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Introduction

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Introduction

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Why do you talk ‘Virginny’ — that vile gibberish
— whenever you are in high spirits? ‘It’s
my mother-tongue, sir; and when I’m very
happy — very — I can’t speak any other.

John Neal, *Brother Jonathan* (1825)

The term ‘mother tongue’ is still used to designate a particular language to which one is attached, a primary language in which one is supposed to have a potentially flawless competence, or the ‘place’ at which thoughts may emerge in coherent form. Although the term is thought to be self-evident, its definition is somewhat vague, like other important cultural concepts. For instance, dictionaries frequently provide unsatisfactory pseudo-synonyms like ‘first language’ or ‘native language’ to explain it. People typically experience their mother tongue as natural and unproblematic, unless it is challenged by the presence of other languages and cultures or, more dramatically, endangered by socio-political circumstances.

Critical thought has extensively investigated the emergence and history of the — gendered, kinship-based — term ‘mother tongue’ and provided insightful elaborations on the cultural-political implications

of the metaphors of maternity and nativity in relation to language.¹ A simple look at the instances of the term ‘mother tongue’ listed in the *OED* can help single out some assumptions that have been accompanying, charging, and connoting the concept since its first occurrences. Let us examine them briefly:

A. 1. One’s native language; a first language. Also in extended use; 2. language which gives rise to others; *esp.* one regarded as the source of a group or family of other languages, or (occasionally) as the source of all other language.²

First of all, there is the assumption that the mother language not only is ‘someone’s native language’ but also can be the ‘mother of other languages’. In this respect, the notion of ‘mother tongue’ also has a genetic function that, if extended to anthropological terms, can be addressed in connection with distinctive patterns in particular civilizations and ethnic groups. This assumption serves as the basis for the interesting sentence cited in the *OED* as an ‘extended use’ of the term. In his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon notes of Shakespeare that ‘he was ignorant of the Greek language — but his mother-tongue, the language of nature, is the same in Cappadocia and in Britain.’³ Identifying the mother tongue with the language of nature, Gibbon envisions the possibility of a universal mother tongue. Indeed, his sentence seems to evoke the Renaissance image of the ‘book of Nature’, whereby nature lays open meanings through a system of signs and signatures that do not require any kind of cultural interpretation to be understood. In a nutshell, nature speaks a language, and this language is universal. So, to assert that Shakespeare’s mother language is the language of nature is perhaps equivalent to saying that his poetry

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- 1 See, for instance, Thomas Paul Bonfiglio, *Mother Tongues and Nations: The Invention of the Native Speaker* (New York: De Gruyter Mouton, 2010). The notion of ‘maternity’ does not simply designate the capacity to become a mother but also alludes to Kristeva’s notion as a boundary at the threshold of meaning and being, as it problematizes the connection between the maternal body and motherhood. See Julia Kristeva, ‘Stabat Mater’, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer, *Poetics Today*, 6.1/2 (1985), pp. 133–52.
 - 2 ‘Mother tongue, *n.* and *adj.*’, in *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/122678>> [accessed 8 January 2023].
 - 3 Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1st edn, 6 vols (London: Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776–88), III (1781), chapter 27, p. 15 n. 29.

is universal and transcends boundaries related to culture, history, ethnicity, and geography.

Studies in both linguistics and social sciences have emphasized the role of unique languages as cultural archives and markers of ethnicity.⁴ Ethnic markers in speech — inflections that can sometimes be heard as an accent — are carried over from the mother tongue. Yet this assumption can be deconstructed when analysed in a multilingual context. When an individual speaks more than one mother tongue, the choice to use one rather than another is not simply practical but also functions as a powerful indicator both of the way one identifies one's self with an ethnic community and of the way others identify one's self with an ethnic community.⁵ In multilingual contexts, therefore, the use of a specific mother tongue is negotiated in the midst of different options and deconstructs the supposedly clear-cut distinction between self-identification as an intentional act and belonging to a language 'naturally', without deliberate choice. In this respect, the choice of a specific mother tongue in a multilingual context shows that different forms of 'linguistic adaptation' are often at work to allow inter-generational and inter-ethnic communication, especially in contexts where one language is dominant over the languages of minorities. Besides, a change in the mother tongue is also linked to specific aspects of group integration and is a clear sign of acculturation. This phenomenon typically occurs in minority groups in a context of diglossia, for instance, in second or third generation Turkish-German speakers.⁶ A genuine interest in, or 'love' for, one's mother language does, in fact, need the perception of the 'other' as well as self-reflection on one's own culture or education. This is what Heymann Steintal, for instance, argued when stating in 1863 that the absence of the term 'mother tongue' in ancient Greek indicated that that civilization had little interest in learning foreign languages.⁷

