

## Experiencing otherness and renewal of the processes of subjectivation: confronting the language of the other in a situation of migration in France, Germany, and Brazil

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### Abstract

This article studies the singular relationship that children, adolescents, parents and professionals have with a language other than their mother tongue. In order to do so, the authors rely on three clinical research experiences: participant observations and clinical interviews with newcomer students and specialized teachers in Germany, professional practice analysis groups dedicated to teachers specialized in the reception of allophone students in France, and discussion groups with children and parents of immigrant origin in Brazil. The problematic focuses on the ambiguities, the ambivalences and the paradoxes specific to the acquisition of the language of the host country for children and teenagers. This learning can indeed structure as well as prevent a process of subjectivation often already weakened by the traumatic ordeals linked to migration. The language of the other reveals itself to be a double place of transition: between first original objects and later investments socialized in another cultural framework, between what is familiar and the strangely other. Under what conditions can this learning of the language of the other preserve the paradox, maintain the original link and bring about new links while risking denying the previous one? In what way and under what circumstances can the language of the other serve as an alibi, as a defensive means against the return of a repressed memory, against the expression of a previous intimate wound, of a questioning of identity of another nature, etc.? These are the questions to which this text tries to bring some analyses.

**Keywords:** *migration; mother tongue; subjectivation; ambivalence; culture; intersubjective*

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## Introduction

If, as A. de Waelhens (1966) writes “To speak is first of all to divert from the urgency of the event” (p.380), does speaking the language of the other, a language other than one’s native language, mean momentarily fleeing the traumas that often accompany emigration paths, or displacing them by investing oneself in another language and another culture, or even finding a way to sublimate them through a new way of speaking? What, then, becomes of the language of origin, where traces of memory are held, which is the receptacle of unspeakable experiences, the place where anxiety-provoking ordeals are relegated? Is it buried under the cover of access to another language? In what way can the migratory experience prevent certain children from learning a language and speaking?

Investigating this transition from one language to another, examining what goes on in the partial disinvestment of one’s mother tongue in order to put one’s energy in another language, raises the question as to what is hidden in the area in-between. That is to say in this gap where a desire remains suspended, the desire to be able to act again without suffering the torments of war, genocide or terror, of separation or of a subjective and family history battered by the social history of people.

In what way can this desire or willingness to appropriate the language of the host country be experienced as a rebirth, as a renewed process of subjectivation or, on the contrary, as a stripping-away, as an invasion of intimacy, as betrayal? There could be this ambiguity in wanting to learn the language of the other: a guarantee of access to a new culture, to a new way of belonging to society or,

on the contrary, an experience felt as an annihilation, self-denial, the mark of one’s disloyalty, the risk of denial and oblivion. We must also consider the difficulty of appropriating the language of the other as a way of both revealing and concealing a malaise (Kaës, 2012). This indicates a defensive attitude in the face of the invasive or intrusive feeling of an unbearable otherness. It’s also provides an alibi for the wounds, vulnerabilities and flaws in the process of subjectivation, sometimes prior to the traumatic events that precede migration, and sometimes directly linked to it. It should also be emphasized that this malaise may be linked to the place migrants occupy in the host country’s imaginary; in other words, the link established between migrants and their host country is decisive for their experiences in the language of the other.

To study the different components of immersion in a language other than the mother tongue in families, children and adolescents in a situation of migration in France, Germany and Brazil, we used a series of data collection tools:

– In Germany, we observed three language classes (*Willkommenklassen*) in Berlin, each consisting of about fifteen teenagers between the ages of sixteen and twenty, from Syria, Afghanistan and various African countries, as well as a young Russian girl. It is important to note the country of origin, as cultural aspects are important in classroom interactions between learners and with the professionals. As well as observing these students’ relationship to the language and the teaching practices, interviews were held in German in Berlin with four language tutors, two of whom, Elga H<sup>1</sup>. and Elga G., are themselves Russian emigrants married to Germans. They

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<sup>1</sup> To ensure the anonymity of all research participants, all names mentioned here have been appropriately changed.

therefore teach a language other than their language of origin, and we can form an assumption on their potential identification with the young people with whom they communicate, an identifying relationship that can guide our data analysis. The other interviews were conducted with a teacher, U., who had spent several years in Brazil, and with a bilingual French teacher, A. (whose mother is German and whose father is French), originally a German teacher in France and who wanted to live in Berlin and teach German in *Willkommen-klasse*. The trajectories of the teachers themselves raise the question of the central role of the relationship to the language of the other, both among pupils and teachers.

