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<https://periodicos.sbu.unicamp.br/ojs/index.php/cel/article/view/8673388>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20396/cel.v65i00.8673388>

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THE ACQUISITION OF THE MOTHER TONGUE IN BETWEEN LANGUAGES

A AQUISIÇÃO DA LÍNGUA MATERNA ENTRE LÍNGUAS

Maria Fausta Pereira de Castro¹

Le destin est le récit de vie auquel on n'échappe pas.

Exemple: la langue maternelle (...).

Pascal Quignard - Vie Secrète.

Resumo: Partimos neste trabalho da análise de certos fatos da aquisição de linguagem que nos mostram o entrelaçamento de línguas na aquisição da língua materna. Em certas condições, materialidades linguísticas originárias de mais de uma língua participam do processo de captura (LEMOS, 2002) do *infans* pela linguagem. Partimos de fatos linguísticos observados na fala de duas crianças de três anos de idade - uma menina brasileira e um menino franco-brasileiro em contato com o francês e o português brasileiro. Experiências temporárias ou contínuas, vividas por crianças em contato com mais de uma língua, fornecem evidências empíricas e promovem questões teóricas que se desdobram em uma indagação sobre os efeitos das línguas da infância no funcionamento linguístico do adulto. A história do falante com sua língua materna é marcada pelas representações de sua aquisição e pelos enlaçamentos no encontro com outras línguas. Seus efeitos não são previsíveis. O inconsciente não cria obstáculos para a mixagem das línguas e pode reter palavras, expressões e outros fragmentos de uma língua da infância que depois se torna estrangeira (MELMAN, 1992). Este seria o caso de uma das crianças, atualmente uma jovem adulta. Através das hipóteses levantadas sobre a aquisição da linguagem e a partir de um outro observatório, voltamos nossa atenção para escritores e poetas que fizeram da trajetória linguística vivida a própria substância de seu trabalho. Afetados pela “memória representada” (PAYER, 2006) de um passado reconstruído, no qual a língua materna foi silenciada ou vivida como tal, eles elegem uma língua materna tardia, adotada, com que tecem suas obras. Elias Canetti e Aharon Appelfeld são autores característicos dessa experiência. Há em ambos a necessidade de nomear como materna a língua da criação literária. A análise de tais fatos ilumina as palavras de Milner (1990[1978]) sobre o termo *lalangue*: é uma língua enfatizada pela função poética e sua figuração mais direta é a língua materna.

Palavras-chave: Língua materna; fala da criança; inconsciente; língua materna adotada; criação literária.

Resume: Dans cet article, nous partirons de l'analyse de certains faits liés à l'acquisition du langage qui mettent en lumière l'imbrication des langues dans l'acquisition de la langue maternelle. Dans certaines conditions, des matérialités linguistiques provenant de plus d'une langue entrent dans le processus de capture de *l'infans* par le langage (LEMOS, 2002). Nous partirons de faits linguistiques observés dans la parole chez deux enfants de trois ans - une fillette brésilienne et un garçon franco-brésilien - en contact avec le français et le portugais brésilien. Des expériences temporaires ou continues, vécues par des enfants en contact avec plus d'une langue, fournissent des preuves empiriques et soulèvent des questions théoriques qui sont développées dans une enquête sur les effets des langues de l'enfance sur le fonctionnement linguistique des adultes. L'histoire du sujet parlant et de sa langue maternelle est marquée par des représentations de son acquisition et par des imbrications dues à l'exposition à d'autres langues. Ses effets ne sont pas prévisibles. L'inconscient ne crée pas d'obstacles au mélange des langues et peut retenir des mots, des expressions et d'autres fragments d'une langue de l'enfance qui devient par la suite étrangère (MELMAN, 1992). Ce serait le cas de l'un de ces enfants, aujourd'hui jeune adulte. Sur la base des hypothèses soulevées sur l'acquisition des langues et à partir d'un autre poste d'observation, nous nous

