expresses the inspiration of new humanism in language. He has the inclination to establish the humanist language that can maintain a bond with the family and the society and return to the combination of the word and thing, which is the ideal Jeffrey pursues in which continues his self-discovery.

Seeing that language is changeable and infinite, the establishment of the stable identity needs its own rule or principle. As Heidrun Friese claims that “the words and names of language, which are meant to fix meaning, can only follow its own rules.” (20). to establish the humanist language needs a unique system belonging to oneself. Jeffrey’s continuous behaviors of naming and defining surroundings aim to imprint and connect himself or his characteristics with something in his own rule, further making life meaningful. He denies others to tell their names and injects themselves his own definition in order to integrate and identify himself in the whole circumstance. The organic relationship with the surroundings or in life needs

the help of language. When he engages in the act of eating, he “cannot chew and swallow without thinking of chew and swallow.” (89), which is the organic relation that Jeffrey eager to establish.

DeLillo warns us in this novel to use the orderly view of language and human experience like structuralists against postmodernists establishing an organic relationship with the world which creates a sense of belonging and gives access to achieve identity.

## V. CONCLUSION

*Zero K*, as a half-scientific and half-realistic novel, reflects manifold aspects in contemporary American and world life. The subject of identity and language is more striking in complicated problems reflecting in this novel. This paper investigates the relationship of language and identity and by the sense of loss as an outsider of community, the sense of confusion as an unconscious wanderer, and the reconstruction of order as a namer, which aims to solve the crisis. After experiencing the meaninglessness and emptiness of the broken postmodern world, Jeffrey eagers to gain strength and sense of belonging from language. Don DeLillo has the intention to explore and inject an organic relationship between language and identity by means of humanist language.

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