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1 Entering into Language and into Languages

From the Mother Tongue to the (M)other Tongue

*Monique De Mattia-Viviès**

This study begins with an observation based on thirty years of teaching English linguistics in higher education.¹ For many students, learning to speak English, and especially mastering the phonetics of English, is a fairly smooth process; for others, however, it is highly challenging or almost impossible, to the extent that some students abandon the prospect of becoming English teachers, even though that was what they initially set out to do. Poor marks given for oral exams as undergraduates, which can be levelled out by written assignments, leave almost no hope of success when attributed for spoken English in French schoolteachers' competitive exams (the English CAPES and *agrégation*).² While the majority of native Anglophones no longer speak phonologically standard English, it is nevertheless this variety of English that persists – or 'insists', to borrow a term from linguistics philosopher Jean-Jacques Lecercle³ – at least in the French system, which values it very highly.

Confronted with the variable results of traditional approaches to remediating these difficulties (e.g., long stays in English-speaking countries, intensive listening to programmes in English, all-English experiences of various kinds based on the idea of immersion and presumed to guarantee significant progress), I began to wonder whether they might be rooted in something other than, for some students, an always too brief exposure to the sounds of English. Might it not be worth studying how children learn to speak, in order to observe

* To my student Miriam, whose mother does not speak French.

To all the students whose mothers do not speak their (M)other tongue.

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² The CAPES and the *agrégation* are two national competitive examinations for recruiting secondary school teachers in France. The *agrégation*, of a higher level, is a prestigious qualification that is also often held, in literary disciplines, by university lecturers.

³ Jean-Jacques Lecercle, 'A global language is not a language', Unpublished lecture, Padua University, 15 February 2013.

whether the difficulties encountered when learning a foreign language are, up to a certain point, of a similar nature to those encountered in the mother tongue when a child enters into language ... or fails to?

1.1 The Research Experiment

During a three-year period (2014–17) of half days on a weekly basis, I sat in on the medical appointments of Dr Jean-Luc Di Stefano, child psychiatrist and head of the Centre for Early Infancy Socio-Medical Action (CAMSP) at Salvator Hospital in Marseille, at which a clinical psychologist was also present, either Julia Maraninchi or Myrto Rapti. The children admitted for consultations in this facility, accompanied by their parents, all have difficulty speaking and are developmentally delayed in various ways that affect more than speech.

It appeared that the most frequent causes for these difficulties were fairly directly related to problems of separation, although other influences should be considered as well.⁴

1.1.1 *Child–Mother Separation*

- This can be rendered problematic by, first and foremost, insufficient presence on the part of the father, thereby placing the mother in a position of emotional and relational predominance, for various possible reasons:⁵
 - the father is frequently absent for professional reasons;
 - the parents have separated, and the father has left the family home;
 - the mother fails to ‘make room’ for the father; or
 - the father is physically there but his linguistic presence is sketchy, either because he is taciturn or speaks too sparingly or because the linguistic space allowed him is insufficient, thus making the mother–child separation, via language, problematic; as is well known, the words of the father are responsible for severing, little by little, a fusional prelinguistic experience with the mother.
- An impossibility exists for the mother to let go of her child, for reasons related to her own life story. This fusional state may sometimes be revealed by the way she addresses her child, for instance, by calling the child not by

⁴ This notion is distinct from that of ‘attachment patterns’, which are more common in English-language psychology.

⁵ The term ‘caregiver’, frequently used in the English-speaking world, is not appropriate here, as will become apparent (translator’s note).

their name but by the word ‘mummy’, with the result that, linguistically speaking, mother and child are one and the same.

- An accident at birth has transformed the child into an object of constant attention, thereby encouraging fusion and making it harder for the child to gain access to articulated language. When this accident has become a family secret that has not been explained to the child, including and especially in terms of its emotional impact on the parents, there is an added degree of complexity.
- A preterm birth (moderate to late) has occurred.

1.1.2 Enforced Separations due to Abuse or Inadequate Care

Traumatic situations such as these, making what should be a natural bond unnatural, delay all the essential learning processes, starting with language. The child is not protected, is only perceived in terms of the worry he or she is the cause of, and is insufficiently loved and taken care of and immersed in perplexity and guilt (‘if I am treated this way, it must be my own fault’⁶), thus maintaining the child in a pre-verbal state. Such lack of care and maternal guidance means that the infant is not in a position to envisage separation from an initial state, as they have no experience of that state’s fusional nature and the security it provides.

1.1.3 Separation from an Original Language That Is Hidden or Disparaged

For some migrant families, French is a foreign language, and a child’s difficulty in learning to speak (French) may stem from the fact that the parents perceive it confusedly as the language of their enforced separation from their original language. It may even be perceived as the language of their renouncement (out of the desire for assimilation) or of social domination, producing a rift or reticence that is not conducive to the child’s successful language learning, whether French or the often-underrated original language – assuming the parents continue to use it in the home. Generally speaking, people who have experienced exile, who are ‘exiles’, are faced with a foreign language that they are forced to use, even if they do not completely abandon their Mother tongue and continue to use it amongst themselves. The world, especially the linguistic one, of the family and the developmentally delayed child no longer coheres. Exiles are ‘foreigners’ in the strictest sense of the term, as they are

⁶ See Ronald Fairbairn, *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality* (London: Routledge, [1952] 1994).

foreign to themselves, and a child who has lacked homogenous structuring in an original language is not even foreign in that sense, for they have no identity at all but are trapped between the country of origin and the host country, between two languages, of which neither can easily become their own. A gap is opened up in the filial relationship.⁷

As a rule, exile, just like early separations, delays the entrance into language and confines the infant in a position of pre-verbal fusionality, preventing them from developing out of infancy and interacting with others.