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intéresserons aux écrivains et aux poètes qui ont fait de la trajectoire linguistique vécue la substance même de leur œuvre. Affectés par la "mémoire représentée" (PAYER, 2006) d'un passé reconstruit, dans lequel la langue maternelle a été réduite au silence ou vécue comme telle, ils élisent une langue maternelle adoptée tardivement avec laquelle ils tissent leurs œuvres. Elias Canetti et Aharon Appelfeld sont deux auteurs caractéristiques de cette expérience. Tous deux éprouvent le besoin de nommer la langue de création littéraire comme langue maternelle. L'analyse de ces faits met en lumière les propos de Milner (1990[1978]) sur le terme *lalangue* : il s'agit d'une langue mise en valeur par la fonction poétique et dont la figuration la plus directe est la langue maternelle.

Mots-clés: langue maternelle ; parole de l'enfant ; inconscient ; langue maternelle adoptée ; création littéraire.

The aim of this work is a reflection on languages which intertwine in the acquisition of the mother tongue, conceived as a language which imposes itself on the *infans* since his/her birth.

It is in the field of language – when language and speech are at stake – that the *infans* is captured by language (Lemos, 2002). He/she will not begin to speak if there does not occur an encounter with a language (or languages) that reaches him/her through the speech of the other – his/her parents, adults, the speaking mass. From the phenomenal point of view, it is possible to recognize structural relations between the speech of the Maternal Other and the speech of the child, who finds him/herself entangled by the web of language, affected by the performative value of maternal invocation.

In this sense, the mother tongue must be recognized as a unique experience, by the incidence of a linguistic functioning that turns the *infans* into a speaker; and must also be conceived as unforgettable, even when we do not find it at the surface of speech. The speaking subject does not ever return to state-zero, to the position of *infans* (Pereira de Castro, 2006). According to Jean-Claude Milner (1990[1978]), the mother tongue is a language among others, but for a certain subject it is his/her mother tongue and no other language can be compared to it.

However, it is not less true that, in certain situations, diverse linguistic materialities, originating from more than one language, participate in the mother tongue's constitution. In these cases, the speaking subject would be the effect of a crossbreeding of languages, even though he/she may even ignore such knowledge.

These initial hypotheses open up an universe of inquiries into language acquisition and beyond, when that crossbreeding of languages in infancy makes itself felt in adult life by the silence of some of these languages, or when the rumour of time presentifies in literary or poetic creation what remained way behind.

Temporary or continuous experiences lived by children in contact with more than one language, in their process of language acquisition, provide empirical evidence of becoming a speaker in between languages.

We deal here with two children of three years of age – a French-Brazilian boy and a Brazilian girl – in contact with French and Brazilian Portuguese (BP)².

E.³ is the son of a French mother, born in Brazil, with French grandparents on his mother's side who also live in Brazil. On the other hand, his father is Brazilian, from a Brazilian family.

With three years of age, the child already went to a French school in São Paulo, but the teacher thought his lexicon was still restricted and asked his mother to talk more to him in French. Taking advantage of a period of time spent together on the beach, the mother taught him a few words, like, for example, names of animals, objects etc.

² The speech samples of the children in this study were donated by their families, whom we thank.

³ Abbreviation of the child's name.

Later, with the family joined around the table, the mother asked the child to tell his Brazilian grandmother the words he learnt in French, such as “gato”, cat (*chat*, in French). The child thinks for a few seconds and answers without hesitation:

1. C.⁴ *Café* [ka. 'fe] (“coffee” in Brazilian Portuguese, pronounced with an open e).

What was the child’s trajectory to arrive at that answer? Where does *café* come from?

Before anything else, it must be said that the child’s answer ignores the referential relation to the object: the animal cat.

Saussure deals several times, in his work, with the fragility of the referential relation, but one passage is particularly pertinent to this child’s speech. I quote the author:

The final law of language is, we dare say, that there is nothing which can ever reside in one term, as a direct consequence of the fact that linguistic symbols are unrelated to what they should designate, so that **a** is powerless to designate anything without the aid of **b**, and the same thing is true of **b** without the aid of **a**, or that both have no value except through their reciprocal difference, or that neither has any value, whether it be through any part of itself (I suppose “the root”, etc.) other than this same *plexus* of eternally negative differences.

