

Which Language?

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It is unthinkable to write about language and the unconscious in psychoanalysis without referencing the remarkable, prudent, and extensive book about both native and foreign languages in psychoanalysis written by Amati-Mehler, Argentieri and Canestri (Amati Mehler, J., Argentieri, S., Canestri, J., 2010 [1990]). Jorge Canestri left us in May 2021. His death is a great loss to the psychoanalytic world, and I would like to dedicate this short article to him.

Treatments of multilingual patients speaking both French and German have woken my interest about the relation of languages with each other inside the psychological apparatus. Which conscious and unconscious reasons lead to a preference for one or the other language?

To understand the meaning of the languages available to us, we must first address the importance of the first language learned, mostly the mother tongue ([\[1\]](#)).

The internalization of a language and its symbolic complexity depends on the readiness of the Ego and on the satisfaction of the Id. Learning a language begins, at least externally, with learning words. These words are steeped in our individual, emotional, and cognitive experiences in connection with their meaning in terms of content. They are also emotionally linked to experiences that are related to their formal expression.

That words have a kind of life of their own can be seen in a play on words or in 'slips'(Freud, 1905). An offensive idea that has been repressed and pushed into the unconscious appears unintentionally in the shape of a word again; this is usually phonetically similar and replaces the conscious intended, emotionally 'harmless' word. The repressed idea utilizes the string of the word formation, to bypass the superego, and pave its way into light to shame the Ego in the very moment of speaking.

What happens if several words exist for the Signified ?

Even within each individual language, those signifieds charged with strong emotions have many synonymous signifiers. According to the analytical hypothesis, the choice of a word is consciously and unconsciously determined, for example, by its emotional reference. Synonyms are arranging themselves based on their memory traces with each other and are chosen based on conscious and unconscious need for the occasion. Under particular circumstances these determinants are changeable and also influenced by current events. Analytical interpretations, for example those that lead to 'catastrophic changes'(Bion, 1974), and traumatic experiences can fundamentally change these determinants. A word, that was hated based on its associated memories, can be 'defused' by uncovering and processing its associated memory traces. The opposite is also possible; a word that had hardly any color until now, can be filled with life through making a meaningful connection.

Now, how about words from a foreign or second language?

The emotional context, in which learning a new language takes place, has a significant influence on the conscious and unconscious willingness to accept new signifiers. In the case of a second language the signified are already symbolized and organized in semantic and syntax, and they are already bound to memory traces as well.

The absorption of new words requires the establishing of inner space (one could say receptiveness) in addition to what is already present to receive signifiers of a new language. This process is accompanied by a phenomenon of great relevance regarding the choice of language; the new words allow for a distancing from the emotional connotations in the original language. The new language seems to enable a liberation from the burdens which are tied to the first language. Actually, the second language obscures, only temporarily, what is repressed within the first language; it will be uncovered over time, or through the analytical process (among other things).

Here are a few examples:

Mr. A., a French citizen living in Germany, saw himself unable to speak German at the beginning of his treatment. His French expression was chaotic. He didn't finish his sentences and jumped from one topic to the next, but through projective identification it was still possible to understand what he wanted to say. His working language was English which he, too, spoke badly – but no one was bothered by it, because he was French, so he was well camouflaged. An intense and ambivalent attachment to his traumatized mother formed the cause of his language difficulties. Initially, the analytical treatment made it possible to improve his English language – which he increasingly liked to speak – while communicating in French involved great effort on both sides during the analytical hours. The predominant mother transference/projection resulted in an intensification of the language impediment as a defense against devouring/annihilation phantasies. By speaking endlessly and chaotically, he brought his phantasized mother inside the analyst to follow him and to focus on his verbal, as well as non-verbal message. Thus, he was able to keep her at a distance and tie her to him at the same time. The detailed and lengthy analysis of this mechanism, re-enacted in the analytic relationship, initially caused an inconsistent, but later stable, improvement of the language; first in English, his second, and more innocuous language, and later in French, his first language, which was bound to primary process memory traces. Almost unnoticed, he began to learn German at the same time.

When Ms. E. visited my practice, she could not use our common mother tongue, but rather expressed herself arduously in German, although she could hardly speak it. A few months earlier, a miscarriage had triggered a depressive-psychotic crisis based on several paralleled and unconscious fantasies; she worried about being punished by her mother for daring to separate out of their symbiotic-submissive attachment, but she also fantasized that her 'Id-wishes' – sexuality with her husband, speaking (using) her mother tongue in German or the freeing herself from her mother's care – might have killed the unwanted fetus in her womb. Several authors (Freud (1905), Ferenczi (1911), Fenichel (1945), Reich (1927). Krapf (1955)) consider the first language to be the language of the Id. Because it was learned during the earliest emotional, cognitive, and sensorimotor development, it is closely connected to early experiences. A language learned later is linked to more mature stages of development and is imprinted by the superego from the outset. For some patients though, the immature superego bound to the first language is so prohibitive, that the 'Id-drives' are only accessible within the more tolerant atmosphere within the second language (Krapf 1955). Ms. E. felt protected through the German language, a second language, from her archaic fears of a possessive and vengeful object, but also protected from her untamed 'Id-drives', while French meant a threatening proximity to it.