Finally, group interviews were conducted with the adolescents themselves at the end of a morning of observation, and after participating in their interactions in class.

– In France, with support from CASNAV 93 and 75, we ran six discussion sessions, bringing together two distinct groups of professionals from different teams, but all directly involved (teachers, social workers, student affairs coordinators (*Conseillers Principaux d'Education*), health center staff, etc.) with these children, adolescents and their parents. They were invited to share their expertise, opinions, difficulties and possible needs as regards their work with families with a migrant background. What the exiles bring to these schemes (UPE2A and FLE) profoundly affects the subjectivity and, more significantly, the professionalism of those who work there. We will question the multiple ways in which the figure of the foreigner, linked with the figures of otherness (the other in oneself, the other of a different sex and generation, the other of a different culture, the multitude of others...), particularly through the difference in language, partly overwrites other figures of

difference in the discourse of the various people involved. However, we also note the extent to which using this figure of the foreigner can be a powerful lever for triggering a process of differentiation by acknowledging the other within oneself, together with what cannot be said about that other, let alone translated.

A new group has recently been set up, again in the Paris region. This time it will bring together an entire team (rather than professionals from different teams) and will therefore focus more particularly on the elements engaged at group and institutional level.

These data are supplemented by the (long-standing) clinical practice of the researchers who run these practice analysis groups with the CASNAV. The paths taken by the families that they support in the care facilities are, in all respects, similar to those of the families dealt with in the UPE2A units.

In Brazil, with the aim of taking better account of the educational situation of migrant children, we are currently conducting an action-research project involving different setups in four schools in São Paulo (one for children aged 0-4, one for children aged 4-6 and two for children aged 6-15). In consultation with the professionals, we propose a specific system (device) in each school: a conversation group with teenagers, a conversation group with teachers, a conversation group with migrant families, and support for certain children or families. In this article, we will give particular focus to three events that occurred on different occasions. The first is a bilingual storytelling session for children aged 2-4 years. The second is based on a group session in which knowledge and experiences were shared, focused on the difficulties and needs

of migrant parents with regard to the schooling of their children. The third is a meeting with the staff at a school for children aged 6-15.

We would like to point out that we became involved after a school principal asked our group – *Grupo Veredas de Psicanálise e Imigração*, led by Miriam Debieux Rosa and based at the Universidade de São Paulo – to assist a small boy, the son of a Bolivian couple. He was five years old at the time and did not speak any language. We later discovered that this is a common symptom among the children of Bolivians living in São Paulo (Primo & Rosa, 2022). Some of them are diagnosed with autism.

Using this heterogeneous but congruent clinical set, we crossed several sets of assumptions which opened the way for analysis of the complexity of what we will call here the ‘relationship with the language of the other’.

Initially, we hypothesized that the sentiment of foreignness could be a source of jubilation, thanks to the sense of control that language gives to the environment. Here, we need only think of Freud’s analysis of Fort/Da in his article *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1920/2017). The first line of analysis thus takes the idea of an opposition between activity/passivity, the desire for control/withdrawal, the fear of the unknown, of difference.

Exploring this transitional function of language, not only between internal and external reality, but also and most importantly between the culture of origin and the host culture, also means questioning the subjective, bodily relationship to sounds, and/or the distanced, rational relationship to the senses. The language of the other turns out to be a dual place of transition, but also a dual connection, a transition between the first source objects

and subsequent socialized investments in another cultural framework, a transition between what is familiar and what is otherly foreign. In this respect, we can put forward the hypothesis that, for adolescents in particular (numerous in our research projects in France and Germany), the discovery of this other language is accompanied by the discovery of another body, another identity, other desires. This twofold renewal comes with paradoxes as well as its own rationale. We can hence ask ourselves: for the young people we will discuss below, isn’t the language of the other also the language of discovery of adolescent sexuality, in other words, a different emotional language to that of childhood? Is it simpler or more complicated to discover sexuality in a language other than one’s mother tongue? Is it paradoxical to discover sexual otherness in a cultural otherness or, on the contrary, does it facilitate the adolescent structural paradox of having to use the same words for two distinct forms of love (the tender form and the erotic form)?