It is astonishing. But where, in truth, would the possibility of the contrary lie? Where would be for a single instant the point of positive irradiation in all of language, once granted that there is no vocal image that responds more than any other to what it must say? (SAUSSURE, 1954, p. 63, translated by the author).⁵

Apart from the referential issue, there is missing in the signifier/signified relation a *mise en système*, that is, the sign *chat* is still not in a system of opposition to other signs in French (such as “chien”, “poule” etc.), from which it could extract its value and a meaning. The signifier begins then a trajectory that is unexpected, but not absurd at all, if one considers its displacement in between languages, in the conjunction of French and Portuguese.

In fact, through the phonic association between *chat* (animal) in French and *chá* (“tea”) in Brazilian Portuguese, there establishes itself a *mise en système* by homophony and by relations in the semantic field between two drinks that are opposed – *chá* and *café*, in Portuguese – that can be read as “if it is not *chá*, it must be *café*”. Deprived of the signified, the signifier *chat* slips up in such a way that linguistic barriers are crossed. One language calls another, and Brazilian Portuguese gains prominence in this brief but elucidating episode of a child’s speech.

Equivocation signs the relation of the speaking subject with language; whether the reference is “a language” or “languages”, there is always a breach for such an event in which the speaker is involved. In *For the Love of Language (L’Amour de la Langue)*, Jean-Claude Milner (1990[1978]) deals with this issue, as it can be read in the long quotation that follows, where the author enters the territory of *lalangue*, term created by

⁴ C. child.

⁵ “La loi tout à fait finale du langage est, à ce que nous osons dire, qu’il n’y a jamais rien qui puisse résider dans un terme, par suite directe de ce que les symboles linguistiques sont sans relation avec ce qu’ils doivent désigner, donc que a est impuissant à rien désigner sans le secours de b, celui-ci de même sans le secours de a, ou que tous les deux ne valent que par leur réciproque différence, ou qu’aucun ne vaut, même par une partie quelconque de soi (je suppose la racine, etc.) autrement que par ce même plexus de différences éternellement négatives.

On s’étonne. Mais où serait en vérité la possibilité du contraire? < Où serait > un seul instant le point de rayonnement positif dans tout le langage, puisqu’il n’y a point d’image vocale qui réponde plus qu’une autre à ce qu’elle est chargée de dire?” (SAUSSURE, 1954, p. 63).

Jacques Lacan (2010[1972-1973], among others) to determine in every language the register that destines it to equivocation.

(...) we hold that there is always a sense in speaking of a language, so that one can always, for any segment whatever, decide if it belongs to this language or not. Yet nothing is less sure. Granting even that we can always know for a given segment of reality how to decide if it is part of language or not, it does not follow that one can always assign it to one language rather than to another. Alongside the usual cases where the distinction is trivial, there are ones where identity and differences become confused – what of the case where there are different types of syntax from which a single subject can occasionally choose according to his or her humour or circumstances? (...).

Let us agree then to call ‘language’ this kernel which, in each one of the various languages supports its uniqueness and distinctness; it cannot be represented on the side of substance, indefinitely overburdened with diverse accidents, but only as a form, invariable across its actualizations, since it is defined in terms of relations. We recognize here the schism between language and speech, *langue* and *parole*, which device, whether openly or not, functions in all the usual versions of linguistics. The operation is thus possible; yet nonetheless it does not fail to arouse suspicion when it is observed that it is always possible – without departing from immediate experience – to bring into focus in every grammatical construction a non-identical dimension. This is the equivocal and all that arises from it – homophony, homosemy, homography – all that supports the double-entendre and the innuendo, continuous fabric of our conversations (MILNER, 1990[1978], p. 207, italicized by the author).

The speech of a second child brings up other aspects of the crossbreeding of languages within the mother tongue.

