Language acquisition, motherhood, and the perpetual preservation of ethical dialogue: a model for ethical discourse focusing on Julia Kristeva

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Abstract
This article proposes that Julia Kristeva’s semiotic view of language supports the mother/child paradigm as a model for ethical discourse. Her defense of motherhood, particularly her discussion of the sacredness of maternal love and the mother tongue, strengthens the argument that motherhood is a primary means of preserving language acquisition and ethical development. It focuses on motherhood’s ability to ensure, protect and preserve the possibility of productive ethical discourse through verbal and non-verbal means of communication. This article discusses the constraints of language, and its effects on the actualization of self.

Keywords: semiotics, language acquisition, ethics, motherhood

But when she was being taken to her execution, the godmother appeared in full sight of everyone, carrying the newest baby in her arms and followed by the other two children. She approached the princess lovingly and placed the baby in her arms, saying, “My dear daughter, here are your children. You must love and care for them now. I am the Queen of Heaven and I have taken your children from you so that you might feel suffering, such suffering as I endured when you lost the star and the moon and the sun. Now you understand suffering. Now you may speak.

--Retold by Josephine Evetts-Secker, Mother and Daughter Tales

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This article will address Julia Kristeva’s defense of motherhood as it pertains to language acquisition and ethical development. Her assessment of language, using a semiotic analysis, insists upon recognizing the complexity in real language acquisition and rejecting a purely theoretical process of the labeling of objects in the self’s environment. This assessment reveals the effects of restricted expression of the self and the ethical consequences when language fails to accommodate autonomy and individuality of the self. Kristeva’s discussion of motherhood, specifically her reference to the “mother tongue,” (Clément and Kristeva 2001: 137) precipitates an investigation into the necessary properties of ethical discourse. In identifying these properties, a response to Kristeva’s call for a “herethics” is proposed, using the mother/child paradigm as an ethical model.

Julia Kristeva liberates the definition of language acquisition from a rote, dry process to a lively, energetic, ever-changing dynamic. It is Kristeva’s discussion of motherhood as both a figurative and literal means of language division that forms the argument for this article. Language acquisition, like motherhood, is a continual process, an unending experience. Kristeva states, “[a] mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh. And consequently a division of language—and it has always been so” (1977b: 178). The mother/child paradigm of language acquisition rejects a sterile understanding of language by recognizing the intrinsic connectedness at work in language, its reciprocity and its innate responsibility for the other. Kristeva explains, “Outside motherhood, no situations exist in the human experience that so radically and so simply bring us face to face with that emergence of the other” (Clément and Kristeva 2001: 57). The emergence of the other offers the possibility of ethical engagement. This “possibility - but not the certainty – of reaching out to the other, the ethical” (Kristeva 1977b: 182) is what preserves the potential of ethical dialogue.

Kristeva continues to connect language acquisition to the ethical development of the self when she calls for the demystification of the concept of a “community of language as a universal and unifying tool, one which totalizes and equalizes.” (Kristeva 1979: 210) Kristeva asserts that women respond to their exclusion from the socio-symbolic contract by attempting to “shatter language, to find a specific discourse closer to the body and emotions, to the unnameable repressed by the social contract” (1979: 200). Of course, she argues that a reformulation of a contemporary ethics “demands the contribution of women” (1977b: 185). She specifically suggests that a reformulation must include the contribution of mothers. (1977b: 185)
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Kristeva’s discussion of motherhood is inextricably connected to her discussion of language and semiotics. She articulates the shortcomings and difficulties in the field of linguistics when she states semiotics discovered “the fact that there is a general social law, that this law is the symbolic dimension which is given in language and that every social practice offers a specific expression of that law” (Kristeva 1973: 25). A semiotic analysis must be a continual self-critique of its own discussion about linguistics. She explains that semiotics is a “mode of thought where science sees itself as (is conscious of itself) as a theory” (Kristeva 1969: 77). A semiotic analysis, in other words, must scientifically approach a discussion of language recognizing that it is restricted by the constraints of the very language being used for the analysis. This does not mean, however, that a discussion is impossible, but an acceptance and understanding of its complexity is imperative. Kristeva argues:

[E]xact science itself is already tackling he problems of the unrepresentable and unmeasureable, as it tries to think of them not as ‘deviations’ from the observable world, but as a structure with special laws. . . Quantum mechanics is aware that our discourse (‘intelligence’) needs to be ‘fractured’, and must change objects and structures in order to be able to tackle a problematics that can no longer be contained within the framework of classical reason. (1969: 84-85)

Kristeva’s work at investigating the intrinsic and often unidentified limits of language reveals the disconnect between the desire to express the self and the ability (or means) to express the self. She states that, historically speaking, some feminists have tried “to give a language to the intrasubjective and corporeal experiences left mute by culture in the past” (1979: 194). A productive ethical discourse cannot fail to give voice to all of those who should be invited to the conversation. If particular groups of potential participants are denied authentic engagement, the integrity (productivity and genuineness) of the dialogue is obviously compromised. Limiting language is limiting knowledge and power. For example, while discussing the symbolic order of monotheism, Kristeva explains:

[T]he economy of this system requires that women be excluded from the single true and legislating principle,
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namely the Word, as well from (always paternal) element that gives procreation a social value: they are excluded from knowledge and power. (1974: 143)

The symbolic order, according to Kristeva, is “the order of verbal communication, the paternal order of genealogy” in which society operates, in which, one is told, particularly as a woman, it must continue to operate to prevent anarchy and to maintain stability (1974: 152). This verbal communication is the glue that cements women to their relationship with the symbolic order, an order that requires women to repress “the underlying causality that shapes” the fixed governed word (1974: 153). She proposes that this symbolic order is a temporal order, supporting “symbol and time” but suggests it is imperative to “recognize the unspoken in all discourse” (1974: 156). Kristeva challenges the belief that language is simply a conduit for exchanging information when she argues:

[W]hat semiotics has discovered in studying ‘ideologies” (myths, rituals, moral codes, arts, etc.) as sign-systems is that the law governing, or, if one prefers, the major constraint affecting any social practice lies in the fact that it signifies; i.e., that it is articulated like a language. (1979: 200)

She contradicts the premise that language somehow manifests itself independently, that it uses logic in an a priori vacuum. Acquiring a language means learning the laws of its society, its practices, culture and moral codes. Spoken discourse is not a simple transfer of information but a rich reflection of the sociological, religious, moral, and economic, among other components, making up the environment in which the self acquires his or her language. Her application of semiotics to language analysis shows how the self and the other communicate on a variety of different levels and at parallel points. She reorganizes and re-classifies language acquisition by recognizing that verbal communication is the end-result of an already learned protocol.

Kristeva shows that our learned, acquired language helps to form our perception of our environment and our perception of self. Language simultaneously develops and determines the self’s ability to express, to communicate with the other, and limits the self’s ability to express and to communicate with the other. Language introduces and indoctrinates the self into society and culture. The acquisition of language is the process by which the self identifies or disassociates with community and by which
the self expresses individuality, or the lack thereof, within that community. Kristeva argues, “in order to bring out – along with the singularity of each person and, even more, along with the multiplicity of every person’s possible identifications . . . the relativity of his/her symbolic as well as biological existence, according to the variation in his/her symbolic capacities” a demystification of the “identity of the symbolic bond itself” must occur (1979: 211). This requires re-defining what constitutes ethical discourse. If, within every exchange between interlocutors there exists the possibility of ethical engagement, on a variety of different levels, spoken/unspoken, direct and indirect, then the definition of language and ethical discourse must accommodate this multifaceted nature and reflect its complexity. The mother/child paradigm, representing the first interaction between self and other at its most primal level, illustrates motherhood’s role in the preservation of the potential of new discourse, the potential of ethical reciprocity and the potential of the demystification of the identity of the symbolic bond itself.

**In defense of motherhood: maternal love**

Motherhood is a primary example of preserving the possibility of ethical engagement between the self and the other. The mother/child paradigm offers physical, literal and figurative examples of language acquisition and ethical discourse. For example, Kristeva argues that pregnancy “seems to be experienced as the radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject: redoubling up of the body, separation and coexistence of the self and of the other, of nature and of an other, of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech” (1979: 206). Motherhood, beginning with pregnancy, requires a recognition of the other, initiating a division of language that separates the self in a particular manner that “leads the mother into the labyrinths of an experience that, without the child, she would only rarely encounter: love for an other” (1979: 206). This love for another, Kristeva asserts, is a love “not for herself, nor for an identical being, and still less for another person with whom ‘I’ fuse (love for sexual passion). But the slow, difficult and delightful apprenticeship in attentiveness, gentleness, forgetting oneself” (1979: 206).

Kristeva’s discussion of maternal love affects the dynamic between the self as mother and society insofar as it creates connections and opportunities for engagement where none existed. No longer is a mother exclusively concerned with her own self, nor is she exclusively concerned about her own other (her child); she sees the world differently because her child is
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inextricably connected to it and therefore, so is she. She has experienced a metamorphosis from the potential of exclusive existentialism to that of inevitable connection: the lived relationship. A mother sees relation, communication, dialogue and language potential between her and her child, individuals in her child’s environment and her child’s environment itself. It is in its unique relationship with the society of others that motherhood creates a second dimension (another plane or a different tier) of possible ethical dialogue that exponentially offers possibilities of ethical discourse. Kristeva argues that in maternal love, “love tenderness takes the place of erotic love: the ‘object’ of satisfaction is transformed into an ‘other’ – to care for, to nourish. Care, culture, civilization” (Clément and Kristeva 2001: 57). In the mother/child paradigm there is a need to communicate, to become involved, to protect, to nurture, to offer, to assist. The relationship between the mother and her child leads to a relation between the care of that child and the care of the greater community, the culture, the civilization. She contends, “if pregnancy is a threshold between nature and culture, maternity is a bridge between singularity and ethics” (1977a: 297).