1.1.4 Separation from the Mother Tongue through Learning a Foreign Language

Some parents wish for their child to learn a foreign language from birth, in general, English, even though neither of the parents are native Anglophones. Rather than address their child in their Mother tongue, they speak a language that is not their own and which often lacks fluency and is phonologically stilted, thus shutting the child out of the bonding language, the language of affect, which is also that of the family circle. In so doing, they replace this language with a language devoid of their own life stories – but which is the vector of a fantasy project of self-generation, of ‘filial dissolution’ or of ‘de-generation’ – thereby producing a hiatus in transmission and making all organic processes unnatural (e.g., language learning, potty training, walking).

1.1.5 Language Variations

Language variations within the family are another source of difficulty when one parent attempts to have the linguistic advantage over the other. For instance, this occurs when one parent speaks one language (e.g., French) and the other parent speaks another (a foreign language), and one tries to dominate the other linguistically. Or perhaps the mother has had a university education and the father has not (or the other way round), and she tries, consciously or unconsciously, to impose her value system on the father. Interlingual or intralingual discrepancies can in such cases create conflicts of loyalty that prevent the child from finding their place in language. Language variations within a family can give rise to disorder when they go hand in hand with power struggles. The variation known as intralingual variation occurs when there is a usually unconscious underlying intention, which can delay a child’s development.

⁷ Cf. Chapters 4 and 5 of this volume.

1.1.6 Other Possible Causes

- Choosing a child's name is not a neutral act. When a child is given a foreign name (e.g., a name heard in an American TV series or a name linked to a country of origin in the case of exiles) and the meaning of this act has not been explained to the child, it isolates them in a filial descendancy that is different or rooted in the past. Such children may sometimes be invested in a project of self-generation, of severance from the parents' origin, which prevents them from taking up their natural filial position and entering the parents' language, out of uncertainty as to the legitimacy of this language for the parents.
- The parents' separation, especially if violence is involved, may generate difficulties. To avoid taking sides between father and mother, the child attracts attention by contracting a whole series of pathological conditions and developmental delays that can extend to aphasia.
- Excessive parental expectations can leave no place for the child as an individual. The child becomes uncontrollable ('a nightmare!'), always out of line with respect to what is expected of them. Proving incapable of being loved for what they are and compelled to follow strict requirements, they develop theatrical behaviours staging non-conformity to the parents' desire and, through language learning difficulties, the impossibility of communicating with them.
- Taboos and secrets prevent the child from learning language harmoniously, as if the act of speaking could have uncontrollable, or even tragic, consequences.

Thus, learning one's own language is not necessarily an automatic process, but one that is affected by psychological and emotional complexes, which, if they are obstructed, can in some cases delay or even obstruct a child's language development. If speaking means separation (i.e., separation from a primary, pre-verbal, and fusional state), then any entrance into language is traumatic – all the more so when this initial state of fusion has not occurred, when there is neither no *paradise lost* nor any paradise to lose. In such cases, the child has not received their due, and this can lead to delays in gaining access to other pleasures, such as those less body oriented and more symbolic.

Let us return now to the reasons that led me to carry out this experiment. Why is it that certain students – who may perform brilliantly in other areas and have mastered English grammar and vocabulary with ease – cannot assimilate the sounds of the English language? To answer this question, it appears necessary to return to the Mother tongue. The clinical experiment shows that to learn language harmoniously, certain psychological and emotional conditions must be fulfilled for a child to take the risk of, or consent to, a separation

from an early phase in their attachment to primary carers, in particular the mother. Born of her body, that primary relationship is expressed essentially through the body and through sound, which means that the mother's role is unique. It is first and foremost from her that the child must part, by means of language, with the father playing the role of separator in this process, associated as he is with the entrance into articulated language. Hence, we see the importance of his role, or of any figure with parental responsibility, in facilitating the gradual termination of a state of mother–child fusion.

My hypothesis here is that learning a foreign language reactivates this primary phase of separation, namely, the child's accession to articulated language. Even when it proceeds smoothly, this phase comprises a primary severance, a primary traumatism, that is attenuated, or, on the contrary rendered more problematic, by a more or less favourable emotional context. When difficulties have arisen at this stage, it is possible that they will be reactivated when a second language comes to be learnt. Ultimately, the impossible appropriation – far more so than where syntax or vocabulary are concerned – of the *sounds* of another language, which are bound up in the body and in this pre-verbal phase that the infant goes through before language, would seem to be rooted in the Mother tongue and in a number of early positive or negative experiences that have resulted – to put things very broadly – in the child being able to speak or not.

But the concept of the Mother tongue and what it embraces is not self-evident.

1.2 The Mother Tongue and Loss

Learning a foreign tongue, a language 'beyond the bounds of the mother', to borrow Michel Foucault's coinage,⁸ and beyond the bounds of the family history, or even learning one's Mother tongue can never be taken for granted, as it is a learning process that implies loss.

What is it *exactly* that is at stake, or at stake all over again, in the process of learning a second language? The terms 'Mother tongue' and 'foreign tongue' are set in opposition to each other, but is it not true to say that any language is at first foreign when a child enters its sphere? What fundamental experience is it that is reactivated in foreign language learning that distinguishes it from all other learning processes? Should we content ourselves with explanations in terms of 'errors', resulting from lack of work, lack of time spent abroad, and so on? Of course, these factors should not be overlooked, but is there not something more fundamental in this difficulty to assimilate, to embrace the

⁸ Michel Foucault, 'The Flight of Ideas'. In Jean-Bertrand Pontalis et al. (eds.), *Dossier Wolfson ou l'affaire du schizo et les langues* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 123.

sounds of the Other? What is it that gets in the way? Could it be that this fundamental factor is the Mother tongue, which the would-be linguist must consent, at least in part, to leave behind?

