

Maternal Care (Function) and Language¹

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Introduction

Living with a child from its birth, by its side, as it grows we live with its little shouts, its crying, but also smiles. At the same time, we live with an expectation that is sometimes agonizing: that of the first word, the first phrase, the emergence of speech.

And suddenly, language finds us; its own language. To loosely paraphrase Titos Patricios' verse *Suddenly Poetry Finds You*. As simple as that. It's like a miracle, a miraculous "poem"!

If we try to "analyze" this miracle, to place it under the microscope of our scientific understanding, a strange feeling emerges within us, we feel as if we are defiling something sacred.

¹ This text is a first edited form of my notes on which I based the lecture I gave at the "Talks on the Language at Aeginition Hospital" series of lectures, following an invitation by Costas Potagas' (June 2019). Then, Kia Thanopoulou's invitation to publish it in "Systemic Thinking and Psychotherapy" journal prompted me to transcribe it. The text retains the personal mood as well as the flow of oral speech, which I consider components of the text: It is written the same way it "went on" stage. This last sentence will be more meaningful after having read the last chapter of the text. The video recording of the speech (without the discussion that followed) is available online at Bodossaki Lectures on Demand-BLOD <https://www.blod.gr>.

And if we want to make this miracle happen, make it happen faster, using the tools of our science, we may destroy it.

The emergence of the maternal language cannot be taught to the child. It appears: Suddenly, it “stands up” and “walks”. And it takes steps and leans on many things in order to appear.

So, what does it lean on and what is it that provides these steps with the necessary consistency? I would call it *maternal care or maternal function*. A kind of “embrace” that contains and keeps and connects and composes, and tames that gives meaning - or better still returns meaning.

If the child, as described by science, and the real-life child, seem sometimes so different to one another, maybe an effort to reconcile the two could be worthwhile. Perhaps this effort would eventually “tame” the way we see children, the way we think of them. The words or thoughts, that follow are included in this effort.

I encountered some of these rather simplistic aforementioned thoughts, as I was going through some old folders, looking back at my own wanderings within the issues of language led by my therapeutic work with children. A work impossible without the use of language. A work that also doesn't care for language that is “stiff”, overly technical abstract and lifeless.

Old folders... Looking back to the past... A loud reminder of a loss...

How could one truly speak about language if he didn't talk about loss? What language, what kind of language is born (if it can be born) through a persistent denial of loss? Or through the search for – or the illusion of – a complete fulfillment, where everything is constantly added, and nothing is ever removed? A self-satisfied, but so meaningless fulfillment - not exclusively in the area of language².

And above all, what else is there to be softened by language if not loss?

What were these notes in these old congested folders? The few traces left of an encounter that marked my interest in language: an encounter about maternal language, a TV show³ on the same subject that I think has gone missing. But mostly people who made it come alive, who no longer exist.

In these few traces left from the past, I found the program script. The date is nowhere to be found. Many years have passed since.

In this script I am at the typist's with these two persons as we were in this long lost footage: Tasos Christidis and Thanasis Tzavaras. Two people who helped me love language and reconcile it with its science and our lives.

² Let us recall the *Disappearance (La disparition)* of Georges Perec, a book written without the letter *e*, an internal subtle reminder, which may go unnoticed by unsuspecting reader, of both his parents' loss during World War II.

³ *Babylon*, a TV show, presented by D. Maronitis (1994)

I am writing an introduction to this subject, not an old fighter's elegy. Among other things there is also a purely scientific objective, an imperative need, to recall a unique – in my opinion - text that condenses masterfully the most profound thoughts that have been written in Greece (and not only) on the subject of “Language, Linguistics and Psychoanalysis”. We can at least recall it whenever we wish, bring it back to life at will, continue our discussion with it. Something we can no longer do with Tassos himself.

Its title is “The nature of language”⁴ and it will support me for the rest of this writing.

Maternal care - Maternal function

The title of my article is a little awkward (careless, one could say): *Maternal function or maternal care?* The awkwardness basically expresses a dilemma.

It represents my process from the maternal language, that made me think about language itself, to my present dilemma: my first thought was *Maternal care and language*, which was then challenged by the second one: *Maternal function and language*⁵.

