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“ALL THAT HAS BECOME PART OF US NOW” BETWEEN MOTHER TONGUE AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Résumé Articulé en trois temps sur les concepts Lacaniens de Réel, Symbolique et Imaginaire, l'article dégage successivement, à travers des références aux travaux d'Andrée Tabouret-Keller et des exemples pris chez quelques écrivains majeurs du XX^e siècle confrontés au plurilinguisme, plusieurs notions capitales, notamment celles de contrainte, d'institution et d'identification, dont se constitue toute langue pour tout sujet.

Mots-Clés : langue maternelle, langue étrangère, Réel, Symbolique, Imaginaire

We all commonly use the expression “mother tongue” as though it could be taken for granted and as though its meaning were obvious. Its basis seems so solid that it is pointless to question it or even cast doubt on its “necessity”. And yet this necessity has the deceptiveness of the patently obvious.

Some scholarly research, especially that of Andrée Tabouret-Keller (2003, 21/ 2004, 277), has traced the historical roots of this expression back to its first occurrences in 12th century Church texts, where it is used to distinguish the vernacular from the scholarly languages. This research has brought to light the “metaphorical density” of the expression and has redefined it as a

“metaphoric crossroads” whose actualization depends on the historical and social contexts in which it is used.

Regardless of languages, era, and ideological and political discourses, the usages of the expression are based upon “very diverse representations” such as the flesh and blood mother, birth, blood, lineage, clan, foundation, orality, territory, community, people... Our perspective however is not to delimit the many usages of the expression but to put forward two propositions:

What is described as “mother” tongue does not correspond to any particular linguistic object, an object which derives its particularity from a “maternal” attribute, even though J. Lacan is reported to have said that the “mother tongue” is a “fantasy” elaborated by linguists and grammarians about the “dispersion” and “hybridation” of languages.

For each and every one of us, “there is” language, even if we should think this “there is”, as contemporary sociolinguistics (Canut, 2005; Gadet, 2006) invites us to do, against the background of linguistic multiplicity and heterogeneity or of permanent and indefinite fluctuation of “usages”. This “there is language” implies that there are for each one of us, for each subject, three dimensions inextricably knotted together and to language: the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary.

R for Real

The notion of “real” refers to the phonetic, vocal and corporal materiality of languages and to the “order of constraints” (Tabouret-Keller 1990, 11) that they impose on their speakers. “My voice comes out of my body”, writes Flaubert, “but my body is in my voice”. The vocal event is governed by a first order of constraint: the voice is materially rooted in the body, speech¹ is physical and at the same time it must submit to what Saussure (1968, 103) calls “the linear character of the signifier”, meaning that vocalicity forces speech to unfold along a “line”, i.e. all utterances occur in time and are perceived by the ear as a sequence.

Even before they are symbolic and semantic systems or universes, languages are modes of being and of corporal and vocal presence, heterogeneous to one another. With Saussure, linguistics has shed light on some minimal and constitutive properties of this “order of the real”, properties which also define natural languages: arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, double articulation of the units of language, their differential character and their “co-functionality” as a system.

¹ “Speech” translates the French word “parole” from the Saussurean triad: “langage, langue, parole”.

J.-Cl. Milner (2002, 15) clearly expresses our debt to what he calls "the structural journey" when he shows how, being completely at odds with the philosophical tradition, Saussure's notion of difference opens up a previously unheard-of way of thinking unity and identity, a unity cut through by multiplicities, no longer a unity strictly speaking but rather a network of intersecting multiple determinations.

Languages as "linguistic systems" represent a second order of constraints: they impose on the speaker their "systematic singularity", that is a number of forms, structures, syntactic constraints, morphological conventions. This is what Saussure called the "game of the forced card" (1968, 104): we may feel that we are free to choose but language forces us to go through its twists and turns, its signs, its forms, its structures.

To be confronted with the systematic singularity of a given language is to be confronted with constraints that we cannot imagine; these constraints determine an "impossibility", the impossibility to say something that would be outside the limits imposed by that singularity. It is with this "real" that linguistics and grammar are confronted in order to build a "representation" (Milner 1978, 113) of it, to bring out the "properties" which make its representation possible: regularities, constants, recurrences. The same properties which make language teachable but also the locus and basis of any transmission.