L.⁶ is a girl who leaves for France a few days before turning 3 years of age, to live there with her family for one year. Since her very first moments there, she is attracted by the sounds of the new language. On the way from the airport to her new home, she hears the adult read out a street name – *Rue Avérons* – searches for an approximation to what she could hear and says:

2- C. *Aglu bu* [v. 'glu 'bu] (onomatopoeic segment, immediately followed by a comment):

É porque eu não sei falar (“It is because I don’t know how to speak”),

On the day after her arrival in Paris, L. surprises all the adults with an utterance that is very close to:

3 - C. *Ça y va?* [sa 'i va] “*Ça va?*”. (“How is it going?” in French).

In the following days, she begins to say *bonjour*, but at the same time is not ashamed of speaking Portuguese to her colleagues in kindergarten, where she spends a few hours a day.

In contact with another-language, the child sets herself to use the words she listens to, mixing up errors and correct choices: such procedure allows her to segment and starts creating translation hypotheses. She engages herself in translating words into Portuguese by their respective “French versions” and amuses herself exploring this unknown universe. Use and mention alternate themselves in L.’s speech.

(The child asks the mother to dress her with her panties: “calcinha” in BP).

4 - C. *Mãe, põe la calcinhá em mim?* “calcinha” [kaw. 'si.ɲɐ], here pronounced as an oxytone: “calcinhá” [kaw. si. 'ɲa] (“Mother, will you put on *la calcinhá* for me?”).

M: (The mother, stunned) *La calcinhá?*

C. *É, em francês. Sabe como fala “sofá”? Lo sofá* (pronounced as an oxytone) (“Yes, in French. Do you know how to say ‘sofa’? *Lo sofá.*”).

⁶ Abbreviation of the second child’s name.

The word “calcinha” in Portuguese undergoes an approximation to French by her use of the French feminine definite article and the stress on the last syllable. Apart from that, it is probably as an oxytone that “sofa” (homophonous to “sofá” in Portuguese) calls the child’s attention; and, as a masculine word in both languages, has been preceded by the masculine article.

After one month in France, French is already present in the child’s diverse activities: while playing, in symbolic games and - an interesting fact - when she addresses herself to Brazilian adults sometimes French and Portuguese are conjoined in the same utterance.

5. C. *Mãe, s’il te plaît, me dá um papel?* (in French and Portuguese: “Mother, please, will you give me some paper?”).
6. C. *Excuse-moi* (asking the Brazilian adult for permission to pass).

A year later, when the time is coming for her to return to Brazil, and before her fourth birthday, Portuguese and French are L.’s childhood languages. A video recorded during the visit of her paternal grandparents allows us to appreciate one and the other functioning. Laura addresses herself to the adults – all of them Brazilian – in Portuguese and sings several songs in French.

One can clearly notice the French accent when she speaks Portuguese, but this video shows, besides her performance in French, a child sensible to the difference between languages, aware of the existence of diverse languages.

7. (The video begins with L. singing a song in French. When it is over, the adults applaud and her grandmother asks:
Grandmother: What else can you sing?
C. **Em inglês?** (In English?).
(The adults laugh, because L. cannot speak English, and her mother asks:
M: In English you know how to sing too? (and suggests she sings “Une Souris Verte”. L. sings with ease the whole song and, when she is done, asks).
C. **Outra em inglês ou em francês ?** (another one in English or in French?)
(Grandmother laughing: Ah, you are a polyglot, you can also speak English).
C. **Ou...ou em japonês então** (or...or in Japanese then)
M: Also in that language?!
C. **Em japonês?** (In Japanese?)
M. Could be.
(Both embarrassed and amused, L. asks them not to laugh at her because she will feel ashamed and, among giggles and frolics, improvises a chant with consonants and vowels, combining them to simulate a Japanese song. When she stops singing, her grandfather asks:)
Grandfather. Where did you learn to sing in Japanese?
C. **No Brasil ou aqui** (In Brazil or here).

From the empirical point of view, the speech of both children’s shows the incidence of different languages on the texture of their mother tongue, even though only *a posteriori* it would be possible to say in which forms their childhood languages are present in adult life.