Speaking, to be sure, requires separation from the mother, but only up to a certain point, for when this separation takes place the child enters the sphere of the *Mother tongue*, which is of a symbolic order where her presence can still be felt. This is what prompted Jean-Jacques Lecercle to declare that the Mother tongue possesses the subject to such an extreme extent – being the language of affect, memory, and desire – that it is no doubt illusory to think that one can discard it completely.⁹ The Mother tongue is the place of fusional memory, the place of a state of bliss that is lost yet constantly regained, indirectly, through its intermediary.

Ultimately, what is it that gets in the way of learning a foreign language, preventing it from ever becoming a Mother tongue – could it be the Mother tongue itself? What is lost in learning one's own language, and what is lost or gained in acquiring a foreign one? To borrow a phrase from Michèle Vierling-Weiss, what does the (foreign) language force us to part with?¹⁰

Hannah Arendt spent part of her life in exile in the United States and never lost (or wanted to lose) her German accent. 'Nothing can replace the Mother tongue', she said.¹¹ What remains is the Mother tongue. She felt an unwavering sense of loyalty to the German language, and her exile was not so much from a country as from a language. Moreover, she did not define herself as German, but as Germanophone.

The Mother tongue seems, therefore, to be one of the fundamental factors at stake when learning another language, whether as a help or a hindrance, or sometimes a bit of both.

1.3 Defining the Mother Tongue

However, the Mother tongue is not one language. It is a plural, divided entity, corresponding to phases in the evolution of the child. In other words, the Mother tongue is by nature plural, and we are all plurilingual within the same language, without necessarily being aware of it.¹²

⁹ 'One cannot escape one's Mother tongue, the tongue of one's memories and desires, a tongue that possesses the subject to such an extent that it is always in excess of any attempt to force it within the boundaries of rules'. Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *The Violence of Language* (London: Routledge, 1990), 22.

¹⁰ Michèle Vierling-Weiss. 'Que reste-t-il ? La langue maternelle'. *Che vuoi*, 26.2(2006), 11–21.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, 'A Conversation with Günter Gaus', *The Last Interviews and Other Conversations* (New York: Melville House, [1964] 2013).

¹² Cf. Sara Greaves, *Poésie, poétique et traductologie, parcours interdisciplinaires: Synthèse d'habilitation à diriger des recherches* (Paris: Université de Paris III, 2017, [unpublished]).

Indeed, a transition takes place from *lalangue* (a concept borrowed from Jacques Lacan¹³), passed on to the infant by the mother, by the body of the mother, to articulated language. Mother and child share this *lalangue* until the child learns constituted language ('*Lalangue* is that private language that the mother and child share, the language of that primary erogenous bodily contact', writes Michèle Vierling-Weiss;¹⁴ it is that initial state of fusion between two beings through *lalangue*, which is a fused signifier: 'a form made of *body thought language*', in the words of Yoann Loisel¹⁵). Articulated language performs the mother-child separation while remaining the language of the interior,¹⁶ internal to the family, even if it is in contact with the outside world; this *interior language* is not necessarily homogenous, as it may bear traces of other languages (e.g., Spanish, Italian, and Arabic, while nevertheless remaining French), but its principal characteristic is to comprise the child's language of identity, the language of their close circle and primary emotional identity.¹⁷

This interior language meets the language of the exterior (the one spoken amongst friends, at day care and then school), from which it differs to varying degrees. In some cases, there is a sociological discrepancy with the language spoken at school, which is positioned therefore at a further remove from what is remembered of the primary *lalangue* as well as from the language of the interior. In fact, all children are at least bilingual, and most often trilingual within their Mother tongue, which can be broadly subdivided into three categories:

- *lalangue*, body and sound oriented, a private language shared by mother and child;
- *language of the interior*, articulated language, at once sociolect, idiolect, and language of affect, the language of the child's close family circle, of their people; and
- *language of the exterior*, including the language used at school, of varying degrees of sociological and idiolectal discrepancy with the interior language.

¹³ Jacques Lacan, *Encore: Le séminaire-livre XX*. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, Collection Points Essais, 1975), 174.

¹⁴ Vierling-Weiss. 'Que reste-t-il?'

¹⁵ 'Écho de l'ego, du monde des choses: La rencontre Keaton-Beckett'. An unpublished lecture, 'Écriture et arts du soin'. A study day co-organised by Sara Greaves and Jean-Luc Di Stefano. Timone Hospital, Marseille, 17 March 2017.

¹⁶ The concepts of *language of the interior* / *language of the exterior* are also used by Marie Rose Moro. 'Passer d'une langue à l'autre, le cas des enfants migrants' (2014). www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwcGUuCpzXs.

¹⁷ Julia Kristeva, 'L'amour de l'autre langue' (2014). www.kristeva.fr/la-traduction-langue-de-l-europe.html.

The language of the exterior is still, to be sure, the Mother tongue, but no longer entirely so. It comes into varying degrees of conflict – especially the language spoken at school – with the interior language if the latter is socio-logically distinct and devalued by the very people who speak it. For the child, two levels of legitimacy then come into conflict: an emotional legitimacy ('I speak my home language at home, not school language, as I would risk losing my rightful place in my family circle') and a social legitimacy ('I speak school language in the classroom, but not my home language, for if I were to, I would lose my rightful place in the classroom, in the language used at school'). Later, under the influence of the two languages, interior and exterior, with one no doubt dominating the other, the adolescent forges their style, which is to say an exterior language of their own, in which *lalangue* nevertheless remains present, unconsciously remembered, assimilated by the body. These different points of contact come together to generate style, or the relationship that each person has with language and that is their own. Generally speaking, this language has moved away from the realm of intimacy; it is at once more personal and invested by a kind of norm to be respected (school language), sometimes at odds with the interior language, which may be sociologically devalued.

