

Building One's Own Language... In The Dialect That Suits

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On ne parle jamais une seule langue [\[1\]](#)
Jacques Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre*

The discourses of psychoanalysis and literature, be it in prose or poetry, have a lot in common. I do not intend to name all the similarities and differences, but rather to register some lines of thinking that arise from my position as an analyst who works in many languages and from my own experience as an analysand in more than one language. I have also been enriched as a reader of authors who used languages other than their mother tongue in their writing, and as a writer in two languages – Spanish and French.

When we think, at first, that the use of one's mother tongue would be the logical choice as a means of verbal expression, it is possible to notice that certain writers and analysands have preferred to express themselves in a different language. Like every choice, this preference's motivations are always subjective, but it is interesting to emphasize some common traits.

My reflection necessarily makes me interrogate the language so-called mother tongue and what happens when a person, either in analysis or in their literary occupation, changes languages. There are various examples in the literary world and, obviously, in the history of psychoanalysis.

Even so, it is worth asking: Is the mother's language actually the mother tongue? This question is not tautologic and its answer is less evident than it looks, demanding a certain route to be covered beforehand. There is an essential alienation inherent to the language, unique to each language, which is always the language of the other.

The so-called mother tongue is never purely natural, nor owned, nor habitable. There is no possible habitat without the difference introduced by exile and its consequent nostalgia. There are no languages belonging to the origin, only languages belonging to the arrival – hence belonging to the path that disalienates one from the other's desire. Sometimes, the mother tongue is not so much the language in which the mother speaks with the child in the day-by-day, but rather the language in which the mother desires – which does not always coincide univocally with her own language. Jacques Derrida (1996) questions what a language is: 'But who exactly possesses it? And whom does it possess? Is language in possession, ever a possessing or possessed possession? [...] What of this being-at-home [*être-chez-soi*] in language toward which we never cease returning?' And he adds: 'My language, the only one I hear myself speak and agree to speak, is the language of the other.' The mother tongue, said Dante (1315), is 'that which we speak without rules, imitating our nurse'. It is a sound wrapping, a language bath that the child recognizes as being the mother's language even before birth. Confronted with the mourning of the separation from the bodily relationship with the mother, the baby starts by hallucinating the primary object, and then the calls start: laments and cries first; babbling and the first phonemes after. Since the relationship with the mother is intracavitary in the beginning, the emergence of language is produced to compensate her absence, bringing her closer and farther away at once, introducing the foreignness of the other, despite the other being the baby's own mother. The mother's language, rooted in its experience of

drive, transmits at once the universality of language and the mother's desire. The mother's word imprints on the child the stamp of primary alienation to the meaning of their own discourse. This is the original interpretative violence imposed by the mother to the child about which spoke Piera Aulagnier (1971). Without forgetting that 'such violence is necessary for the cry to become a call, and not mere noise, for the smile to become a sign of love and not a simple muscle game, and for feeding to become the desire to give life and not a simple supply of calories'.

The mother tongue, I believe, requires a distance from the language of the mother. It requires recognizing the language of the mother as a language of an *other*, making it less solemn, detaching oneself from the presumably natural original language, decharacterizing it. The mother tongue demands the ability to make it one's own at some point, to attribute a singular meaning to the subject; the ability to successfully mourn the initial fusion and leave the confusion of an absolute One. It is good to desire the mother tongue in order to detach from it first, and then reinvent it.

Derrida (op. cit.) emphasizes that the **of** in the language **of** the mother 'refers not so much to property, but to where it comes from; the language is of the other, issue from the other, *the* issue from the other'. In this sense, it is possible to say that the mother tongue is a starting language. Therefore, there are but languages of trajectories or of arrival – a movement made explicit by the plurilingual person, but also present in the monolingual person: 'we never have one single language; one does not practice monolingualism with oneself'. Using Winnicottian concepts: would we be able to say that the mother tongue is this transitional air of found-created object? The language of the mother is, above all, an 'affected' language – i.e., traversed by an affective movement. Sometimes involving and containing, sometimes generating vampiric and incestuous anguish.

The passage from the language of the mother to the mother tongue supposes a cut with the bodily relationship of the initial fusion, the abandonment of this language of perfect comprehension to which refers the myth of the Tower of Babel. A passage that supposes the inclusion of a third and the assumption of the lack. It demands a certain deconstruction of the saturation of the *too much meaning* in the language of the mother in order to start the search (never completely reachable) for the meaning of one's own language – i.e., the language sieved by one's desire and its effect in the discourse. 'Desiring is not encountering. It is searching for. It is de-solidarizing with oneself, with society, with language, with that which has been, with the mother, with that from which we came, with the other who incorporates' (Quignard, 1998).

This trajectory can be made via the chain of signifiers in the mother's language, or it can demand the passage into other languages named foreign. Which proposes, in psychoanalysis (a strongly suggestive practical field) the question: how is the use, in one isolate session or throughout the course of the analysis, of a language other than that which was taught by one's 'nurse,' either by the analysand, the analyst, or both?