Mr. J. was referred to me after a major depression. The French academic had come to Germany because of an interesting work project. He effortlessly spoke French and English. While his family increasingly acquired the German language and culture, he didn't manage to take in the language, despite German lessons; 'It doesn't go in!'. One could describe his depression as 'white' based on

the *white psychosis* described by André Green. For a long time he had no images, no associative thoughts about the excruciating depressive mental state. 'Learning a new language involves the introjection of new objects and resistance against giving up earlier objects that can hinder this process' (Greenson 1982, p.24). Mr. J was born shortly after the end of the Second World War. His parents had experienced the war as teenagers: 'Les Boches' represented an undifferentiated, destructive, envious and perverse conglomerate, spreading horror and annihilation. Mr. J. found it difficult to recognize that, despite his conscious efforts to deal with them in a differentiated manner, the hostile images that had been formed inside him as a child in relation to the Germans unconsciously were setting off his 'white' depression, stirring up resistance against the reception of the German language. Once he noticed that the new German objects would not overpower the old French ones, he started to pick up the language. The interpretation of his unconscious fear of the intrusion of German introjects, that would destroy the French ones, was the key to his recovery. His identification with the analytical object, which had preserved its French identity despite the absorption acceptance of German introjects, played an essential role in this treatment. Gradually he left his 'trench' and made contact with the German enemy. He began to psychically internalize the German language, which he learned cognitively and reported enthusiastically how he would meanwhile have a 'chat' (in German) with the baker who he feared for such a long time, because he didn't understand her words.

Ms. Y.'s relationship to the mother tongue and second language vividly illustrates the phenomenon described above. After an abusive and conflicted childhood, Ms. Y. had discovered France and moved there as a young adult. When she came to see me years later, the quality of her French was remarkable with respect to, that she spoke as if she were imitating French people. While adults try to acquire a new language 'rationally', children use the 'simple and complete' identification of 'parroting' (Stengel;.1939). 'By strengthening the defenses against the old infantile impulses, the new language contributes to the creation of a new and somewhat better intrapsychic structure, so Greenson, 'A new language provides opportunity for the creation of a new self-image' (Greenson, 1982). With her emigration to France and her immersion in the French language, Ms. Y. had experienced how liberated she felt from the experiences and insolvable relational conflicts of her childhood. For several years, the new language had enabled the splitting off of destructive fragments. When they broke out again in the context of a love affair, she moved back to Germany in the unconscious expectation of renewed relief, but this time it was short-lived. Based on her experience with language change, Ms. Y. had undergone several surgical corrective procedures that completed her desire to redefine herself. The imitative quality of her French language pointed to a disorder disturbance, or complete abandonment of the psycho-oral processes of introjection, which enables to establish an object relation in the first place. Behind a 'fascinatingly efficient facade,' as Gaddini described it in 1966, was concealed an immature and fragile personality structure.

One cannot speak about language and the unconscious without mentioning their special relation to narcissism. The first language learned at an early age is mastered in a way that makes her an unmistakable distinctive mark of belonging – throughout life. But a later learned language is never fully mastered, a reliable sense of sentence formation is never achieved and imperfections in intonation, as small as they may be, will mark the speaker as a stranger.

Adult patients who find themselves exposed to a foreign environment due to emigration describe identity collapses in the cultural unity of the environment, and a sense of being 'no one' anymore. In addition to being linguistically excluded, a devastating feeling of inferiority, shame and powerlessness can spread, which then is confirmed and reinforced by the, mostly, unconscious arrogant response of the native group. The not- mastering of a language also evokes feelings of guilt, whose origin cannot

be grasped directly. Injured pride serves as a rationalization for giving up learning the language. Feelings of guilt also arise in children who suddenly find themselves cut off verbally from others in a foreign language environment. Instead of being listened to and getting narcissistic confirmation, they suddenly experience rejection and humiliation and feel as if they are invisible to the point of non-existence. This state of narcissistic dissolving or annihilation causes schizoid withdrawal. But it is also accompanied by reactive destructive impulses towards the surrounding objects, which are envied for their ability to speak. It is these destructive impulses arising after narcissistic crash which trigger feelings of guilt in both children and adults. We are dealing with a two-step response here; the crushing feeling of inferiority, shame and powerlessness as the first stage, and the destructive impulses with their accompanying feelings of guilt as a second stage.

A more precise knowledge of the influence of the unconscious on the languages we are using gives us a better insight into the causes of language impediments and learning challenges and enables us to provide adequate assistance.

This text is an excerpt from an article published in Psyche 6-2018 'Zu Bedeutung der Wahl einer Sprache' ['On the importance of the choice of a language.']

[1] I am assuming a family which speaks one language that is identifiable for the child. People who grew up in a polyglot family often don't have one language as their native language.

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