Under what conditions can learning the language of the other uphold the paradox, maintain the original link and bring about new links, while risking denial of the previous connection? In what way and under what circumstances can the language of the other serve as an alibi, as a defensive tactic against the return of the repressed, against the expression of an earlier, intimate wound, of a different kind of questioning of identity, and so on?

Our analysis is thus caught in this inevitable oscillation between desire for joyous mastery, guilt and inhibition. The process of a renewed subjectivation, entangled with the undermining of identity, is exposed both in the forms of resistance to change and denial, and

in the movements towards the other, in the investment in new objects, but also in the adhesions and enduring ties to the original objects.

### The command of language as a metaphor for a desire for control

In this article, we will focus on data – collected by Christiane Montandon in German – from observations and interviews conducted in Berlin in three *Willkommenklassen*. The other data – collected by Aurélie Maurin Souvignet in France and Joana Sampaio Primo in Brazil – will serve as a counterpoint to our joint analyses.

As Freud's analysis of the Fort-Da game (Freud, 1920/2017) suggests, using speech to accompany gestures can be interpreted as a desire to control a situation in which the passive individual becomes active. The (observed) jubilant eagerness of some adolescents (of Afghan or Syrian origin in this case) to master the use of German prepositions can be seen a kind of game that, to them, feels like a power-act (Mendel, 1973, p. 52) with regard to everyday objects and their day-to-day activities.

While observing the German language class in Berlin, at times the pleasure derived from manipulating new turns of phrase in German could be seen, while at other times, there was clearly apprehension, circumspection, or even reluctance to start a sentence. When we speak of *immersion* in a language, the aquatic metaphor covers some very different attitudes among the speakers, depending on the relationship they experience with the language. For example, some young girls (also Afghan or Syrian) are less daring when it comes to *diving* into this linguistic *bath*, unlike the boys observed, who readily *take the plunge*. The

group interviews conducted with the latter reveal that they have strong expectations from this command of the language in order to acquire a profession and establish themselves in a trade. This gender difference in attitude – a winning attitude among boys versus a more timid approach from the girls – must be put into a cultural perspective. The weight of the culture of origin is particularly evident in what is perceived to be private or public, for example. Such perceptive categorization also demonstrates the researcher's grounding in her own social imaginary and her representation of the other culture, as if this relationship to language was a private matter for women, marked by the seal of intimacy, whereas men are able to assert themselves with ease in the language of the other, which is not subject to taboos or modest reluctance. This gendered cultural difference is all the more revealing of the place of women in certain societies: a Russian teenager, L., who attended the same language class, spoke out against this reserved behavior and could not stand such timidity. Her attitude of revolt before this passivity reinforced the impression of audacity, but also confirmed the pleasure with which this young Russian girl threw herself into learning German, a powerful contrast with the reserve observed among other young women. The German teacher, Elga H., observed in this class, was herself a Russian emigrant so it goes without saying that L. could easily identify with her teacher: 'She's very keen to learn German,' it was said, off the cuff, between classes.

These clear differences in posture with regard to the language of the other demonstrate the dual anchoring of language: the symbolic, polysemic and polyphonic structure of all language activity, indicating the speaker's sense of belonging to a cultural

group, but also the singular legacy of a mother tongue that carries emotional resonances and latent emotions from the first learning experiences. Every language is rooted in a cultural background, with its nursery rhymes, songs, sounds, idioms, proverbs and emotional resonances. On the one hand, language is thus seen as an object invested with a very personal emotional experience and, on the other hand, in its communicative scope, as a largely functional, utilitarian device, enabling us to form a relationship with the other. When it comes to leaving one's mother tongue for another language, this ambivalence towards language carries the promise of a possible change of identity but also the threat of a loss of self, a disavowal of what one was, at the risk of forgetting oneself.