Language, be it in analysis or in literature, never apprehends the complete reality – there is always some unsayable leftover. The use of more than one language can reinforce the illusion that, with many different ones, it is possible to completely seize the whole. It is possible to reach a sense, but the meaning is never exhausted. Enunciation slips through the signifier.

To be conscious, contrarily to Plato's Cratylus, that there is no evident naturalness between the thing and the word that names it is to admit the sign's arbitrariness. Therefore, the object *mesa* can also be 'table' in French and 'table' in English – which, although sharing the same writing, do not sound the same. The music of a language, its prosody, is equally or more significant than its grammatical rules

and the words' semantic content.

The deployment of a language does not have just one communicational aspect, as though it was a utensil of which one makes use. It is, above all, the expression of the enunciator's subjectivity within a complex system of relations of signifieds shared and not shared. But every language is, more than anything else, a system of thought: the base of sustentation, as if an inescapable matrix from which the individual constructs their way of thinking. One does not think the same way in one language or in another. There are expressions, structures of the language that influence one's associative journey. For example: in Spanish, a statement is proposed as a simple affirmation, while in French it is common to use a double negation. Although a double negation works like an affirmation, it is an affirmation with more shades, not as emphatic as in Spanish.

Since Freud's description of the 'language apparatus' and its disorders in *On Aphasia* (1891), the relation between language and thought has never stopped to interrogate psychoanalysts – and the same is valid for the relation between language and affection. We know that the destination of representation and affection can be separated, since the last link of the process of 'psychization' takes place with the representation of the word (Green, 1973). Even so, what happens when a word's representation includes more than one language? Or when, among the possible destinations of the affection, there is a language route to be covered? In this regard, we must note the nuance that exists between plurilingualism and polyglotism. Essentially, learning various languages simultaneously from an early age – i.e., being plurilingual – probably does not have the same intrapsychic effects as learning a foreign language later on in life, when one's mother tongue is already solidly established – i.e., being a polyglot. We can, nevertheless, conserve the more general term 'multilingualism' when it is not necessary to differentiate polyglotism and plurilingualism, as suggested by Amati-Mehler et al. (1990).

The history of the psychoanalytical movement is traversed by migrations and language transmutations – and this, since the time of Freud's first patients in Vienna. For most of them, German was a second language, as was the case for his most famous cases, Wolf Man, Miss Lucy R., and numerous Americans who were in Vienna. With some of them, Freud needed to speak in English (Flegenheimer, 1989).

Instead of following the apparently known routes of their mother tongue, the multilingual person prefers, sometimes, to call upon little forestial shortcuts safe from the heat of the other language. How to classify this other language? Borrowed? Foreign? Of adoption? If I speak about heat, it is because psychoanalysis is connected to language, evidently, but mainly to affection and drive (Tesone, 2000). Therefore, the route is expanded: 'the drive is not so much a place as a circuit' (Green, 1973).

When a polyglot chooses to do analysis in a language that is not the one they speak without rules imitating their nurse, they deliberately keep their distance from the voice of the primary object, a source of exaggerated excitation. If the circuit is shorter, the individual fears the affective overload, the short-circuit.

What would have happened if Oedipus, this famous migrant, did not speak the same language as the Sphinx? Would he have been able to circumvent the city of Thebes and, hence, avoid the tragedy? If we accept the idea that, in the transleakage of languages, the multilingual person enriches the fabric of their preconscious with other representations of words, what happens then with affection? (Tesone, 1996).

When a patient or a writer changes their language, it is likely that they feel freer to express, in a second language, their most intimate experiences. There may be a certain excitement in imagining that one can re-invent oneself, become an *other*, different from that who one was in one's original language; be other, or finally have, in the face of this foreignness, ownership over one's own complexity. Pessoa's literary creation and his numerous heteronyms are a beautiful example of the complexity in the notion of authorship. There is something rhizomatous in every foreign language. Roots that become trees and, hopefully, make one's creative potentiality lighter. The language of the unconscious is always another language, a language that is given to us. In order to make it conscious, one needs to reconstruct. In a reformulation of the Cartesian thought, we could say: I think, speak, or write – in the language that better expresses my feelings – therefore I exist. Libido, affirms Ivonne Bordelois (2002), 'makes words into its object and dwelling: between the speaking tongue and the hearing ear there is a relation analogous to that between the phallus (which, in Sanskrit is called *lingam*) and the vulva.'

The sounds of languages, such as a musical score, produce certain songs. In their melody, they, like enchanted toys, allow us to play with them to find that or those in which we manage to speak and hear opening the pores of our affections, either in the analytical discourse or in the act of writing. The other language may emphasize that the encounter with the Other constitutes us. And, in the encounter with foreignness – both ours and that of the others – the creative power of language is potentialized.

[1] One never speaks one single language.

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