4 Gillian Stevens, 'Nativity, Inter-marriage, and Mother-Tongue Shift', *American Sociological Review*, 50.1 (February 1985), pp. 74–83 (p. 74).

5 Ibid.

6 Cf. Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

7 Heymann Steintal, 'Von der Liebe zur Muttersprache', in *Gesammelte kleine Schriften*, 2 vols (Berlin: Dümmlers, 1880), I, pp. 97–107.

One usually takes ‘mother tongue’ to be a natural condition of language acquisition, equally valid for every individual speaker. Yet throughout history, the use and connotations of the expression ‘mother tongue’ have undergone several changes. In the Middle Ages and Early Modern period, the Latin ‘*lingua materna*’ referred to the vernacular languages in opposition to the learned Latin. In the eighteenth century, ‘mother tongue’ became an emotionally charged term: establishing a more intimate, supposedly natural and privileged relationship between the speaker and her primary language, it lent authority to the Romantic aesthetics of originality and authenticity.⁸ The new emphasis on the ‘maternal’ element in the metaphor inscribed the speaker into broader networks of relationships, from kin to nation. Carrying gendered and political meanings, the term ‘mother tongue’ thus links its fortune to a ‘monolingual paradigm’ coeval with the historical constellation of the emerging nation states.

French post-structuralist thought has problematized the notion of a ‘mother tongue’ by dividing it into two discrete elements — the ‘maternal’ and the ‘linguistic’ — and by exposing their metaphysical and colonial presuppositions. Thus, Derrida has exposed the metaphysical implications of the dream of a ‘mother tongue’: a desire for origin, purity, and identity. In his *Monolingualism of the Other* — permeated with reflections about his affective relation to French —, Derrida has maintained that ‘the language called maternal is never purely natural, nor proper, nor inhabitable’. Julia Kristeva, on the other hand, has addressed the relationship between ‘maternal’ and ‘language’ in her elaborations on Plato’s concept of *chora* — a sort of pre-ontological condition of reality. While the Platonic *chora* is a formless matrix of space, in Kristeva it becomes ‘a non-expressive totality’: paradoxically, both a generative principle through which meaning constitutes itself and a force subverting any established linguistic or epistemological system.

This collective volume seeks to re-think the mother tongue as an affective and cognitive attachment to language while deconstructing the metaphysical, colonial, and nationalist presuppositions of the mother tongue as well as the opposition between monolingual nationalism

8 Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, p. 9.

and multilingual globalization. If traditional conceptions of the monolingual, pure 'mother tongue' reveal the ideology of the European nation state, then today's celebration of multilingual competencies simply reflects the rise of global capitalism and its demand for transnational labour markets.

The project of this book goes back to 2016 when we organized, as postdoctoral research fellows at the ICI Berlin, a conference with the aim of exploring the manifold entanglements of what many languages designate with the term 'mother tongue'.⁹ The questions we sought to raise included: how does a deconstructed notion of a 'mother tongue' overcome the traditional opposition between monolingualism and multilingualism? Should revision of these terms take place individually or in their vexed constellation? How would such revision affect the notion of language as a medium for expressing emotions, particularly in relation to traumatic experiences? How would such revision affect the theory and practice of (literary) translation? How would it modify our perception of linguistic errors, slips of the tongue, and other mistakes? In this new conceptual constellation, what role would linguistic phenomena such as language mixing, hybridization, and incorporations of multiple vocabularies play?