The aphasic child, whatever the reason for the aphasia, must therefore turn their back on the affect- and body-oriented monolingualism of *lalangue* (which Lacan calls elsewhere the *One*, the same¹⁸) to progress towards bilingualism (interior language) and then trilingualism (exterior language), multiplying in this way the separation phases. The Mother tongue, *lalangue*, which they find it so hard to let go of so as to embrace the interior language, will one day itself become exterior. There are three levels of loss in this. As Rajaa Stitou writes, 'Such is language, born of the mother "*lalangue*" [. . .]. The latter should not be confused with codified language, but it is attached to it and their connection can never be erased'.¹⁹

So we are all plurilingual, and at the same time monolingual, according to the would-be paradox in Jacques Derrida's famous formula in *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre, ou La prothèse d'origine*,²⁰ defined in two ways:

We only ever speak one single language – or rather one single idiom.

We never speak one single language – or rather there is no pure idiom.

¹⁸ Lacan, *Encore*, 174.

¹⁹ Rajaa Stitou, 'Épreuve de l'exil et blessures de la langue', *Cahiers de psychologie clinique*, 18.1 (2002), 159–70.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre ou La prothèse d'origine* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1996).

That is indeed what it amounts to: we are plurilingual and at the same time monolingual through the memorising of *lalangue* and our practice of the language of the interior, which makes our relation to language a unique one. At the same time, while each of us has a unique relationship to language, language is nevertheless common to a given entity. The Mother tongue, therefore, both is and is not private property, nor is it a homogenous entity. It is at once personal and psychically invested, and always already there. It evolves with time, but what does not change is the initial experience of *lalangue*.

Derrida's acceptance of the word 'monolingualism' is a highly singular one, derived from his personal life story in Algeria. His Mother tongue is French. However, he is deprived of legitimacy in this language because this Mother tongue has its roots elsewhere, outside Algeria. 'For us all, the French language was supposedly a Mother tongue, but one whose origin, norms, rules and law hailed from elsewhere. They harked back to another country. [...] The monolingual speaker I refer to speaks a language of which they are deprived'.²¹ Derrida is thus deprived of one of the dimensions of his own tongue, the exterior language, which has no legitimacy within the historical context in which he finds himself, whereas more frequently it is the interior language that is devalued and the exterior one that is legitimate. In Derrida's case, the delegitimization of the exterior language affects the interior one, to such an extent that the emotional roots of his relationship with language are called into question. This is how I understand the word 'deprivation'.

1.4 The Experience of Exile as Constitutive of the Mother Tongue

Generally speaking, all children, even those born to a homogenous environment, are in reality exiles from the moment they enter into language, in the sense that they have experienced the exile of separation, the severance from *lalangue*. According to Rajaa Stitou:

Speech is what prevents us from becoming confined within our language and invites us to recognise that all speaking beings are exiles from language-as-all (which is to say, *lalangue*). It is this exile from language-as-all that enables the subject to find their style and to acquire speech, in other words to enter the sphere of misunderstanding, of the hiatus between the word and the thing.²²

This is all the more true of the child whose interior and exterior languages are at variance with each other, and who is an exile within their own language. Barbara Cassin asserts that more than one language is needed for an experience

²¹ Derrida, *Le monolinguisme*, 72.

²² Stitou, 'Épreuve de l'exil', paragraph 21. www.cairn.info/revue-cahiers-de-psychologie-clinique-2002-1-page-159.htm.

of exile to occur.²³ But exile is always already there; it can be intralingual when the discrepancy is too great between the language of one's family circle and the language of the outside world and of school.

Learning a foreign language, especially one phonologically very different from French such as English, may reactivate that initial exile – fraught as it was with an intermingling of pain and pleasure – the transition from *lalangue* to language, from the bliss of the body and of sound (*lalangue*) to that of words and meaning (language): an exile founded upon an initial renouncement that is necessary for accession to a symbolic order, which bears a tenacious trace of that renouncement. Michèle Vierling-Weiss is right to emphasise the fact that the word *exile* (from the Latin *ex(s)ilium* derived from *ex(s)ul*: 'living in another country, banished', or from *ex(s)ilere*: 'to leap outside') has the same etymological root as the word *exulter* (from the Latin word *exultare*: 'to leap').²⁴

1.5 Why Learn a Foreign Language?

If the Mother tongue is the place of primary bonding, what can explain the appeal of a foreign language or, on the contrary, the forms of resistance it gives rise to? Similarly, what can explain the fact that some people sever all links with their interior language for the sake of a foreign language (or extra-erior language, one might say) or, on the intralingual level, for the sake of the language used at school, the exterior language? This brings us back to the question asked above: 'What does a (foreign) language force us to part with?'²⁵

1.5.1 The Foreign or 'Extra-erior' Language as Anti-destiny

The foreign language (or exterior language when totally at variance with the interior language) is a means of escape from the language of origin, experienced as stiflingly familiar, and – to borrow a phrase from André Malraux concerning art – the foreign tongue can be seen as an *anti-destiny*.²⁶ Being the only one to be fluent in an idiom – as if it were a private language of one's own, with no one else in the family circle able to speak it – provides acute narcissistic pleasure; it thus becomes possible to undertake the effort of moving away from the original interior language and to sidestep the conflictual

²³ 'Hannah Arendt et les langues de l'exil'. Radio 'France Culture' (2011). www.franceculture.fr/conferences/ecolenormale-superieure/hannah-arendt-pour-etre-confirme-dans-mon-identite-je-depend.