In *De Vulgari eloquentia*, Dante (1965, 568) describes the constitutive knotting of "grammar" and the "scholarly tradition":

It is the kind of thinking that moved the creators of grammatical art.. In fact, grammar is nothing else but a certain identity of language which is not altered by either time or place ... Thus they created it so that the fluctuations of language according to everyone's fancy would not prevent us from understanding philosophical texts and the tales of ancient gests.

S for Symbolic

According to psychoanalysis, subjectivity and language are "knotted" together mainly through the modality of institution; institution meaning that speech is, through language, the distinctive mode of existence of the human species. It is to this that the widely known neologism forged by Lacan, "parlêtres", refers.

Indeed life, in order to be human, has to go through a process of institution. Each subject is initiated into this process by a founding speech, an "originary" speech, which inscribes him/her in the order of generations, confers on him/her a name, a "symbolic place" (Tabouret-Keller 2000a, 59/ 2000b, 75) which integrates him/her in networks of kinship and alliance. Throughout life and its avatars we are always represented only by words, i.e. we only exist inasmuch as we speak, through the language we speak which provides us with

the terms and expressions which in turn represent us in our relations to other subjects and to ourselves; our very names and diverse identities come to life in this language and because of it. And thus we can say, quoting one of Lacan's jokes, that man is made up of signs more than he makes out.

The signifier is not only that which brings out what is not there; what is not there, the signifier does not refer to it, it generates it; but then what is not there at the origin itself is the subject. (Lacan, 1966b).

If the signifier generates the subject, if it is the "cause" of the subject, this means radically that the symbolic order, and language as "symbolic order", "organized system of symbols", are grounded neither in nature, nor "in the subject"; rather it is nature and the subject which are grounded in the symbolic order which, in its structure and its effects, eludes the subject. Here subjects are not only determined by signifiers which sustain the desire of their parents, but they "fall" from the relation to this embodied Other, to the Other as principle of institutionalization, as seat of the signifier, site of prohibition (*l'interdit*) and of the categories of kinship.

It follows that our relationship to language is not simply one of acquisition or appropriation, but one of institution, of "symbolic inscription". Our name is the first operation of this relationship; through being named we are counted as "one" and incised symbolically in a "system of places". The most radical form of this naming function is the inscription, the epitaph on the tombstone.

Tabouret-Keller quotes "That Mighty Sculptor, Time" by Marguerite Yourcenar (1983, 27) in which the narrator, Michelangelo, attests that through the mediation of a name transmission bears us and opens up life to us...to question its meaning:

I have seen many dead. My father, once he returned to his race, was no more than an anonymous Buonarrotti : he had laid down the burden of being himself; he faded in the humbleness of death until he was nothing but a name in a long series of men; his lineage did not end up in him but in myself, his successor, because the dead are nothing but the terms of a problem which each one of their survivors poses in turn.

Language and name make up our very being and part of its "substance" – what is left of human beings if they lose their name? What is left if they lose their language? – yet for all that language and name also have the contingency and the exteriority of a "choice" which does not depend on the subject. This could be called destiny.

Learning to speak, then, means acquiring the capacity to explore this destiny, to invest the symbolic place assigned to us at birth, to learn the rules of communal living and the values of our social universe. It also means learning

how to relate to others, to internalize the "laws of speech" and the categories of prohibition on which they are based.

Is there a rejection of these "laws of speech" in this day and age? Could what we call today "postmodernity" (Dufour, 2003) be described as the decline of the figures of the Other? Could this decline be read in the fact that today, in the name of free speech and the right to be different, no *jouissance* (enjoyment)² should be forbidden?

Freud and psychoanalysis constantly stress that prohibition structures the psyche (*psychisme*), and that there is harm caused by an education which does not set limits. Growing up, then, means that, from the symbolic place that is our lot, we must confront "attributes" and "adjectives" ascribed to us by family and educational discourses in order to question them and to distance ourselves from them, in other words to become mature and live as an adult.