In her interview, Elga H. underlines these gendered cultural differences: 'They cannot play in the same way; there are games they cannot play, questions they cannot answer.' Here, she is referring to the role-playing games and game-like situations she uses in class to encourage language interaction. She notes that a certain juvenile behavior (*'jugendliches Verhalten, wie sie ausgehen dürfen, wie Mädchen mit Jungen umgehen'*) is the norm for girls in terms of how they react to and behave with men and that this conveys certain taboos. This risk of transgression highlights the extent to which the relationship to language – in its elocution, in the infra- and para-linguistic – engages something of the body; the linguistic universe, or rather public speaking, can thus be experienced as a scene of intrusion, a form of exposure that reveals the inadmissible in a foreign language that we do not master. 'For example, when we sang at Christmas, the two Afghan girls couldn't sing in front of men; there is no way of expressing something through the body – singing and

dancing involve the body too much.' This example raises two levels of analysis: the observation of cultural matter among these young girls, but also the observation of cultural matter among the professionals who probably did not foresee that singing to mark another religion's festival, in another language, in front of boys with the same cultural origins, was a particularly demanding act for these girls. The repercussions of such an act in the private sphere are obviously not well measured here in the context of language training. In the course of the interview, this teacher seems to become aware of how acts like this bring to light the discriminatory repercussions for women in this different cultural imaginary. It is therefore understandable that this subjection to cultural norms leads these young girls, who are also in the minority in the male-dominated class, to refuse the transgression and reveals the difficulty of engaging in a process of subjectification.

The duplicity of language prompts us to see the gap between mother tongue and host language as paradoxical and possibly conflictual, since this transitional experience calls on internal and external realities, past memories and present demands that stand out when formulated, even with previous experience. 'The act of speaking is always caught between subjectivity and objectivity, the principle of pleasure and the principle of reality. What is more, this position presupposes the combined movements of projective and introjective identification' (Gori, 1977, p. 96.). Thus, for these adolescents in Berlin, the language of the other will also be the language in which they discover sexuality, explored in an emotional language other than that of childhood, which is accompanied by sounds, abstract resonances which both close and open up other mnemonic traces. Hence, this language of the

other, as a transitional space, confronts them with paradoxical transactions, where the transition from adolescence to adulthood goes hand-in-hand with an abandoning of their first investments, a paradox encompassing the dual experience of loss and gain, of uprooting and the promise of a new sense of identity in this process of subjectivation.

As we explore this function of transition in the process of acquiring the language of the other, which is part of the passage from the culture of origin to the host culture, we hypothesize that there are two ways of understanding language interactions: either as expressing a way of being in the world, reflecting a certain collective relationship to the socio-cultural environment, or as calling on psychic processes loaded with mnemonic traces, rooted in a mother tongue and drawing on an experience that has not yet been consciously elaborated. This character, both collective and individually rooted in each one of us, gives language this function of receptacle, one that is singular and socially transversal, and that helps to make the speaker a member of a community, required to manage their relations with regard to the customs and traditions of a society where they must comply with conversational norms and habits as they interact with others (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1998). Thus U., one of the teachers at this vocational college, told us about her educational goal of bringing students into the culture via the language but also, for example, by taking them to the Berlinale, ‘with films that dealt with an important aspect for refugees, *der erste film Fortuna, das war ein schwarzer Regisseur mit englischen Untertitel, und es spielt in einem Kloster, mit diesem Thema: Flucht*<sup>2</sup>. She says

that she tries to get them enthusiastic about the German language: ‘You don't just learn by teaching, by grammar, books, *sondern die Schüler sollen auch mit verschiedenen Bereichen des stätischen Lebens bekannt gemacht werden, und auch das kulturell Leben. Und vielleicht auch wie irgendwo sie in dieser Stadt leben können*; to learn the language is to become culturally integrated into the city’.

