

**« Le noir et le rouge »:  
language marking, red ink, s/m and deeper  
meaning**

“One winter evening, when I was 13, I was set upon by a gang of boys, and the word ‘*Mark*’ was cut into my thigh with a razor blade.”

John Major<sup>1</sup>

Freud held that one indicator of the importance, if not of the meaning, of sleep was that we spend a lot of time — nearly one third of our lives — doing it. Whilst modern-languages teachers, and others, may not devote a third of their lives to marking, we certainly spend a deal of our waking time, usually of the less exhilarating sort, engaged in it. It can even occupy the odd bout of nightmarish sleep.

Marking often seeps across into home life, onto the late-night study desk or kitchen table, hence, perhaps, the dreams. Less mind-enhancing by far than the tutorial umpiring of student debate or textual analysis in class, language-marking — often considered a necessary chore (and, in universities, off-loaded with increasing frequency to part-time or postgraduate assistant teachers) — brings few career rewards to the marker, even in our Quality Assessment-conscious times. True, there is research gold in student mistakes, but even researchers into error analysis or language testing may have the actual marking done by others. After which, more loftily, they evaluate the data.

There can nonetheless be few, if any, educational establishments where marking is not considered to be, and used as, a fundamental pedagogical tool. Marking is part and parcel of teaching; to mark is, or should be, to teach. In education by correspondence it is a mainstay of the process. To what degree tutors and teachers (on university induction or on PGCE courses, for instance) are or are not trained for it is not the topical question I want to address here,<sup>2</sup> but rather, and briefly, the more speculative issue of the history and the psychology of marking, with some kite-flying thoughts on what the French half a century ago might have called *la psychanalyse de la correction*.

It is surprising to discover that marking, as most teachers now understand it, is not known (*black mark!*) to the *OED*, completed in 1928. In the relevant volume, produced around the turn of the century, no definition appropriate to modern teaching is given of either the verb *to mark* or the noun *marker*. Where the noun *mark* is concerned, under meaning 11 which is: ‘a sign affixed or impressed for distinction’, definition *g* gives ‘(a) *Good, bad mark*: a written character used by teachers, jailers, etc., in their registers as a symbol of an instance of good or bad conduct respectively; hence *fig.* a point noted or remembered to a person’s credit or discredit; (b) Originally, in schools, a vertical line placed opposite to a pupil’s name as a record of a correct answer in class or some other point of merit, his [*sic*] place in the class being determined by the number of marks which he [*sic*] obtains. Hence, the unit of the numerical award given by a teacher or examiner to the person whose comparative merit is to be ascertained’.<sup>3</sup> Volume II (1976) of the *Supplement* to the *OED* adds nothing further to these definitions.

The *OED*’s carcereal analogy jailer/teacher is grist to Foucault’s mill (and is evoked too in the dual meaning of the French *correction* and its adjective *correctionnel*). Noteworthy too is the fact that it seems to understand *mark* as an adjudication of the pupil as a person rather than of any (written) work produced

<sup>1</sup> John Major *The Autobiography* (HarperCollins, 1999) serialised *Sunday Times* 10 October. 1999 “News Review”: 2.

<sup>2</sup> Among institutions, rare one suspects, at which assessors are, to a degree, “trained” in marking are school examination boards. See the NEAB (former JMB & NEA) “Criteria for assessment” in its *Syllabuses for 1999* document and the detailed guidelines on error identification in the AQA (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance, former NEAB) *Mark Scheme GCE 1999 — French Advanced*:30–55.

<sup>3</sup> *OED Compact Ed.*, vol.1, A–O: 1727.

by him or her. It is true that the mark, in pre- and even early-twentieth-century days, could be physically on the person, as it was for prisoners sentenced to penal colonies. The « TF » branded on the shoulder of Balzac's Vautrin is the fearsome emblem and indelible proof of his past criminal behaviour and *travaux forcés*. In a schooling situation *mark* could and perhaps originally did mean a token worn by a pupil who had last committed a fault, before passing it to the next perpetrator. The earliest example given by the *OED*, from Miss Mitford's *My Village* series (1832) is coincidentally concerned with the learning of French: "French was the universal language of the house, and an English mark was passed among the young ladies, transferred from culprit to culprit as they were detected in the fact (of speaking English), and called for three times a day, when the unlucky damsel who happened to be in possession of the badge, (was) amerced in the sum of three pence... this order of demerit was an oval piece of wood, with 'English', in large capitals engraven on its front, suspended by a riband from the neck."<sup>4</sup> In the same way French Third Republic teachers in Brittany forced children who lapsed into Breton in class to wear a miniature clog round their necks for shame. Similar repressive signal systems obtained at the time in schools in other non-francophone areas of France, notably the Oc-speaking regions. In these contexts too, the mark was on the person.