In his book *The African*, J.M.G. Le Clezio (2004, 7) relates this initiatory journey:

Every human being results from a father and a mother. One cannot recognize them, not love them, even doubt them. But they are there, with their faces, attitudes, manners and manias, their illusions, hopes, the shape of their hands and of their toes, the colour of their eyes and their hair, the way they speak, their thoughts, and probably the age of their death; all that has been passed onto us.

The language known as "mother" tongue takes us in and institutes us but it is also the cradle of our identifications and the voice of the others imprinted on us. H. Michaux (1998, 663) would talk about "passages". Words and the speech within which they live are the "mainstay" of the identifications upon which is built subjectivity: words give root and consistency to the unconscious identifications which define us and make us who we are; "The unconscious", says Lacan (1966a, 830), "is a concept forged in the wake of what is at work in the making of a subject."

Our relationship to language, therefore, is of symbolic inscription and of identification (Tabouret-Keller 1989, 180). It is this double relation which learners of a foreign language lack, whatever their motivation. This language, at least for a certain period of time, is radically "foreign" to them because they cannot find their "place" in it; they can only be counted in it by "subtraction", doomed to radical solitude on the "territory of the other" and to "the enigma of arrival" (Naipaul, 1987).

² We follow S. Žižek's example here, keeping the French term *jouissance* which has no real equivalent in English, but giving the closest approximation of it between brackets. For a discussion of related psychoanalytic terms used here, i.e. *prohibition*, *psychel/psychism*, and *jouissance*, see [www.e.notes.com/sychoanalysis-encyclopedia/...](http://www.e.notes.com/sychoanalysis-encyclopedia/)

Undefined, indistinct and “out of lace”, learners of a foreign language know that in that language they are outside themselves, i.e. alienated. It is this alienation which confronts migrants or exiles. Thus they have to live in-between trying to conjugate, associate heterogeneous modes of meaning and language; their ordinary experience can only be one of uncertainty, misunderstanding and incomprehension; they are constantly confronted with a sense of loss, loss of geography – even if, as Bianciotti points out, geography is only the apparent, superficial form of exile – estrangement from their own language and loss of the feeling of continuity, permanence and stability that it normally gives them.

From the start, the other language presents itself to them as a threat because it exposes them to insecurity, to the breaking down of certainties and to a certain subjective precariousness because in it they can always lose, and be alienated from, their inner voice. When they speak in a foreign language, their first words can only be awkward: their speech is confused, it cannot open up freely, it is a kind of stammering because language fails them, it no longer provides them with a space in which to come forward and stand their ground. The foreign language remains foreign, i.e. outside and they feel powerless and frustrated because they are aware that they must submit what they mean to say to rules and operations they fail to understand, that they do not yet master fully.

Now they learn to know this new language, to know its signs³ and their function of designation and communication. When they speak their mother tongue, it also means that they are “spoken” by it, the mother tongue expresses and speaks in them and in spite of them – “the words about to come out know something about us that we don’t know about them” (Char 1983, 534) – so they *speak* their mother tongue whereas they can only *know* a foreign language and consequently they consider it spontaneously as a means of communication.

In the foreign language they learn to communicate, in the strictest sense of the word which is to transmit/receive a piece of information. It is this situation which makes them foreigners in the language of the host country. Whereas speaking a language and being spoken by it allows one’s speech to deploy all its powers of evocation, invention and differentiation, knowing a language condemns the subject to the restricted economy of message and information.

Without definition, place or distinction, they can only feel that in the foreign language they are in representation, that they play a part in it. Their first words are, at least for some time, subject to a visualization fantasy, they imagine that their speech is being watched by others: “*I feel naked when I speak*

³ According to the opposition between sign and signifier as defined by Lacan, the sign is “something to somebody”; “a signifier is what represents the subject to another signifier”, the subject being subordinated to the signifier and to his speech whose effects of meaning escape him. (See Lacan 2007, 694).

English, I am ashamed". Speaking in a foreign language can foster inhibition, but it can also be a source of pleasure (Prieur 1987, 57) and play, pleasure "to be different", to be "elsewhere", which gives language learning its intrinsically theatrical dimension.