By positing language as a receptacle for experiences, whether conscious or unconscious, “not only of family history but of the history of the social group and the culture in which it (speech) is inserted” (Rouchy, 1998, p. 74), we assume that there are two ways of understanding language interactions: either as syntactic mechanisms or as psychic processes: “This reveals something about the way these components work in language and non-language interactions. It is not a question of sharing thought content but non-thought content” (Rouchy, 1998, p. 75). This non-thought refers to a sound and imaginary halo that surrounds certain phrases of the language, depending on the contexts in which they were heard and pronounced. For example, a question asked in the mother tongue, and the same question asked in the language of the other, will not be perceived in the same way. When Saduman Kadi (a Franco-Turkish psycho-sociologist), spoke to an all-female group on the topic of parenthood, she asked – in Turkish – “So why do you wear the headscarf?” and found that the same question, when asked in French, was not received in the same way by the Turkish women in the group. ‘Surprised by my question, the Turkish interviewee replied: ‘Funnily, when it’s you, it doesn’t have

<sup>2</sup> Translation: the first film, with a black director and English subtitles, was filmed in a cloister and dealt with the theme of escape or exile’.

the same effect on me!’ (Saduman, 2019, p. 164)<sup>3</sup>.

Such a reaction clearly indicates the need to differentiate between sense and meaning: when translating, the sense, i.e. the literal, objective content, remains the same, but the meaning changes because it is expressed in the mother tongue or in a foreign language, and depends on the imaginary and the emotional and affective resonances formed against the background of the mother tongue. It is this untranslatable remnant that will have to be sought out and tempered when the newcomer starts to familiarize themselves with the other language. The anchoring of language in the body shows to what extent language can be a receptacle that collects not only the traumatic events experienced, but also new objects of investment, a pledge of renewal and openness to new alliances, i.e. a sign of renewal of the subjectivation processes.

Here we adopt the course marked out by René Kaës and, with him, we cross “an epistemological and methodological boundary when we seek to apply to the societal field what psychoanalysis teaches us about unconscious alliances” (Kaës, 2014, p. 191). What we must retain from this particularly heuristic concept is that unconscious alliances are psychic formations that structure and reinforce in the subjects who develop them certain psychic processes, meaning that the subjects find themselves obliged to maintain the alliance for themselves, for the needs of the other and for their reciprocal bond. While alliances can be structuring (like the ‘narcissistic contract’ described by Piera Aulagnier in 1975), they can also be defensive and based on repression

or denial, or they may be offensive and constitute a threat to those who lie outside of them. The clinical research program we pursue explores “the effects of the collapse of unconscious, structuring alliances and the growth of pathological, defensive alliances on malaise and psychic suffering in hypermodern societies” (Kaës, 2014, p. 192)

### **The word ‘foreign’, its exoticism and its alienness as a receptacle of past experiences, conveying unconscious motions**

With reference to Roland Gori’s proposed analysis of a “transitional anchoring of language” (Gori, 1977, p. 85), we can make the assumption that the sound form of words can serve as a receptacle for affects, and help to contain a traumatic and painful experience, thus invoking an internal reality: “As such, the “word” can be more or less loaded with subjective or objective valences” (Gori, 1977, p. 86). ‘As a means of coping with depressive anxiety’, certain words may then take on emotionally charged valences in these migrant children and adolescents, instead of merely referring to an objectively defined code. Using the foreign language may reveal the transitional power of certain words, invested more specifically by certain people, who can then take them on board to pass from their mother tongue to the language of the other.

This is precisely what we noticed during a bilingual storytelling session for two- to four-year-olds in Brazil. At an end-of-school-year party, there were a number of cultural presentations. The staff at this school for children aged 0-4 in São Paulo invited us to do a bilingual storytelling session in Portuguese

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<sup>3</sup> We refer the reader to this article to comprehend the extent of the perspectives it opens with regard to what is conveyed by and in the Franco-Turkish cultural imaginary.

and Spanish, as Spanish was the native language of most migrants. During our presentation, a little girl, aged about three and from a Bolivian family, first sat down and turned her back on us. When we started speaking Spanish, she turned around and looked at us with great interest. When the story was over, she didn't want to leave us! Her father came to pick her up, but she wouldn't move. He explained that at home they spoke only Spanish. The hypothesis of the sound form of words being used as a receptacle for affects is very clearly seen here. The possibility of hearing the mother tongue – the language spoken at home – while in school, where the other language is usually spoken, shows how important social recognition of the affective sound of the language is in offering children a better welcome.