In contemporary English pedagogic terminology, however, the verb to *mark* has an obvious hybridity which merits division. On the one hand it means to ascribe a numerical (less frequently an alphabetical) mark, as a proportion of an absolute, which, in the marker(s)'s view, represents the quality of the work, whether on its own or compared with work produced by others in response to the same set task. This meaning is represented in French by the verb *noter*, in German *benoten*. The absolute may vary in its attainability as say between mathematical/numerical tasks, where literally "full marks" are possible, and discursive/argumentational tasks where right/wrong distinctions may be more opaque, and where traditionally the absolute is held to be beyond reach, an A++ (+) being truly excellent but theoretically surpassable and not therefore equivalent to 100%. The convention for the absolute may also vary, 10, 20 or 100 for instance being preferred according to country, pupil age-group, or set task. Brussels has yet to legislate for European conformity on this, but one can surmise or fear that it may eventually do so.

On the other hand to "mark" a piece of work, and this can only apply to a written task, also means to annotate it, either marginally or in the text proper, with an error-signalling system (how variable, one wonders, in U.K. universities, is the semiology of target-language marking?), with or without corrections and with or without comments. The secondary error-signalling script will be applied by an instrument that makes for clear distinction — in pencil or ink-colour — between student-writing and marker-writing. French has a separate verb for this activity: *corriger*, German *korrigieren*. In the examination context of unreturned work, of less concern to the arguments of the present article, *noter* will take precedence over *corriger*. Corrective overwriting may subsequently be summarised in an accompanying graded mark, numerical or alphabetical, as defined previously. In assessed work of a textual, as opposed to numeric, nature the relationship between the overwriting and the grade awarded is an unstable one; it may fluctuate according to factors such as misjudgment, tiredness or (un)conscious bias on the marker's part.

Usually there is an obvious but curious inverse ratio between the two meanings; the more marks of the former sort, the better the piece of work; the more marks of the latter sort — markings on the page — the worse.

Banal as it may be, the overwriting itself is a fascinating scriptorial practice. In a languages-teaching context a process of superinscription is involved. A conscientiously-marked assignment in the target-language becomes a virtual palimpsest, the original text being partially dismissed and dominated by a secondary, colour-distinct, later one, which infiltrates and invalidates fragments of the former and prioritises itself. The altruism of the intention is coloured by a normative authoritarianism which brooks virtually no dispute over the precedence

<sup>4</sup> *OED*, *ibid*.

it takes. It is here that most modern linguists part company with the descriptive approach of their linguistic colleagues. A text is “submitted” and “corrected” according to an understanding, on the marker’s part, of what is regular French, i.e. the French language observant of certain “rules” or conventions in a certain context. Whilst the correction takes place in the absence of the submitting agent — written work is invariably marked at a decent distance from its author and mental pain is thus only indirectly inflicted — the potentiality for the pedagogical situation, albeit now one between marker and paper only, to be shadowed by residual subconscious drives, related to the primal mark-on-the-person model, is recognizable.

The sado-masochistic tensions that Sartrean existentialism would have at the heart of interpersonal relationships is a thought-provoking paradigm here.

In a masochistic context, so the argument might go, the linguistic persona of the marker is hurt by the grievous textual harm inflicted in the delinquent text on the marker’s fond understanding of inviolate French. The corrective ink underlining the damage would thus represent the strokes inflicted on the wounded marker, whose stigmata are transferred to the learner text in an appeal for the future mercy that would be improved performance on the part of the learner.

In a sadistic context, however, — and it is red ink, evocative of laceration, that is traditionally used to mark the body of the transgressive text — the marker’s chastising strokes draw, by an act of devious transference, the blood of the work marked. The moral-corporal ambiguity of the French word *correction* may be germane here. Perhaps red ink in the classroom is the permitted symbolic residue of banned corporal punishment. Certainly such ink is the teacher’s empowering prerogative, or even, interestingly and most recently, the know-all computer’s, which now underscores our spelling or grammar errors in jagged-edge red or green. And to what degree is it relevant that in recent decades the gender composition of the university modern-languages class sees, far more often than not (though a shift is beginning to take place) female authored-texts being submitted to male scrutiny, if not to male scopophilic appetite? Error appetite — hunger for mistakes to be made — may be difficult to imagine, except in error analysts (is there a *Fehlenfreude* akin to *Schadenfreude*?), but that there is a psychology behind the materiality of marking a body of text can be inferred from the fact that some tutors will choose to mark shorter pieces in red (or more politically correct green?) ink, but dissertations, theses, less aggressively, in softer pencil, with more respect for the considerable body of the text presented. Relevant here is the research by educationalists into gender-discriminating marking manners which is a burgeoning issue<sup>5</sup>.