The large response to our call for papers convinced us of the necessity to elaborate on some of the questions that had been discussed during the limited time of the conference. Therefore, we invited some of the speakers to explore further the questions that they had focused on in their work or that had been brought to the fore by the collective confrontation. These contributions are collected here, together with the essays by Teresa Prudente, Caroline Sauter, and Libera Pisano — three scholars who for different reasons could not attend the conference.

In her contribution, 'But You Don't Get Used to Anything: Derrida on the Preciousness of the Singular', Deborah Achtenberg puts Derrida's deconstruction to the test of accounting for the significance of loss with respect to language(s) in a 'plurilingual, multicultural era' such as ours. She summarizes some simplistic reconstructions of the

9 'Untying the Mother Tongue: On Language, Affect, and the Unconscious', conference programme, ICI Berlin, 11–12 May 2016 <<https://doi.org/10.25620/e160511>>.

French philosopher's thought that have read it as compliant — and complicit — with the instability, precarity, and rootlessness fostered by a globalized labour market and the economic power structure beneath it. In opposition to these readings, Achtenberg demonstrates that Derrida's work is in search of a paradigm that would combine two apparently contrasting sets of affirmations: on one hand, the affirmation of 'flexibility, plurality, and change'; on the other, the importance of understanding language loss as a real loss. Achtenberg's argument that Derrida offered such a paradigm proceeds by focusing on five examples in which his work expresses a sense of loss: circumcision, in which incision involves excision; hospitality, in which openness requires some closure; subjectivity, in which foreground requires background; language, which is mine but not mine (and subject to being taken away); and neighbourhood, which is constituted through the incorporation of others (who may overwhelm us).

Michael Eng addresses a quite intriguing question: 'Philosophy's Mother Envy: Has There Yet Been a Deconstruction of the Mother Tongue?'. He argues that it is difficult to find uncritical references to the mother tongue in modern cultural theory. There is little to persuade of the mother tongue's continuing conceptual validity, given the extensive critique of the will to origins, the wealth of scholarship that reconstructs the various ways women have been figured as mothers in the conception and reproduction of the nation, and the convincing arguments that the very concept of the mother tongue is a relatively recent invention, one that appeared within the intertwined machinery of modernity and coloniality. Using Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's critique of onto-typology, along with the concept of the *outrè-mère* (the 'beyond-mother'), Eng argues that it is impossible to deconstruct the mother tongue if our affective tie to theory is left untouched.

The enigmatic literary universe of Edmond Jabès is introduced by Federico Dal Bo in his contribution, "'My Mother Tongue Is a Foreign Language": On Edmond Jabès's Writing in Exile'. Dal Bo examines one of the most prolific French authors of the twentieth century, who chose to write his *oeuvre* in French despite his Jewish-Arabic origins and his fluency in both Hebrew and Arabic. In this respect, French never was a true 'mother tongue' to him but rather 'a foreign one'. This poetical choice was also instrumental to Jabès's creation of a cosmos

that is very clearly defined by *la page blanche*, or the ‘blank page’. His writing develops this idea, both literally and metaphorically. A blank sheet is the only thing a writer has to work with at the start of each act of writing, therefore it represents a kind of material opposition that all writers must overcome. It represents in this context an existential nothingness that precedes and simultaneously escapes both human and divine creation. In Jabès’s writings, a blank page connotes both nothingness and a condition for writing. This ambivalent condition results in the paradoxical statement that his ‘mother tongue is a foreign language’, which he makes because the mother tongue cannot offer the same spiritual intimacy as another language, such as the Holy Language, and because the writer’s ‘mother tongue’ — and, by extension, human language — is always impure and infiltrated by foreignness.

In his contribution, ‘The Mother Tongue at School’, Jakob Norberg focuses on the development of elementary education in the early nineteenth century and on a persistent problem that was posed by the nationalist valorization of the ‘mother tongue’, as that problem was formulated by the famous linguist Jacob Grimm. As Grimm observed the growth of a veritable army of teachers during the middle of the nineteenth century, the conflict between the mother tongue and the standardized language of the school became apparent to him. Norberg examines the fact that political rule in the modern era is acceptable only when the populace is sovereign over itself. But this contemporary idea of political legitimacy poses an issue of demarcation. What are the limits of the populace, and which law can be upheld in its name? How can the self of collective self-rule be clearly delineated? The people cannot define themselves through a democratic process since that would assume their past existence as a group that draws boundaries.