Similarly, in France, in an area with a dense migrant population, a school for children aged three to five had an educational project for the youngest children that included the aim of gradually learning to say 'hello' in the mother tongue of every child in the class, and of the professionals involved (teachers and assistants). Hence, at the start of the day – the time to say 'hello' – this socio-affective recognition approach became the norm.

In a letter to Wilhelm Fliess dated 29 December 1897, Freud shows the unconscious resonances of this multilingual grounding. He shares some elements of interpretation of E.'s story about the *Käfer*, a beetle which he later associates with *Marienkäfer* (ladybugs). His mother's name was Marie and the link between these two words also took in a French expression: 'Que faire?', referring to his mother's indecision as to whether to get married, but also to his fondness for his nurse, who was French and 'the object of his first love'. Freud adds that E., his patient, had

learned French before German (Freud, 1950). We can thus see a kind of crystallizing of libidinal psychic motions where the word serves as a container, a receptacle for older affects, but also has a metaphorical function in that it reminds him of his mother's bewilderment about whether to marry or not.

The mother tongue is the language that, in these first sounds, welcomes and receives the affects and emotions of the first instinctual investments; as such, we can see a dual 'translation' – a linguistic one and a psychic one. The words of the mother tongue, of the original language, are the first medium associated with the affects and instinctual motions that will subsequently pass through the other language, taking on other symbolic meanings. Freud writes about this and the value of looking at the poetic creation of language to better identify what unconsciously resonates with the subject.

This is exactly what a French teacher suggested to her group of high school students who were not native French speakers (mostly boys from sub-Saharan Africa), with an activity featuring song, rap and slam, that she now repeats every year. The idea is to immerse these young people in a creative situation for several weeks: they talk, then write, then record original texts mixing languages, experiences, and past and present feelings. During one of our sessions analyzing practices, the teacher behind this project explained that, for the first time, these young people were able to connect the traumatic events of the past to their daily lives as young people in Paris today. In other words, in this professional's experience, only the sublimatory potential of language made it possible to bridge the gulf between past and present, trauma and its symbolization. As is often the case, this innovative project was born out of a gridlock situation in

which the teacher found herself: she was unable to get the young people she was working with to express singular emotions. Only functional aspects emerged when they expressed themselves in French. Yet she felt a powerful need and a strong but totally repressed capacity to tell and talk about their stories, their journeys, and their lives today. This was almost impossible to achieve in a conversational type of language exchange. We formulated the hypothesis, shared by the practice analysis group, that paradoxically, the risk of loss of meaning was too great in a non-sublimated language exchange, i.e. when addressing a non-staged message directly to another. Using poetry, including, and perhaps even more so, in a brazen form such as rap or slam, seemed to be the only way of achieving poiesis, i.e. a composition, and ensuring authentic transmission, i.e. a semiology. Staged in this way, the message could finally be delivered. It is no different to what Primo Levi did. We were able to read and listen to the result of this creative work, which combined undeniable artistic aspects (these are talented young people!) with significant and visibly symbolizing aspects. The words of the original language thus allowed the students to express the emotion of the present, while the words of the language being learned gave new meaning to the painful experiences of the past, and vice versa. The whole process was also aided by the group work involved in writing and interpreting their creations using several voices.

Escape and renewal in the mother tongue can be seen in another example – the story that Olga G. tells in an interview, when she expresses her pride at having been able to relieve the great distress of a young Syrian by listening to her speak, *in* her mother tongue, about what haunted her. For more than an hour, the teacher listened as the story was told,

not understanding any of the details but realizing how much she could elicit by lending an ear to those who had been through an ordeal and who had, until then, been unable to express it. In this case, the phatic function (Jakobson, 1963) appears to be much more valuable than the referential function, because what is said reveals and simultaneously conceals from the correspondent what cannot be said directly. This experience has been put to the test many times in therapeutic situations in the care facilities where we also work.