A dilemma that may “open” a door for us and could also lead us to the “heart”, to the essence of this issue.

Speaking of “heart”, I would say that *maternal care* touches me more. Not just because it carries some of the warmth of my aforementioned meetings about maternal language, being their continuation of sorts. But also because it is built on the accumulation of my clinical experience through the years, and it highlights the concept of care as central to the therapeutic effort. A belief that has been growing stronger inside me in recent years.

The concept of care has always had a “secondary”, an “auxiliary”-even derogatory- connotation, in mental health settings, as well as in the main theoretical construct of psychoanalysis⁶. At best it referred to something practical that supported the surfacing (and highlighting) of our noble psychotherapeutic work, and of the even nobler psychoanalytic work (divan or non-divan⁷ analysis - to mention the important psychoanalytic efforts for a fruitful association with psychiatric practices during the 1980s in France).

At best, care remained merely a gentle nursing or medical practice, which albeit necessary, was shallow and was mainly supportive or auxiliary to psychotherapy.

⁴ Α.-Φ. Χριστίδης, Η φύση της γλώσσας, στο: Ιστορία της Ελληνικής Γλώσσας, Από τις αρχές έως την ύστερη αρχαιότητα, Επιστημονική Επιμέλεια Α.-Φ. Χριστίδης, ΚΕΝΤΡΟ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗΣ ΓΛΩΣΣΑΣ, Ινστιτούτο Νεοελληνικών Σπουδών (ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΜΑΝΩΛΗ ΤΡΙΑΝΤΑΦΥΛΛΙΔΗ), σ. 21-52

⁵ Dilemma that was “solved” in the title of the presentation in the seminar announcement: *Maternal function in Greek language, Maternal care in the English version of the title*

⁶ With the exception of the movement of institutional psychotherapy (*psychothérapie institutionnelle*) in France. For a brief overview of this movement, see below, Pierre Delion, *Τι είναι η θεσμική ψυχοθεραπεία, Συζήτηση με τον Yasuo Miwaki, Εν τόμω/ΣΥΜΕΠΕ, Θεσσαλονίκη, 2019*

⁷ P.-C. Racamier, *Le psychanalyste sans divan, La psychanalyse et les institutions de soins psychiatriques*, Payot, Paris, 1983

Today I believe that the concept of care is central and crucial⁸ and that psychotherapy is a form of care.

Thus, care has a warm human dimension. It is an *attitude*.

Maternal care was transformed into *Maternal function*, as I was wondering if we should emphasize more on a neutral version of *care* by choosing the term *function* as a more explicit scientific approach, which allows for more pedagogical wording, when addressing mental health professionals. There is however another, more important reason that imposes this version: the term functioning implies that care can be detached from its full attachment to the mother- even if it still mainly refers to that. The term function allows for a more dynamic understanding, and thus each mother may remain the main person, but not necessarily *the main responsible person* (for whatever will emerge as a problem), not necessarily the main culprit.

The mother is not solely and fully responsible for the *Maternal function*, even though she is subsequently considered as having provided all the care (and as being totally responsible), even for what might have been an outcome of medically necessary actions⁹. A mother shares care, entrusts care, is replaced by others in care from an environment (adequately or inadequately). Maternal care exists largely due to this capability or ability. And the environment's (not only family environment but also social) good enough (or not good enough) response, plays an important part. Nevertheless, ultimately, we call all these kinds of care or their absence "Mother".

This dilemma, between care and function, can be understood as a warm-cold, as a tender-distant, as a human-scientific dipole. In an extreme inversion of it, we may see one pole canceling the other, in a paradoxical, yet so enlightening version of it, where the "flawless" performance of the maternal function, which faithfully obeys the scientific data of good upbringing, tends to abolish the emotional richness of care and turns into a treacherous (underground) form of emotional neglect¹⁰.

This dilemma, between the spontaneous and vital element, on the one hand, and the neutral, distant, analytical, high scientific and researching on the other, also exists in language itself. And it connects us again to our topic.

We find it again with the same intensity in language, in its two faces that mirror each other: warmth and light -as A.F. Christidis underlines in his work. *Metaphor moves, lives, and falls between them*¹¹, he adds.