²⁴ Vierling-Weiss, 'Que reste-t-il?'. ²⁵ Vierling-Weiss, 'Que reste-t-il?'.
²⁶ André Malraux, *Les voix du silence* (Paris: NRF/La galerie de la Pléiade, 1951).

traumatism between interior language, the language of the rift, and exterior language, the language used at school. The foreign tongue offers a way to bypass this conflict through a return to the intense pleasure of *lalangue* that this experience of learning another language – perceived, as Catherine Coquio argues, as ‘good’, as a ‘counter-language’ – makes it possible to reactivate.²⁷ Here are a few examples to illustrate this.

1.5.1.1 *When Exterior Language Is Adopted to Counteract Interior*

Language: Edouard Louis – Being Excluded from One’s

Own Language The real name of Edouard Louis, a young writer born in 1992, is Eddy Bellegueule. He claims to have struggled against a language that is doubly hostile, both the language of his family circle (interior language) and the language used at school (exterior language, that of the ‘bourgeoisie’ and his chosen idiom), which was unwittingly antagonistic towards his home environment. To highlight his choice, he changed his name and wrote an auto-fictional narrative, *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule (To See the Back of Eddy Bellegueule)*.²⁸ Making a clean break with one’s experience involves a change of words and name. It is not he who has rejected his social class and the language of his family circle (interior language), but his family who have rejected him, refusing his new language, which contrasts so sharply with theirs. The exterior language he uses is foreign to his community and has made him a stranger to them. He no longer speaks as they do, and his family no longer ‘recognise’ him. He, on the other hand, has reinvented himself and his book is a plea ‘not to be what we have been made into’, ‘for before I took exception to the world of my childhood, that world took exception to me. Very early on I became, for my family and other people, a source of shame and even of disgust. I had no other choice but to run away.’²⁹ Very early on, he had to part company with his emotional self in order to put everything into words. One may then wonder what is left, in his case, of *lalangue*, the sphere of affect, if the interior language that came after it and in which it remains present has rejected him and has had to be abandoned. Can it be that writing with the words of the exterior language has produced a kind of self-generation and given rise to a *foster* mother, another primary fusional experience that is more abstract than the former, another *lalangue* that is more solitary and less body oriented, and has come to replace the original *lalangue*?

²⁷ Catherine Coquio, *La littérature en suspens. Écritures de la Shoah: Le témoignage et les œuvres* (Paris: L’Arachnéen, 2015).

²⁸ Edouard Louis, *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2014).

²⁹ Edouard Louis, *Les matins de France Culture*. Radio ‘France Culture’ (2014). www.franceculture.fr/emissions/les-matins/quand-lecriture-de-soi-devient-un-acte-de-revolte-avec-edouard-louis-auteur-de.

As Julia Kristeva points out, ‘There is matricide in the abandoning of a native tongue’.³⁰ Edouard Louis has not abandoned his native tongue, which is French; he has abandoned a substantial emotional dimension of that Mother tongue (his interior language) into which *lalangue* is incorporated. He has thereby – at least so it would seem – lost his original *lalangue*, which is to say his early affects.

1.5.1.2 *When a Foreign Language Is Adopted as a Counter-Language: Louis*

Wolfson and ‘Counter-Language’ For some, the foreign language is a means of protection from the other language, in this case the Mother tongue, which is perceived as predatory. It offers a means of escape from the incest of *lalangue*, from that initial body-to-body experience that has been incorporated into the interior language, and of seeking refuge in it as an exterior language in the fullest sense of the word, as a counter-language. It offers a means to protect oneself from the affect of the Mother tongue, to make a cleaner break with the body of the mother, to re-engender oneself outside of one’s life story, ‘beyond the bounds of the mother’. Moreover, during a lecture on Beckett in Marseille in June 2017,³¹ Yoann Loisel alluded to the attraction of anorexics for foreign languages.

Let us briefly consider the case of Louis Wolfson.

The ‘language student’, as he refers to himself in a book entitled *Le Schizo et les langues*, of which he is the author, cannot bear to hear his mother speak.³² He fears that ‘through the intermediary of words the bad maternal object will enter [his] body’.³³ He therefore sets out to learn languages (mainly four: French, German, Russian, and Hebrew) so as to translate the English words she uses into foreign ones, and to learn these languages without the help of English, through the intermediary of interlanguage dictionaries. Wolfson’s plan is to destroy his Mother tongue so as to avoid being mutilated by it. To borrow from Gilles Deleuze, ‘Translation, involving a phonetic dismantling of the word, and without transference into any single language but into a magma composed of all languages against the Mother tongue, is a deliberate destruction, [...], a de-boning, since consonants are the bones of language’.³⁴

³⁰ Kristeva, ‘L’amour de l’autre langue’.

³¹ ‘Écriture et arts du soin’ (Writing and the healing arts). A study day co-organised by Sara Greaves (LERMA) and Jean-Luc Di Stefano (IDEC), La Timone Hospital, Marseille, June 2017.

³² Louis Wolfson, *Le Schizo et les langues* (Paris: Gallimard, [1970] 2009).

³³ Michel Foucault, ‘La fuite des idées’ et ‘Les trois procédés’ (Dits et écrits [1958–1988]; Vol. II, 1976–1988; Paris: Gallimard, 2001). In Jean-Bertrand Pontalis et al., *Dossier Wolfson ou l’affaire du Schizo et les langues* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 125.

³⁴ Gilles Deleuze, ‘Schizologie’, préface de *Le Schizo et les langues* (Paris: Gallimard, [1970] 2009) 10.