E. is still a six-year-old child, and after a one-month stay in France, his French started off. On the other hand, L. is today a young adult of twenty years of age, and

throughout the years, her French lost space to English, but this fact only confirms this work's hypothesis, according to which the mother tongue can be constituted of a crossbreeding of languages without us having to suppose, however, an uniform performance in the speaking subject's relation to his/her childhood languages.

These issues reverberate Melman's observations (1992) on the subjective incidences of the contact between languages: the unconscious does not create obstacles to the mixing of languages, it is not nationalistic nor xenophobic and may retain in itself words, expressions and discourse-types of a childhood language that later become foreign. It can be said that French is currently a language that is, at the same, familiar and foreign to L. Her memories of the year she spent in France pass through everything that Portuguese and French were able to weave during her childhood.

The history of the speaking subject's relation to his/her mother tongue does not leave unregistered the representations left by the acquisition and intertwinings that occur in the encounter with other languages; the echoes of some of them on the others have unpredictable effects.

Such an issue is present in the literary fields under different forms showing, for example, the effect that the mother tongue's silence promotes in literary or poetic creation. Furthermore, it puts into question their infantile's forms of appearance in the adult's linguistic functioning. According to Mehler *et al.* (1994), a psychoanalyst whose childhood was marked by the coexistence of four languages, "*a posteriori prophecies*" are needed in the case of polyglot adults. In other words, the analyst must often "look back" at the patient's linguistic experience.

From another observatory, writers and poets cast the same look, making out of that trajectory the very substance of their work. Affected by "represented memory" (PAYER, 2006) of a reconstructed past, in which the mother tongue was silenced, or experienced as such, they elect a late mother tongue, an adopted one, in which they weave their work.

Writer Elias Canetti – born in Bulgaria, where he lived until the age of six – is someone who incessantly reflected on his condition of multilingual speaker⁷. The idioms through which he transited were Ladino, Bulgarian, English and German; each one of these occupied a particular place in his life. In his native town, Ruse, however, several other languages were spoken. Turkish, Greek, Russian, for example.

In his time in Bulgaria, his family's language was Ladino, language originated from Medieval Spanish and spoken by the Sephardic Jew community in the Iberian Peninsula. At the same time, two other languages were present in his childhood: German – spoken only between his parents – and Bulgarian, which he spoke to the housemaids and people in general.

From early on, German played an important role in Canetti's life. It was the language his parents spoke between themselves, a secret code to which their children had no access and it was in a context of mystery and seduction that German captivated the little Elias.

I would listen with utter intensity and then ask them what this or that meant (...) They laughed, saying it was too early for me, those were things I would understand only later. It was already a big deal for them to give in on the word 'Vienna', the only one they revealed to me. I believed they were talking about wondrous things that could be spoken of only in that language. After begging and begging to no avail, I ran away angrily into another room, which was seldom used,

⁷ This is an autobiographical trilogy originally written in German and translated into several languages. In this work, I consult the Portuguese translation (1989), mostly the first volume, and for quotations I use the one in English through Heller-Roazen's book (2008).

and I repeated to myself the sentences I had heard from them, in their precise intonation, like magic formulas (CANETTI, 1974, p. 24).

In 1911, the family moves to England, and a little more than an year later, Canetti's father dies at the age of 31, a fact that makes the family start out on a odyssey from London to Paris and Lausanne, where they live before arriving in Vienna.

Linguistically, what marks the child for life is his encounter with German, which his mother teaches him in Lausanne, before the family settles down in Vienna. This period's narrative can be resumed in two antagonistic words: "terror", because of the rigid method adopted by the mother; and, once the language is conquered, "idyll" between mother and son. What had been an exclusive territory of his parents, becomes his own territory and something like his homeland. The acquisition of the new language is not defined by the feeling of having acquired a foreign tongue, but something stronger and more definitive: a mother tongue implanted late, "and in true pain", that also becomes the tongue of his literary work.

The linguistic and psychic consequences of the acquisition of a mother tongue that is elected and late unfold themselves in the narrative.

I was reborn under my mother's influence to the German language, and the spasm of that birth produced that passion tying me to both, the language and my mother. Without these two, which are fundamentally one and the same, the future course of my life would have been senseless and incomprehensible (CANETTI, 1974, p. 74).