In the foreign language, speech has an "as if", make-believe dimension, it is not an exercise in responsibility, it does not really involve the subject, neither when facing the other nor where his/her own speech is concerned. In the so-called mother tongue speech is a commitment that subjects must fulfil and that holds them to their word; this is due to the fact that they are risking "their truth" in the process, i.e., according to psychoanalysis, what is at once most intimate and most foreign, what they will never entirely master.

On the contrary, there is no commitment in the foreign language but the playful possibility of an always open exercise in irresponsibility: the possibility, for instance, of making light and ebullient declarations of love or promises of marriage:

And it is true that I felt irresponsible in that other language, so unknown to me (...) I made the most amiable declarations of love to her, a habit quite foreign to my character and that language not only did I use it lightly but above all, because I more or less invented it, I expressed in it (...) unknown feelings that came out impudently in this form and deceived even myself... (Blanchot 1948, 100).

The foreigner, migrant or exile dwell on the frontier of language: learning a foreign language they are faced with a linguistic system that is heterogeneous to that of their mother tongue, they come up against phonological, morpho-syntactic and semantic frontiers they cannot guess or anticipate. First they will have to recognize these frontiers and then, in the best of cases, progressively master them. This linguistic appropriation can be, for some at least, a way toward subjectivation because subjects can open themselves to the language, let it come alive inside them through their dreams, their swearwords, their puns and their metaphorical use of words.

Allow it be alive within them in order to open up the possibility of defining themselves, to speak as subjects in a configuration of relationships with others. That is to say a configuration of affects and identifications in which desire comes into play. Allowing language to dwell in oneself means risking one's desire in it, also allowing oneself to become caught up in what cannot be learned – its ambiguities, its idiomatic phrases, its usual metaphors – but can reveal oneself to oneself. Open oneself to language and to those who speak it to reveal themselves in it.

I for Imaginary

The imaginary is a key dimension of subjectivity, whether we call it “ego”, “conscience”, or managing agent of our adaptation to reality; it opens up our existence to the “semblant.” As far as the relation to languages is concerned, this dimension denotes a degree of “reflexivity” of the subject towards his language or languages. Whereas the common speaker does not generally look at his language and his relationship to it from the outside, the grammarian, the philosopher and obviously the writer endeavour to describe and analyse their “feeling for the language” and more precisely their feeling for the “motherness” of the language, for what makes it “maternal” for them.

Whereas the figures of reflexivity are diverse, it seems possible to outline some recurring features of this “motherness”. Kafka was distressed by his bad asthma contracted “by dint of running after the dream of a language which would come from within.” (Prieur 2005, 68). Between him and German, – a language which he calls his “mother” tongue but which he says he does not like –, there is a distance, a discrepancy and he feels uneasy in this language that does not come from within, and in which he cannot dwell completely. He speaks of the impossible “familiarity”, or the impossible proximity of the German Jew with his language; according to him, it is “completely ridiculous to call a Jewish mother “Mutter”” (Kafka 1983, 99). In German he is confronted with the question of the “maternal” in language as well as with his “fantasy of language”, that is to say, in the last analysis, with the fantasy of a language “without exteriority” or a language which cannot fail to give its speaker a feeling of familiarity, of proximity and self-confidence, in other words a language which cannot be conceptualized without the “effect of identity” inherent to its very usage.

Interiority, familiarity, proximity, self-confidence and identity – these are the subjective elements on which the feeling for language is based. The lack of exteriority or the proximity that the subject experiences in his relationship to his language is quite often described by means of corporal metaphors, metaphor of the “skin” – “the mother tongue, wrote Freud, is not a garment, it is your own skin” (letter to A. Zweig). The most commonly used is the metaphor of “breath”. Language is fitted to the mouth and to the body and the subject breathes within his language as well as he breathes it; thus he is not its “host”, he is not just “passing” through it: what moves him, rather, is “the unshakeable feeling of being at home” in language.

Not only does the subject “feel at home” in language but he also experiences “faithfulness”, faithfulness of, and to, language. In *La Conscience des mots*, E. Canetti (1989, 204) recounts how, when he was living in London,

he was prone to "word crises" in English as his mother tongue, German, came rushing through his mind in irrepressible waves. The feeling of "being at home" in our language is often also the feeling of being the origin (source) of our speech, of being able to impose our "will to say" on language, of being in control of it. This is what Kafka calls "self-confidence". In this respect, a mother tongue is a language in which we always have the illusion of mastery.