Language conveys the implied imaginary that has become affixed to certain words and expressions, depending on the context in which the subject has heard, pronounced and exchanged them. The depth of the imaginary and the symbolic revealed by the relationship with a foreign language is developed in this special context which connects a professional with the children and teenagers in their care, and which hinges on the atmosphere created by each individual, according to their own relationship with the language. This is true in the transition to another language, but there are many other examples in situations where the initial access to the language is disrupted, such as delayed speech, stuttering, mutism, and so on.

These different attitudes shows how far the relationship with the language of the other draws, on the one hand, on a bodily experience rooted in the intimate and cultural experience of immersion in the mother tongue and, on the other hand, how this relationship with the language of the other can be based on the identifying relations that favor language acquisition.

However, this kind of immersion in the language of the other, as the host language, also concerns professionals: most of those we

met have family histories of exile or colonization. Let us take the example of the two Russian migrants who became German teachers: one of them opted for a more didactic approach to the language, while the other placed significant emphasis on the affect and to what was important to her from an ethical and axiological viewpoint in her decision to migrate to Europe. This is apparent in their teaching strategies: what they want to transmit to their students through language learning encompasses some very different perspectives. From the way in which they interact with the migrant students during their lessons, and the way in which they talk about the points that are important to them in their teaching, we can pinpoint the identifying mechanisms that they apply in their relationships with their students. For example, E.G. emphasizes democracy, the political importance of freedom of expression, of being a citizen and of being able to participate in city life: during the interviews, her students repeat the word ‘Democracy’ when asked: ‘What is most important to you?’ What struck them most, they say, is ‘democracy in Europe’; Elga G. looks on with emotion at these declarations from her African and Syrian students, to whom she hopes to pass on values that are important to her. This kind of word is seen as a ‘door-opener’, opening the way for them in the host country.

During the group interviews, the young Afghans, Iranians and Syrians spoke of how weekends and holidays are testing times of isolation and relegation for them, because they find it very difficult to make contact with the locals. For example, they are banned from entering nightclubs if they do not come along with a girl, which is impossible since there is no question of girls from their own cultural group going along with them. There is evi-

dently a lot of ambivalence over this! According to them, the only way to meet locals and speak German is at sports clubs.

To overcome this marginalization, Elga H. had thought about getting them to exchange letters as a way of learning the host country language. E.H. is certainly more sensitive to the grammatical requirements and syntax of the language, as if immersion in the host language was key to integration, forming a new foundation for identity: language is seen as a medium for rebuilding oneself.

After a few months, however, she gave up on this idea, because it turned out that the absence of a face-to-face relationship deprived this linguistic exercise of its phatic dimension, of the mutual acceptance of the way each person experiences the language, and only retained the referential function (Jakobson, 1963) that is too abstract, too artificial and too watered-down to satisfy these migrant adolescents’ need for contact. Indeed, to enter into a relationship with someone is also to see how they listen, to perceive how they receive your message, to feel the affects your words have. What they missed in letter-writing could be explained by the asymmetry between what they had to say and how they said it; because saying something, or rather writing it, does not make up for the absence of someone to talk to.

### **The difficult relationship with the language of the other: a challenge or an *alibi*?**

This relationship to the language of the other goes hand-in-hand with the experience of otherness, which tests a past experience of separation and rekindles the ambivalent abandonment of the fusional experience. As a chal-

lenge, in these psychic motions of displacement, this process of appropriating another language calls for investment in other objects, to ‘detach’ or distance oneself from one’s original language, a form of detachment that, for some, can be experienced as denial.

As an alibi, this difficulty in appropriating the other’s language can be a sign of attachment, of the impossibility of letting go of a symbiotic state: such marked confrontation with otherness is a threat of intrusion and Break down. Some learners therefore remain attached or ‘cling’ to their mother tongue, where an intimacy of identity has taken root and is shaken and undermined by any relationship with the language of the other, with otherness.

In an article (Maurin & Prompsy, 2018) on mutism outside the family circle among children whose parents are the first generation to experience exile, we asked a ‘seemingly simple’ question but one that “conceals an unfathomable clinical complexity in the meanders of transfer: for what reason/why break the silence?” (Maurin & Prompsy, 2018, p.152).