⁸ I develop this question in an article which is under publication, titled: Η έγνοια και η έννοια της φροντίδας: κάποιες ίσως επίκαιρες σκέψεις για την ψυχανάλυση σήμερα. I refer to the works of philosopher Frédéric Worms (see «Le moment du soin, À quoi tenons nous?», Paris, PUF, 2010), among others

⁹ I tried to develop this direction in my work "Η συνάντηση της παιδοψυχιατρικής με τα βρέφη και των βρεφών με την παιδοψυχιατρική» (especially in its second part «Η μητέρα, το βρέφος και τα νεογνολογικά τμήματα), Προσεγγίσεις III, G. Abatzoglou – S. Manolopoulos (editing), University Studio Press, Thessaloniki, 2004, p.97-103. The initial concept came from Ch. Bollas, *Hysteria*, Routledge, London, 2000

¹⁰ In these cases the "fundamental" depression of the mother goes unnoticed

¹¹ See also A.-Φ. Χριστίδης, *Όψεις της μεταφοράς, στο Όψεις της γλώσσας, νήσος, Αθήνα, 2003, σ. 155-166*

Between care and function however, there is a transitional space where care is neither only warm, nor function exclusively cold and mechanistic. This space in between is neither in nor out, neither with nor without. A space that can be better defined by what *it is not*, rather than by what *it is*.

At this point it is worth mentioning the issue of metaphor, a core idea in Christidis' and his students' work¹². Metaphor as something that escapes, that reminds, that unites the warmth of experience with the light of the symbol. Metaphor as a *case*.

Following Hochmann¹³, I will review our subject from another point of view: *Maternal care* is an excellent metaphor for every kind of care (including mental care). I will now start at the beginning by speaking about the voice.

The voice

What is the "linguistic" production of an infant, immediately after its birth? It produces voice: cries and crying.

It is the voice of discomfort, physical annoyance, physical pain, but also the voice of mental anguish.

As A. F. Christidis puts it "This scream of pain, this voice, is an amorphous, meaningless ("nonsensical") indicator, of a reaction to an immediate experience of pain". And he goes on to explain that the infant still does not produce the word "pain" or "I hurt", it cannot produce speech, that would be the answer to this warm, holistic, indicative signification of its experience. It does not produce the word "pain", that is a symbol, according Peirce's terminology.

The infant produces a *reaction to a stimulus*, but not yet an *expression or concept* free from the bonds of experience. It produces a warm sign, but not a "cold" symbolic one (representations or concepts). It produces the primary warmth, indicative of direct experience, but not yet the "light" of the symbol (and of human subjectivity).

The comparison between a scream -a scream of pain- and the word that expresses the relevant emotion -the word "pain"- is the best way to realize the uniqueness of human language. Let us reflect now on our feeling when we are in pain and on our feeling when we are giving a medical lecture about pain.

The intersection between primary and secondary signaling, between voice and speech, defines the jump from the area of animal needs to exclusively human area of freedom: Speech is getting to function free from the limitations of immediate experience.

But how does this jump take place? To answer this question, we need to consider who (or what) this baby voice, this scream, is calling.

The voice from the very beginning is calling for care. It is calling for pain relief.

¹² Also Eleni Motsiou's doctoral thesis (2006), *Μεταφορά και παιδί: όψεις μιας εξελικτικής διαδικασίας*, Θεσσαλονίκη, Α.Π.Θ.

¹³ J. Le temps du recit, *L'Information Psychiatrique*, 7(68), σ. 665-673, 1992

The voice calls for understanding, invites our endurance, our empathy, our body, our thinking. It invites us in a warm and cold way.

The voice of the infant is a warm, primary, indicative necessity, that we will accompany, nurse, and care for. And due to our response, to our body's reaction, to our emotions and words, the infant will be able to grow, to develop the capacity of the secondary, representational, subjective freedom: the capacity of speech, of human language.