This extreme undertaking goes hand in hand with an eating disorder: Wolfson refuses the food provided by his mother, and when she is out he gorges himself, greedily swallowing the contents of tin cans whose English labels he forbids himself to read, thereby putting himself at risk. 'The equivalence thus runs deep between the unbearable maternal words and venomous or soiled foodstuffs'.³⁵

However, at the end of the book, it seems that a form of relief has been found. The mother 'consents', as Wolfson puts it, to speak increasingly in Yiddish, his father likewise, and his stepfather in French. Is it, Deleuze asks, this wordplay based on similarities both 'of meaning and of sound between the English words and the foreign ones, his Mother tongue, that of his family circle' that has made English more bearable to him? Is it the story of this destruction through the writing of the book *Le Schizo et les langues* and the progressive diminution of the role of English in the speech of his family that have had a therapeutic effect on him? Is it the renewed bond with another Mother tongue, his mother's Yiddish, that allows a kind of reconciliation with English, with, as Foucault writes, 'the enraged idiom of his mother'?³⁶

While most experiences are not as extreme as Wolfson's, learning a foreign language may stem from a desire to escape maternal omnipotence, which can only be tolerated by learning one or several counter-languages to counteract it.

1.5.2 *Beckett and the Forbidden Mother Tongue*

Samuel Beckett had a slightly similar experience, although considerably less spectacular. He used the expedient of French, which he learnt at the age of about fifteen, for his writing, so as to be able to speak in the first person, which he was unable to do in his native Irish-English. He could only truly be the subject of his utterance, a subject-enunciator, in a foreign language. As Michèle Vierling-Weiss puts it, 'For others, the foreign language provides a body that they can then inhabit, far from the incestuous suffocation of the Mother tongue, as we see for instance in the case of Samuel Beckett, for whom Irish-English was too close for him to be able to sustain an enunciative position'.³⁷ It was only after his mother's death that Beckett undertook to translate his works into English, and that for him, finally, the 'I' of enunciation in English was no longer out of bounds. In some cases, for someone who has been dispossessed of it, the Mother tongue must die through the body of the mother for it to become a reality at last.³⁸

³⁵ Deleuze, 'Schizologie', 13. ³⁶ Foucault 'La fuite des idées', 123.

³⁷ Vierling-Weiss, 'Que reste-t-il?'. ³⁸ See also Chapter 8 of this volume.

1.5.3 *The Foreign Language as a Way Back to the Mother Tongue*

Learning a foreign tongue sometimes amounts to a detour allowing a return to the self. Using the expedient of the outside as a way back towards the inside is for some an indirect way to return to the origin of trauma. What is more, it is not unusual for a traumatic experience to be approachable only in a foreign language due to the protective screen it provides, the distance from the events, whereas in the Mother tongue they are impossible to put into words. Another language of intimacy, the adopted foreign tongue, makes it possible to escape the incestuous intimacy of the original language.

Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt, for instance, had an experience of this sort.³⁹ The foreign tongue, in this case French, enabled him to reconnect with his original language, German, which he considered to have gone insane – perverted by Nazism – and which he was prohibited from speaking when he came to France as a refugee during the Second World War. He was only able to re-engage with his Mother tongue thanks to French. The language of the social codes (French) made it possible to return to the language of the body (German), which was even more emotionally charged as it had for a while been forbidden and deformed by Nazism. The Mother tongue only exists through its opposition to other languages. When Goldschmidt was a child he was able to use a counter-language, which ultimately enabled him to keep his Mother tongue.⁴⁰

1.5.4 *The Foreign Tongue as a Way Back to Lalangue*

Conversely, learning a foreign language can mean being able to re-enact the experience of exile as a source of elation, the experience of separation as a source of liberation – even without abandoning the Mother tongue, although gaining a slightly less fusional one than *lalangue*. The initial transition from *lalangue* to language, with the renouncement it implies, is also a moment of intense satisfaction for the child: there is a great sense of achievement as, beneath their parents' admiring gaze, they understand the meaning of what is being said and say their first words. It is this that makes learning a foreign language so pleasurable. In other words, learning a foreign language can maintain the fusional bonding with the mother in another form – by learning a language that she does not speak but which she holds in high esteem. In this case, the foreign tongue allows for a gentler separation, with the mother's approval and with the child's fulfilling at one and the same time their own

³⁹ Cf. Chapter 7 of this volume.

⁴⁰ Cf. Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt *La traversée des fleuves* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, Collection Points, 1999).

desire and the mother's personal project, the two being difficult to distinguish. This foreign tongue is thus a language of desire, which allows both mother and child to reconnect with the forgotten language, *lalangue*. The fact that this foreign language learning is granted value in the mother's discourse guarantees the avoidance of conflict between the Mother tongue (the interior) and the acquired language (the exterior); however, the situation is of limited scope, for as the foreign language is mastered with increasing proficiency, so the divide between mother and child increases and the separation grows more acute, producing the very conflict that it was hoped would be avoided, the tug-of-war between interior language and exterior language.

Thus, despite the pleasure derived from the other tongue, the Mother tongue maintains its hold and will not let go – for one always ends up being confronted in the acquired language with the limits experienced in the Mother tongue.

What can be done to make the foreign language into another body-oriented language, even when the maternal phase of *lalangue* has not taken place? What can be done to make it into a language of invention, as the Mother tongue can be, a language inhabited by the body? What can explain the failure of a stay abroad for a language student who, once separated from their Mother tongue, 'in exile', must come back to France for unexpected health reasons?

Why is it, despite its attraction, that the foreign tongue is sometimes a screen concealing what cannot be said in one's own language, generating failed attempts to run away?