To answer this, we can refer to the second scene observed in a school in São Paulo. As we mentioned earlier, our research in Brazil seeks to support the schooling of migrant children and help them when they encounter difficulties in their initial access to the language. To better understand this situation, we organized meetings with a number of migrant parents living in the same district of São Paulo, to let them share their experiences, knowledge, opinions, difficulties and possible needs with regard to their children’s schooling. Just as much research has investigated possibilities for psychoanalytic interventions outside the classic dual setting, such as Guerra (2021), our starting point was a *clinical and political conception* (Rosa, 2016) stating that

when psychoanalysis researches and works with marginalized populations, it must reflect on the complexity of these situations. If our analyses fail to account for the impacts of social connections, we run the risk of not regarding the effects of social problems. We can see this, for example, in the increase in the number of autism diagnoses among migrant children. This phenomenon does not take into account the effects that social connections can have on Bolivian migrants in Brazil, for example.

We would like to draw attention to two situations observed at the same meeting. The mother of a four-year-old girl expressed her daughter’s difficulty with speaking: before starting school, the little girl did not speak any language, then she gradually started to say a few words. We then asked all the participants if they had been recommended to speak only Portuguese with their children. It was something they had all heard – sometimes at the doctor’s, sometimes at school. When we mentioned the importance of speaking to children in their mother tongue, one mother interrupted us to say that if they spoke their mother tongue, it would be more difficult for their children to integrate in Brazil.

Taking these situations into consideration, we realized the complexity of social connections for migrant parents in São Paulo: on the one hand, they are not encouraged to speak their own language with their children, and on the other, they do not really have the opportunity to learn Portuguese. In addition to this complicated social position, there are also the paradoxes of being a migrant, i.e. how speaking one’s own language or the language of the other implies being between two cultures: “[...] children born to immigrant parents appear to ‘straddle two cultures’, as if they were ‘torn’ or ‘stretched’, as we sometimes hear,

between two cultures implicitly thought to be irreconcilable or radically different” (Failaze & Laacher, 2014, p. 18).

A third and final Brazilian situation will bring us to the conclusion of this article. In a meeting with the staff of a school for children aged six to fifteen, teachers were invited to give their opinion on the situation of migrant pupils. Several of them spoke about the silence of these pupils. One teacher said that she had never heard the voices of some of them. Another teacher said that when he asked the students, ‘Who can speak Spanish here?’, no one answered. Their perception testifies to the fragile condition of migrant pupils and especially the difficulty of being between two languages, one of which is perceived as second-class. Sometimes, these children really seem to forget their mother tongue, while in other cases they do not want to take the risk of exposing themselves their language. It is not only these children, it is a fact that migratory phenomena create borders in the reception of migrants (Mannarini, 2022).

To conclude with this metaphor of ‘detachment’ versus ‘attachment’, it is understandable how, through these different attitudes in the learning process and these different relationships to the language of origin and to the language of the other, something of an intimate experience is expressed. This interpretation tallies with what Ernst Cassirer said about language as the original locus of metaphor: “Language is, by its very nature and essence, metaphorical” (Cassirer, 1944, p. 109).

If we continue with this metaphorical dimension of language, then we understand that attachment and detachment are two sides of the same process: if certain migrant learners remain attached to their culture of origin, particularly through language, and are unable to detach themselves from this primordial

rooting, then we witness what some call ‘school drop-out’. Others who are too attached too quickly can sometimes ‘drop out’ or become detached from themselves and de-compensate psychologically, to the point of developing a pathology or constructing themselves through a false-self (as-if) personality. Such is the ambiguity of detachment/attachment as a metaphor for a difficult experience of otherness. We should then question the process at work and the ambivalence that it inevitably reveals: between the desire for emancipation and adherence, and between (a)filiation and the loss of bearings.

These multiple affective, symbolic, cognitive and experiential anchors of the relationship to language (mother tongue or language of the other, of others) highlight the complexity of the identifying movements revealing the diffractive function that language fulfills by triggering a rearrangement of the previous support mechanisms: this is the issue at stake in psychoanalytical research into the relationship to language as a barometer (or nodal point) of social connections in the processes of subjectivation.

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