Juliane Prade-Weiss devotes her contribution, ‘Scarspeak: Thinking the Mother Tongue as a Formative Mark’, to the scar, which she sees as a useful metaphor for understanding how speakers relate to a particular language that is often known as their mother tongue, native language, or first language. By conceptualizing this relationship in terms of a scar, one avoids the biopolitical ramifications of conceptions that were developed within the context of family and birth and that, over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have come to depict the notion of the mother tongue as the foundation of a nation

state. Additionally, the representation of the scar avoids the linguistic hierarchy and biographical normalization that are implied by the term 'first language' and that are crucial biopolitical techniques for defining people and groups. Thinking of the mother tongue as a scar underlines the intensity of the long-lasting creation and identification that are required by the process of learning this specific language, as well as the importance of maintaining the mother tongue.

The contribution 'The Shuffling of Feet on the Pavement: Virginia Woolf on Un-Learning the Mother Tongue', by Teresa Prudente, presents Virginia Woolf's literary and linguistic experimentation as unique among coeval modernist writers. While modernist experimentation is well known for emphasizing linguistic instability, as it mixes languages and creates new linguistic codes and various forms of intermediality and transcodification, Woolf appears to stay within the confines of a single language, her mother tongue, even as she continues to violate those bounds. Through a careful and insightful analysis of Woolf's novel, *The Waves*, Prudente investigates Woolf's experimental attitude with regard to her mother tongue, language, and literature, as well as the way that Woolf's attitude is related to 'her quest for a universal language of the mind'.

In "I know you can cant": Slips of the Mother Tongue in Fred Moten's *B Jenkins*', Jeffrey Champlin explores the work of Fred Moten and argues that his poetry has a way of making you feel humble while simultaneously encouraging you to work toward a better society. Its call for freedom frequently has utopian overtones since it combines high theory with the Black Arts tradition, yet it prefers language's rhythms and breaks to transcendence. In his 2007 collection *B Jenkins*, Moten literalizes the poetic appeal to the mother tongue in a way that makes it possible to recognize the mother tongue's mediated core. Champlin, by reading *B Jenkins* in connection with Friedrich Kittler's techno-psychological theory of history, interprets Moten's tuning of natural language in terms of a cultural mastery that is laced with affirmative disfluency. As a result of the cant, slang moves toward a greater understanding of the boundaries of knowledge.

In her touching contribution, 'The Mother Tongue of Love and Loss: Albert Cohen's *Le Livre de ma mère* (1954)', Caroline Sauter explores the loss of one's mother. The bare savagery of this experience

will never be adequately expressed by a human being. Her ability to express the depth of love's sorrow and intensity, which came together in the instant of her mother's passing, is beyond words: a chiasmus. In the face of the most formidable, cruel, and indisputable aspect of human existence, death, crying, moaning, groaning, and sorrow are spoken acts or wordless deeds.

With his contribution, 'The Staircase Wit; or, The Poetic Idiomaticity of Herta Müller's Prose,' Antonio Castore explores idioms and *Sprachbilder* as poetic views of the mother tongue. This exploration involves a special focus on Müller's Nobel lecture. While Müller frequently employs idioms in her articles, lectures, and novel titles, she never uses them in a superficial way or as a mere technique to mimic common or daily speech. Rather, as Castore argues, idioms in Müller's prose are indicative of her attitude toward language and toward the mother tongue in general. In the Nobel lecture as well as elsewhere, idioms serve a dual, occasionally conflicting purpose, combining the need for the 'singularity' of aesthetic experience with the search for a new kind of 'conventionality'.

Libera Pisano concludes the volume with a contribution, 'Wandering Words: Translation against the Myth of Origin in Fritz Mauthner's Philosophy,' that examines the issue of translation as a critique of autochthony and of the correlated notion of an original state of purity and belonging. Pisano argues with Mauthner that language is rather a continuous product of borrowing, bastardization, stratification, and contingency. As a result, love of the mother tongue cannot be identified with a physical connection with the land but is rather to be appreciated as an always precarious *Heimat* (home).

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