1.6 The Mother Tongue or Impossible Separation

Miriam M., one of my students, once told me at the end of a mock English competitive exam, for which I was one of the assessors and which had not gone very well (her spoken English was found wanting: numerous displaced word stresses, improperly pronounced vowels, excessively soft plosives, etc., which at a few days from the exam left her with little hope of success): *my mother does not speak French*.⁴¹ Given the emotion of the student when she said this, it was clear that this was not an attempt at self-vindication but something running far deeper and that reached beyond her performance that day or even her own life story. With these words, she was justifying her own difficulties with the English language and in particular with English phonetics, as becomes immediately apparent: *if my mother does not speak French, then I cannot speak English*. While foreignness stands for hope (being in France means the chance of another life story, another language, another life...), it

⁴¹ The first name and the initial of the surname have been changed.

can also connote the disappointment of that hope if learning the language of the country of this new life has proved, for one reason or another, impossible. If the mother does not speak French, the daughter will not be able to speak English. The experience of unattainable foreignness is re-enacted as a learning failure, revisiting an impossible separation from the country of origin. The mother cannot forget her Mother tongue in her inability to speak French. The daughter will be unable to relinquish hers, which is double, as *lalangue* and the interior language are Arabic while the exterior language is French. It will therefore prove impossible for her to acquire that other 'extra-erior' foreign language, English.

The Mother tongue, therefore, seems to be deeply enmeshed in the possibility of learning a foreign language, whether as help or hindrance. In the case of this young woman, learning English meant re-enacting a failed attempt on her mother's part to learn French. Her experience of exile, charged with an enforced separation from her origins, had been absorbed spongelike by the child, now a student, and was being acted out in her difficulty to learn another language.

What are the subjective effects of a rift, chosen or imposed, from language? What future paths are caused by forgetting, losing, censoring or even repressing it? Does this affect the body in any way? The language? Can one speak of mourning in relation to the effects caused by the loss of the Mother tongue? A separation . . . that seems never to come to an end.⁴²

In this case, while the separation was impossible for the mother, it was achieved by the daughter (who speaks French), but only within certain limits: she will not be able to succeed in another language (not academically at least, without distancing herself from this personal life story), thereby reconnecting herself with her mother's life story. That is indeed what she seems to have tried to do with these words: *my mother does not speak French*.

1.6.1 *French, an Exterior Language, Experienced as a Foreign Tongue*

Sometimes it is French itself, the exterior language – especially school language – that is felt by the child to be foreign because there is too great a discrepancy with respect to the interior language, the language of the family circle. When a child is immersed in a working-class or foreign interior language, distinct from the language spoken at school, how can they speak that school language, learnt beyond the bounds of the family? How can they fail to perceive this acquired language as a language that delegitimizes and debases the language of the family circle, or simply as a language of division

⁴² Vierling-Weiss, 'Que reste-t-il?' ..

that makes of the child an enemy to their parents, an enemy to themselves? How can this inner immigration – which some adopted children are extremely sensitive to – be dealt with? How can the sociological dimension of this rift be negotiated, by which I mean the conflict between the language of the oppressed (the family language) and the language of the oppressors (that used at school, the ‘legitimate’ language)? It seems likely – when the school environment is felt to be antagonistic to the family one – that this discrepancy can give rise to numerous ‘conflicts of loyalty’ between the spoken language and the acquired one, sometimes leading to language and behavioural difficulties in the divisive relationship that it produces with respect to authority. How can this confrontation between two legitimacies, one emotional, the other social, be avoided? How can one attempt to solve this seemingly unsurmountable division through language, in which the division itself is rooted? Annie Ernaux describes this phenomenon very poignantly:

Can it be that I – the small girl from the grocery shop in the rue du Clos-des-Parts, brought up as a child and adolescent in a working-class dialect, a working-class world – intend to write and choose my mentors in the acquired, learnt, literary language, the language that I teach in my present role as a French literature teacher? Can it be that I – without batting an eyelid – intend to write in the literary language that I have broken into like a burglar, in ‘the language of the enemy’ as Jean Genet put it, by which he meant the enemy of my social class? From the beginning I have been torn – caught in a crossfire even – between literary language, the language I have studied and loved, and the language of my origins, of home, of my parents, the language of the oppressed, the language I have since felt ashamed of, but which will always be part of me. Deep down the question is: how can I write without betraying the world I come from?⁴³

What if learning a foreign language were a way to reactivate that initial divide between the interior language – which the interior itself holds in poor esteem (thereby overriding all possibility of speaking the exterior language, or a foreign language, without conflict) – and the exterior language, the only legitimate one, valued but eliciting a feeling of betrayal or of conflict, of exclusion from the first language, which is disparaged? True, the foreign tongue can perhaps be viewed as a means to surpass this conflict, as a form of self-generation, but only within certain limits.

Having witnessed the difficulties encountered by certain children for whom language is a foreign tongue with respect to *lalangue*, thus producing a rift, it seems to me highly unlikely that learning a foreign tongue can be a neutral process: human beings speak the language of their own people. Changing languages amounts to losing that naturalness. Hannah Arendt stressed this point:

⁴³ *Retour à Yvetot* (Paris: Éditions du Mauconduit, 2013), back cover text.

I refused to lose my Mother tongue and kept a certain distance from English [...]. The German language is the only thing that has remained.⁴⁴

Language contains *lalangue*; it contains forgotten affect. This is why some people take so much pleasure in speaking a foreign tongue, with the learning process reactivating *lalangue* that recalls both the rift and the primary pleasure shared with the mother, whereas others are confronted with almost insurmountable difficulties because something relating to an-Other scene – a scene of trauma – is reactivated.⁴⁵

1.6.2 Hypotheses and Conclusion

This research project is in progress, and I advance my hypotheses at this stage with caution.