Just as, in the USA, red became, the colour of debit-accounting - hence *in the red* — at what date did written language-work first begin to be, in the error-signalling sense, marked and when, conventionally, in red ink (is the green or purple ink user rarer and more eccentric?)? The silence of the *OED* might suggest that it was not until the twentieth century; yet it would be hard to believe that Latin prose or translations, for instance, were not so treated in nineteenth-century schools, public or other. I have seen French school dictations from the 1880s marked in pale blue crayon, but compositions from the 1920s in red ink. To *red-pencil* as a verb meaning ‘to mark as erroneous or unacceptable; to correct (a piece of written work)’ appears only in the 1981 third volume of the *Supplement to the OED* (Compact ed., vol. II: 935). Doubtless in any history of “marking” practice material factors must be considered, local availability and cost of *le support*, i.e. of paper and of ink of various sorts.

Unlike an author’s corrected proofs, themselves palimpsest-like (Proust being the inevitable exemplar), where it is self-emendation that is at work, and indeed unlike a text submitted to the blue pencil of a censor, the marked student piece

<sup>5</sup> Jane Sunderland, “Learner gender and language testing: any connections? — Preliminary explorations” *Language Testing Update* Issue 13 (1993):46–56, and “Gender and Language Testing” *Ibid.*, Issue 17 (1995): 24–35. Both articles consider testing, rather than marking as such; both contain extensive bibliographies.

will not itself achieve fair-copy status and appear in subsequent, correct form. The wounds of the scarred text will not heal over; red and black will continue to coexist on the page. It will be filed (or thrown?) away, an archival example of a more or less faulty construct, a textual vestige of transitory staff-student collaboration, whose educational purpose is to serve as a platform for a subsequent less erroneous composition, the learning-from-mistakes process, that is at the core of teaching, hopefully having taken place in between.

The fact, or at least the feeling, remains, as markers of continuous work assignments that “count” well know, that to mark is, more often than not, to hurt and it is this psychological factor that is one potential cause of grade inflation. Marking a text and, even more so, returning a marked text, in person, to a learner, particularly a learner one knows, is a situation where the sensitivities of both agents in the transaction are delicately engaged. The lower the numerical mark (the more marks on the page) — and perhaps the more adult the student — the more mutually hurtful the process.

Acquiring a second language may be seen as a liberation for the learner, the possibility of escape into a new domain and a different culture. He or she acquires a new voice. Abroad and in a different tongue it is even possible for the self to be reinvented. The acquiring, however, involves what used to be called — note the word — a *discipline*. The learner’s voice is subject to the control of conventions and “rules” as applied, in the name of the nation-state language, by the teacher. Foucault theory of control and Barthesian doxa are very much in play here. And, when the new voice speaks or materialises itself in a body of text, control mechanisms are applied in the shape of corrections and marks. There is, worryingly, more to marking than meets the eye. No doubt contemporary moves towards in-class marking or peer-marking, with their concomitant problems, demonstrate the sensitivity of the situation and are valid attempts to alleviate more traditional “authoritarian” marking postures. There is presumably some way to go though before it becomes politically incorrect for a tutor to signal a grammar mistake.

Ironically it is we teacher-markers ourselves who, latterly, quality-rated as we now are for teaching and for research — just as schools also are for results — have felt the pain and the stress of the marking process, have jibbed at the crude sums by which human personalities, skills, experience and creative effort are totalised and simplified in a number, a mark out of five or twenty-four. As the poet (almost) has it, recalling “that pencil blue” of the marker in *In Memoriam Examinatoris Cuiusdam*:<sup>6</sup>

“So let [us] rest till crack of doom / Of mortal tasks a-weary,  
And nothing write upon [our] tomb / Save B- (?)”

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<sup>6</sup> *Penguin Book of Comic and Curious Verse*: 131-32, which Stephen Noreiko kindly reminded me about.