It is not possible to unroot oneself easily, without pain, from a certain community and from a determined and delimited linguistic universe, but Canetti's was always plural and, in this sense, it seems plausible to say that the election of German as his mother tongue promoted an effect in the opposite direction. In fact, amidst the plurality of languages he was exposed to, those of his first childhood – Bulgarian and Ladino – were the ones which have been replaced by a new mother tongue.

If it has been possible to observe the sliding of signifiers from one language into another in the speech of the two children mentioned above, process that was ruled by homophony as well as by relations possible to be described within the Saussurean value theory. Canetti, however, describes his trajectory through languages reduced to silence by German in quite a different way:

All events of those first years were in Ladino ou Bulgarian. It wasn't until much later that most of them were rendered themselves into German for me. Only especially dramatic events (...) have been retained by me in their Ladino wording, and very precisely and indestructibly at that. Everything else, that is most things, and especially anything Bulgarian, like the fairy tales, I carry around in German. I couldn't say exactly how this happened. I don't know at what point in time, on what occasion, this or that translated itself (...). I can only say one thing with certainty: the events of those years are present to me in all their strength and freshness (...), but the vast majority are tied to words that I did not know at that time (...). It is not like the literary translation of a book from one language to another, it is a translation that happened of its own in my unconscious, and since I normally avoid this word like the plague, a word that became meaningless from overuse, I apologize for employing it in this one and only case (...) (CANETTI, 1974, p. 10).

Considering Canetti's own words it would be possible to think that becoming a speaker has as an effect the forgetting of infantile speech, in the same way as we can read in studies of language acquisition. (see, for example, SAUSSURE, 1968[1916] and PEREIRA DE CASTRO, 2010, among others).

However, the long narrative of rebirth in German language cannot be read in the same terms as the acquisition of the mother tongue by a child. German is a “mother tongue by adoption”, through the work of invoked remembrances. This allows us to recognize the entrance into language through multiple sources of memory.

Freud, in a rather well-known excerpt from a letter to Fliess, on December 6th, 1896, brings, at a certain moment, repression and memory into the body of his theory on the psychic mechanism. Psychic material “present under the form of mnemonic traces” undergoes from time to time a “rearrangement”, a “retranscription”. However, what is essentially new in this theory, according to him, “is the thesis that memory is present not once but several times over, that it is laid down in various kinds of indications”. Further ahead he says: “I should like to emphasize the fact that the successive registrations represent the psychical achievement of successive epochs in life. At the boundary between such epochs a translation of the psychic material must take place. (..)”. (MASSON, 1985, p. 207).

A final event puts into question the effects of childhood languages on adults’ linguistic functioning. More than twenty years after leaving Bulgaria, Canetti makes a trip to Prague and is touched by the encounter with the Czech language, whose sounds bring him back to his childhood language, Bulgarian, absent in his speech, but present in the echoes of the new language of contact. The typological affinities between the two Slavic idioms are not enough to assume that one of them may be recognized in the other (HELLER-ROAZEN, 2008). Nevertheless, Czech sound chains open themselves to a dreamlike transformation: they weave and unweave themselves in another language, a language of passage, already translated and ready to turn into another.

Adopted mother tongues, as in Canetti’s case, come often from traumatic events bringing up a change of languages or even the obligation of silencing one’s childhood language(s). Such is the case of the poet Aharon Appelfeld, born in Czernowitz (then part of Romania, nowadays in Ukraine). According to him, till he was three years old, his mother tongue was the German spoken at home. Apart from it, he spoke Yiddish with his grandparents and also Romanian; Ukrainian was the language spoken with the house employees.

When the Second World War breaks out, his mother is murdered during the German invasion of Romania, he is separated from his father and transferred to a concentration camp, from where he runs away in 1942. Hiding in the forests of Ukraine, he is adopted by the world of thieves and peasants, but forced to hide his Jewish roots. Throughout those wanderings he plunges into silence, preferring the company of animals. His memories from that period are more associated to bodily sensations than to words.