First, I would contend that in order to move from one language to another, one needs to have confidence in one's Mother tongue and to feel that it is highly valued, for it is this language that has made speech possible.⁴⁶ Miriam was unfortunate in this respect; when the value of the Mother tongue, the language of one's family circle (Arabic in this case), is not acknowledged, it then becomes very hard to venture into a foreign tongue with a light heart. This 'other' language reactivates the initial suffering of the mother – which Miriam has clearly taken upon herself – that emotionally charged environment in which she spoke her first words, first in Arabic, which was discredited by the family circle, and then in French, which her mother never learnt to speak. Miriam already speaks one language (French) that is foreign to her mother; speaking English, a language in a sense doubly foreign, would mean taking the risk that her mother herself would appear a stranger to her.⁴⁷ Thus, there are psycho-emotional limits imposed by one's linguistic family history, in this case by the mother's relationship with French, and more broadly with foreignness.

It is likewise my contention that there exists in every acquired (foreign) rather than transmitted (Mother) tongue a *remainder* of the Mother tongue, notwithstanding the fact that the foreign tongue lies, as Foucault puts it,

⁴⁴ Hannah Arendt, 'A Conversation with Günter Gaus' [1964]. In *The Last Interviews and Other Conversations* (New York: Melville House, 2013). www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVSRJC4KAiE, minute 38.

⁴⁵ This concept is borrowed from Octave Mannoni, *Clefs pour l'imaginaire ou l'autre scène* (Paris: Points, Collection Points Essais, 1985).

⁴⁶ Cf. Marie Rose Moro, 'Passer d'une langue à l'autre, le cas des enfants migrants' (2014), www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwcGUuCPzXs, and 'De l'importance des langues maternelles pour la cohésion' (2015), www.youtube.com/watch?v=9asuUem0rGs. See also Ellen Bialystock, 'On Bilingualism and the Middle Way' (2017), www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwRr_74YkEQ.

⁴⁷ Jacques Hassoun, *Fragments de langue maternelle* (Paris: Payot, 1979).

beyond the bounds of the mother. It nevertheless remains true that within this *beyond-the-bounds-of-the-mother* language, there lies what I would call a *within-the-bounds-of-the-mother* dimension, which seems to transpire in one's speech, in spite of oneself, in another language. This occurs to varying degrees, of course, sometimes to the point of hindering all other language acquisition; a *within-the-bounds-of-the-mother* dimension might perhaps be worth making room for and valuing during the learning process, with the aim either of attempting to escape its influence, at least in part, if only through being aware of it, or simply of coexisting with it, by speaking an English within the bounds of the mother and acknowledged as such. This would amount to a compromise of sorts, allowing for a possible reconciliation with the trauma of the forgotten separation, of the transition from fusional *lalangue* to language proper.

Can the idea be countenanced that this Mother tongue in which memories and desire inhere, this *lalangue*, might be expressed through the intermediary of the foreign tongue? That what is within the bounds of the mother is a necessary constituent of what lies beyond those bounds? If, instead of presenting Miriam M. with a poor mark, we had told her that at this stage her English was as yet strongly imbued with French, but that that was inevitable and in no way her fault, would we have increased this student's chances of success in the competitive exam she wished to take? If we had explained to her that in order to teach English, her own plurilingual life story would prove an asset, but that her pupils would need her to move a little closer to the English language if she was to set a phonological example offering guaranteed authenticity, would we have increased her chances of success?

If the maternal *remainder* is indeed always present, why not legitimize it? Don't students need to have transmitted to them something more than an illusorily perfect code? Can a speaker be transformed into a subject-enunciator – a difficult position to attain in a foreign language (except perhaps for Beckett...) – without venturing to include *lalangue*? Is it not this dimension that is so often lacking in the foreign tongue? Might it not therefore be the case that *consenting to speak imperfectly* is a necessary prerequisite for learning another language? Some people manage to sever as far as possible the ties with their language of origin by going to live abroad, but in most cases, for those who live in France, what is left of the acquired language? What we should perhaps aim for is to cease excluding the language of the mother, of the body, from the foreign tongue – to allow it to return, to allow it to inhere, so as to avoid speaking a disembodied language, a pure code, devoid of affect. Or even, in certain extreme cases, not speaking at all.

With this in mind, here are a few suggestions:

- a semiology of language disorders could be established, to be taught with the aim of tackling English-language learning difficulties according to their relation to the Mother tongue;

- students could be encouraged to accept the idea of speaking an imperfect English, to accept an inevitable remainder due to the traces *left* by the Mother tongue, by alerting them to the role it plays in second language learning;
- students could be made aware of what takes place psycho-emotionally during the childhood language-learning process – in particular, the fact that learning a language immediately thrusts you to the heart of your and your family’s relation to that language, to the heart of things that remain unspoken or are forgotten;
- plurilingual creative writing workshops could be set up, with the aim of valuing the Mother tongue so as to facilitate foreign-language learning;⁴⁸
- students could be taught about language disorders, which would be useful both to language students and to future language teachers; and
- we should abandon the normative approach, which produces feelings of guilt and denies the role of affect in language learning. Why not speak a *(M)other tongue*, at once *within* and *beyond the bounds of the mother* – without going so far as to distort the foreign tongue, but letting a residue, reminiscent of its link to *lalangue*, settle there, such that for a given speaker the foreign tongue is invested bodily, thus standing a better chance of *sounding authentic*?

Jean-Jacques Lecercle makes the following distinction between *insistence* and *existence*: ‘Standard English does not exist, but it insists. What exists is what it ignores and represses – idiolects, dialects, registers and style’.⁴⁹

In light of these few hypotheses, one could therefore let standard English insist, but without either the idiolect or the Mother tongue being denied.

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⁴⁸ See Chapter 3 of this volume.

⁴⁹ Jean-Jacques Lecercle, ‘A global language is not a language’, unpublished paper given at Padua University, 15 February 2013.

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