This feeling of being at home in language can also become an absolute, radical attachment to language, the feeling that we cannot be dissociated or separated from it and finally that we not only possess language but are also possessed by it. Language can thus be experienced as "property", ownership of ourselves by ourselves within ourselves, inalienable property, property that we can carry with us everywhere⁴. This experience of property always opens up the possibility of conceiving language in terms of "ground", "roots", "natural foundation".

Then a different subjective logic or "economy" of "maternity" becomes apparent; what is at stake here is no longer only "familiarity" or "proximity" but "unicity", – the mother tongue is "irreplaceable", it is the unique matrix of meaning for the subject –, "origin-arity" and "natural origin-arity" of language, all this summed up in roots, earth, ground... Unicity, origin-arity, natural-ality: the maternity thus defined can always bring out the worst and lead to a form of "sacralization" and "idolatry" of language, and therefore paves the way to all kinds of ideologies of "rootedness" (*enracinement*) and identity. "One" language and not just language, "one" identity and not just identity, "one" origin and not just origin, that is to say the fetishism of a "tongue-mother-nature-earth-race" and of an identity that cannot be breached.

In other words, this maternity can easily become a regressive figure, not of the love of language, but of passion, the passion of the "unique language" and passion of "being-one" or, as Michaux (1998, 22-23) puts it, of the "public block-man living in society". It is in this social passion of the "block-man" or "being-one" that voluntary servitude, exclusion and the murder of the other can eventually take root. The "block-man" only asserts himself as such by denying or excluding others: driven by a fantasy of omnipotence, oneness and mastery, he denies the other and his/her speech. He refuses the other's speech inasmuch as it is the very ground of his existence as subject. He will not even hear about the division of the subject and the incompleteness of speech and he does not know that "there is as much difference betwixt us and ourselves as betwixt us and others." (Montaigne 1962, 372).

Subjects are divided because they don't know what they are saying. The meaning of Freud's discovery is that language slips away from the subjects'

⁴ See the discussion that J. Derrida devotes to the relationship of H. Arendt to the German language in *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre*, éd. Galilée, 1996.

tongue, although they must maintain this illusion which robs them of their integrity and makes any word for word “translation” of what constitutes them useless, although they keep dreaming of a language which would be adequate to what they are. This discovery ruins the illusion of unity which is the block-man’s fetish.

The words we use can open within ourselves a “line of flight”, make us non-identical to ourselves and also can create, by the many effects of their meanings, play of associations and resonances, a double meaning that exceeds and ruins the conscious awareness of meaning and intentions. Without knowing it, subjects then experience a “de-centering” and they can always evaluate, after the fact, the power of disorientation of the words they use. When Freud speaks of the unconscious and of desire he gives meaning to this otherness of speech, he underlines its force of subversion and dispersion.

Why do we have conversations? Why so many exchanges of words for hours on end? (Michaux 1981, 58).

If each one of us speaks, enters into this indefinite, essential, endless activity that conversation is, it is not only to exchange information but to learn from the other who we are, to try and find out what constitutes us as subject. Each one of us is in the image of that which speaks in him/her, in spite of him/her, in this fundamental speech relation, the “speech pact” with the other which establishes one in one’s subjectivity. It is this very speech pact that the social passion of being-one denies or rejects. It is in this rejection that the exclusion of the other originates as the following story told by M. Safouan (1995, 14) illustrates:

After a victorious battle a general decides to rest with his army at the foot of a mountain. As he looks up he sees above him a man who is sitting on the mountainside. Furious and indignant, he climbs up to this man to demand satisfaction from him.

How dare you sit above me? Don’t you know who I am?
Indeed Sir, you haven’t told me.
I am the commander of that army that you can see yonder.
And who is your commander?
Why, the marshal, of course.
And above the marshal, is there anything?
What do you mean? The King naturally.
And above the King?
There is nothing above the King.
Well then, the man replied, I am that nothing.

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