In 1946, when he was thirteen and a half years old, Appelfeld is able to reach Israel “with no education, no parents, no language. I had all languages, but all of them together were not enough to communicate. We were like stutterers, speaking the body language and not the mouth’s one” (AVIV; APPELFELD, 2011, p. 16).

In the beginning of his life in Israel, the author keeps a diary which shows how he had been deprived of language: a mosaic of words from the languages he had once spoken, but only words and not phrases. While mourning for so many lost languages, Appelfeld puts himself on the painful path to Hebrew, passing through Yiddish and poetry. According to the psychoanalyst Simone Wiener (2012), such a symptom built up a barrier to oral and written language. In Israel, amidst his attempts to preserve the mother tongue, another one is imposed on him – “speak Hebrew!”, “Forget, forget your past” – but they were in vain.

The progressive impoverishment of his German makes him feel he is losing, for the second time, his mother; but, added to that, this language is also the “murderers”

language. He hears many times the sounds of the German language, of a word in German uttered by his mother which sends him back to a family scene of joy and happiness, that is “close to what defines *lalangue* in its proximity with corporeality, its maternal and singular character, that is, particular to each subject in his subjective link to his/her history.” (WIENER, 2012, p. 23).

Little by little, through writing, copying out passages from the Bible, Appelfeld learns Hebrew, which became the language of his literary work; he found in writing “the lost steps of *lalangue*” (WIENER, 2012, p. 22). Due to the loss of his childhood language(s), of his mother tongue, Hebrew comes as a substitution for such a lack.

“Today I have no other language. Hebrew is my mother tongue. I dream, I write Hebrew. Today I am still afraid of losing this language. Sometimes I wake up and this Hebrew acquired with so much effort disappears. I want to catch it, but cannot” (AVIV; APPELFELD, 2011, p. 16).

Canetti and Appelfeld, the latter in a more dramatic way through an unrooting process which deprived him from words, show the perennial desire of naming a language as “mother tongue”. It is not by chance that such a language becomes the language of literary creation for them. However, both a painful psychic experience and a wandering preceded such literary achievement: they seem intimately connected to the fact itself of their having become writers.

The issue seems to be true concerning poetry writing. Wismann sets up as its condition the fact of dealing with a language “which we habitually qualify as a mother tongue” (2012, p. 89).

Nevertheless, the mother tongue is there to be re-created by the poet in exile, the exile of being in between languages. In a letter from July 6th, 1926, to Rilke, Marina Tsvetayeva discusses the relation of the mother tongue with poetry.

Dear Rainer, Goethe says somewhere that one cannot achieve anything of significance in a foreign language – and that has always run false to me. (Goethe always sounds right in the aggregate, valid only in the summation, which is why I am now doing him an injustice).

Writing poetry is in itself translating, from the mother tongue into another, whether French or German should make no difference. No language is the mother tongue. Writing poetry is rewriting it. That’s why I am puzzled when people talk of French or Russian etc., poets. A poet may write in French; he cannot be a French poet. That’s ludicrous.

I am not a Russian poet and am always astonished to be taken for one and looked upon in this light. The reason one becomes a poet (if it were even possible to become one, if one were not one before all else) is to avoid being French, Russian etc., in order to be everything (...) (PASTERNAK, TSVETAYEVA, RILKE, 1988, p. 169-170).

The function of excess in each language is also present in Milner’s reflections (1990 [1978]) on *lalangue*, a language “emphasized by the poetic function”; and whose most direct figuration is the mother tongue; a language “to designate what interests us, to each one of us, in relation to what, for us, is the so called mother tongue, and so called not without reason” (CAMPOS, 1985, p. 187-188; LACAN, 2010[1972-1973]). *Lalangue* includes in its axis what comes out of the encounter between the maternal idiom and the lallation of babies as well as the space in which the poet moves, when the mother tongue is translated into another.

(⁸)

⁸ The author thanks the two reviewers for their suggestions.

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Recebido : 8/5/2023

Aceito : 19/7/2023

Publicado : 27/10/2023