A biography of the symbol

The sounds produced by an infant are, as S. Resnik¹⁴ argues, "phonetic gestures", body extensions, "pseudo feet" (pseudopods), acoustic enlargement of the body that constantly expands its boundaries and slowly pulls the young child out of itself. The toddler learns to play with these sounds as it plays with its body. Then it shares this game with others, especially with significant others, such as its mother and its father. These "Others", mobilize their "infant" self, and also begin to play with these sounds. Thus an interaction is developed that brings the "inside" and the "outside" in touch.

In the beginning the voice is a means of expression that is directly related to the body. It is part of the body, it is a gesture, an action. The transformation of the voice and its sounds into clear and distinct verbal representations, in explicit explanations, is associated with a primary depressive effect, caused by the consequences of a basic differentiation. It is a painful differentiation between the child and the significant "Other", between different impulses and emotions, between body and soul. The child becomes a split and separate whole to the extent that it discovers the "Other" as a split and separate whole. This differentiation and "awareness" of the young child gives rise to intense frustration and aggressive feelings (the other ceases to be a mere continuity of us), as well as feelings of guilt (the "Other", that we so dearly love but also depend on, becomes hated by us).

This "symbol biography", (as S. Resnik¹⁴ calls it) which starts with an initial depression, is a painful but also creative experience. The child must be able to accept that the word "mummy" (which contains, when it first appears, not only a person but also a whole world of relationships - and will always retain some of it) presupposes and involves the absence of the real mother. The word is not representative of the "thing", of the "object", but of a function that replaces it. The child should be able to gradually enrich this function that states the absence, by playing with the words, with the language - and playing with the language is basically a presence/absence game, just like the other games played by little children: games that process absence.

Our inability to tolerate the absence causes us to experience it as a specific presence (the same as in psychosis hallucinations, and also in obsessive hair-splitting of a sterile daily life).

We can however imagine things in a different manner.

Above all, we must hold the infant, we must embrace it - and that embrace is also a mental embrace, made of words, made of narratives. (This embrace remains a lost paradise of which we keep reminiscing to the end of our lives: *"if only I had a place to lean onto"*).

¹⁴ Salomon Resnik, *Personne et Psychose, Etudes sur le langage du corps*, Editions du Hublot, 1999

Thanks to this embrace - and the little child's movement towards it and in it, the infant slowly learns to be comfortable, to settle in. The child can then bring itself, its body, and begin to bring itself through language. From an all-out embrace to the joy of body movement (from the two merged bodies that form an initial entity, to the independent body), from body movement to thought movement, from thought movement to language movement, from itself towards others and away from others. Language is born as a dramatic attempt to detach from our body so that we can move towards others – and, maybe ultimately towards the bodies of others.

Maybe that is why language is characterized by a nostalgic disposition - and perhaps it is this nostalgia that eventually leads us towards others.

And because language is fueled by a nostalgic disposition to return to something merged, which would however eliminate its use, that is why it resorts to constant metaphors. Then it is transformed to poetic language, to magical language, to prophetic language, but also to pathological language.

Language is never complete and that is why it can be so rich. It is never disembodied and that is why it can be strong. It is never enough and therefore it is a constant work in progress which is perpetually evolving. It is never only about presence that is why it seeks, it moves, it regresses. Language is not only functional, and that is why it stumbles. Language is moving! It begins from a separation drama, which, however, presupposes a course of happy and emotional meetings. As life itself, which is a constant movement towards others, but at the same time a movement away from others. Thus, language (and at this level, it might be a reflection of life itself) is a constant dilemma. Towards the body, towards the primordial coexistence, towards the initial merge - or on the contrary, towards the analytic, the abstract, the elevation above things, emotions and feelings.

And what is more tragic for a language than being stationary? Than the prevalence of a desolate use, or a dead sea of literalism?

No matter how much we try, we will never be able to have a language free from all its grounding elements. And fortunately, I would say, there is no such “final solution” for language. Because language exists not only for people to communicate, but mainly to vibrate¹⁵

From interpretation to translation

Let's go back to the maternal function, which among other things “keeps” this course from voice to symbol.

Maternal function¹⁶ can be understood as a balanced integration between many distinct situations, that take place within the mother-infant relationship. I will mention them briefly:

- Dependence and physical intimacy, sensory experiences and body expression.

¹⁵ Γ. Αμπατζόγλου, Η απόσπαση της γλώσσας από το σώμα, Σύγχρονα Θέματα, 88, 2005, σ. 23-24.

¹⁶ See Marie-Paule Durieux, Développement et troubles de l' enfant (0-12 mois), yapaka.be, Bruxelles, 2013, σ. 7-20

- The primary maternal preoccupation, holding, handling, object presentation.
- Maternal daydreaming
- Emotional mood
- The meaning (assigning meaning)

I could summarize the aforementioned situations in two words: ***meeting and welcoming***.

From the very first moment of a child's birth, there is an unprecedented unique meeting, a "mold", in a sense, of every concept of meeting. This initial meeting also shapes the welcoming of a child into the world, and in the long-run the whole kind of care. A being so familiar in the imagination, yet so strange in reality –as is the newborn - only equipped in life with its temperament - meets two parents. The newborn meets a preexisting world, it dives into a pool of preexisting language. It meets its parents' stories, charged by their stories with their own parents, which carry the weight (or "lightness") of a transgenerational course.

The baby literally drops into the world and hovers alone in an extreme desparation - and then someone holds it. The interaction begins. With it joy begins, as well as frustration and ambivalence.¹⁷

And a story begins, a story of projections and interpretations, necessary for the child's recognition and its registration in the world of people and of its family. A story of necessary symbolic violence, that humanizes but sometimes leads to madness. That happens when the interpretation cannot be transformed into a translation, or rather into a sufficiently comprehensible translation.

Maternal care transforms interpretation into translation. It tolerates dissatisfaction and aggression and metabolizes violence into tenderness and understanding. It takes the infant's incomprehensible desperate experience and cry of desperation and gives back to it a meaningful translation, a meaningful world.

The debt of translation

In a book titled "The Duty to Translate"¹⁸ (*Le devoir de traduire*) the central character and influence on the French theater in the post-war period Antoine Vitez, talks about his relationship to translation. A passionate life-long relationship, which began when he was 17, with his first attempt to translate a poem by Hölderlin. The very first line seems magical to him in the original, but untranslatable to French. And then an idea was born within him that excites him throughout his life: we cannot translate, but it is unbearable not to translate.

Continuing his text, after discussing the differences between novels and poetry, he emphasizes the difficulty of translating poetry, which is less transparent than novels. He gives yet another example, which, for him, remains an enternal enigma. It is the title of a book by Pasternak: *Sestra moia jizn*. Usually it is translated as "My sister life". But in Russian

¹⁷ See T.B. Brazelton – B. G. Cramer, Η πρώτη πρώτη σχέση, Γονείς, βρέφη και το δράμα του πρώιμου δεσμού, μετάφραση Χ. Χατζηδημητρίου, Εκδ. Παπαζήση, Αθήνα, 2009.

¹⁸ Antoine Vitez, The Traditional Leap, Actes Sud, 2017

it also encompasses other meanings (if we want to pay attention at them), such as “My sister is life”, “Life is a sister to me” and so on. The Russian language includes all these meanings, but in French it is necessary to make a choice.

Therefore, it is impossible to translate, yet we must do it as best we can (i.e. with all the necessary imperfections).

“It is that impossibility that I love” continues Vitez, “one cannot do it, but one is obliged to try” ... “It is almost a political and moral duty, this sense of being chained to the necessity of translating literature” ... “I would suffer enormously from the thought that one might leave something untranslated, while at the same time knowing that one will never find a definitive translation.”

The enigma of the “untranslatable” creates the obligation of translation.

And this dipole, between the ultimately untranslated and the obligation to translate it, in all its intensity, finds inside me the awkwardness of choice between the concepts of *maternal care* and *maternal function*.

And as Vitez says, when we have a good translation, we direct both, the original text and its translation, because a great translation also dictates direction.

And I would add that every great director dictates, or relies, on great performances.

What more can maternal care be? An original text and a good translation that will accompany each other on stage. So, there will be a “dramatic” performance that will soften the projections, metabolize the violence of interpretation, turn automatic interpretation into an inspirational translation. And then *language will emerge*.