There exists a need for language. Not a language that reinforces the symbolic order, the cultural norms, or continues to restrict the creation of words, but rather, a language that can connect. This ability to connect, to recognize the intrinsic ethical dimension present in language acquisition is what Kristeva calls the sacred. She states:

The sacred is what, beginning from the experience of the incompatible, makes a connection. Between souls, if you like. I almost want to get back on my hobbyhorse concerning the sacredness of maternal love, but I’m afraid I’ll be brushed off. I owe you a confession, however: I truly believe in it, and that the sacred seems to me both essential to women and very threatened in a world that knows how to do everything except “unite souls.” (Clément and Kristeva 2001: 137)

Uniting souls and making a connection after experiencing incompatibility is where ethical discourse perseveres. Motherhood necessitates connection and protects ethical discourse by these connections. The connections, the uniting of souls, happen singularly and globally during the motherhood experience. What once existed as the singular body now “doubles up, suffers, bleeds, catches cold, puts its teeth in, slobbers, coughs, is covered with pimples, and it laughs” (Kristeva 1977b: 167). This body that has doubled, has done so uniquely, but as it does so, it participates in an ancient, sacred and shared process of creating connections. These connections are not restricted to the temporal, paternal symbolic order. Rather, they recognize and participate in components of temporality (gestation,
[A] violent push, biological perhaps, surely narcissistic, propels us toward our children, it sweeps away everything in its path, yes, I say everything, and can abolish the other as well as ourselves, make us mad, possessed; but curiously, the connection prevails, an appeasement comes along to defer the violence, Eros and Thanatos are transformed into tenderness. Here we are at the source of words, where love becomes a so-called mother tongue. (Clément and Kristeva 2001: 137)

The mother tongue is not simply describing the language we hear and acquire during our childhood. It can certainly define the first language spoken to a child from a theoretical and practical perspective, but it also defines the communication that precedes, transcends and surpasses verbal or written exchange. It is the sacred communication that protects the other, elevates the self and creates connectedness. It is not limited to the parameters that contain other languages, for it helps to form those very languages. The state of motherhood preserves the potential for language development by constantly requiring new words and by introducing new connections. The mother tongue, the source of words, depends upon the transformation of the self (Clément and Kristeva 2001: 137). What began as an egotistical preservation of the self develops into a preservation of the other. The mother/child paradigm claims responsibility and recognizes reciprocity not only for the singular individuals involved in the specific relationship of one mother and one child, but also for the connection that ensues: the mother’s connection to her environment is now related to the child’s connection to his or her environment.

Existential anonymity is not enough. The mother is now required to unite with others, motivated by the maternal love for her own child: she is inextricably connected to a community of self and others upon whom her child is dependent (care givers, doctors, health providers), others by whom her child will be affected (environmentalists, economists, farmers, politicians) and others with whom her child will identify (friends, family, teachers, spiritual advisors). The mother is now part of the community of others who participate in the experience of motherhood; this community is vast and it is diverse. The mother tongue speaks through language barriers, through socio-economic differences, education levels and geographical constraints.

The mother tongue demands responsibility and insists upon recognition of reciprocity. The mother tongue refuses the quarantine of ethical
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discourse from everyday dialogue, it recognizes language acquisition as an integral development of ethical discourse and it does not amputate the sacred from relation. The mother/child paradigm illustrates that language acquisition and ethical development have a reciprocal relationship and that this relationship can dwell in and on the space-time continuum but is not defined by it. It embodies monumental temporality (1979: 191). The mother tongue understands and recognizes the unspoken in discourse. (1974: 156) Instead of accessing knowledge and gaining power by speaking or by paternal identification, the mother tongue is characterized by listening and respecting the other. These are qualities, of course, present in the mother/child paradigm, but they are not exclusive to women or to only mothers. Again, this is where its inclusiveness fortifies its ability to add new dimensions to ethical discourse. The mother tongue does not require maternal identification or the rejection of paternal identification; instead, it offers an accommodating platform to both. In fact, it accommodates the complete continuum, because the mother tongue is where words are “folding in unimaginable spaces” (1977b: 162) before sex, gender, sexual orientation, and maternal or paternal identification are determined and is at the same time “the source of words” (Clément and Kristeva 2001: 137). The mother tongue is the primordial soup of language development and it holds the potential for the evolution of ethical possibility. It is the womb of sacred discourse and it has the power to transform narcissism into redemptive love and sacrifice. It recognizes temporality and yet it exists and celebrates that which is “outside the sign and beyond time” (Kristeva 1974: 156). It is in remembering and listening that the self gains access to maternal love’s perpetual conversation, re-visits the potential of its warm understanding and poignant pain, and recognizes that it was, at one time, part of its universal tenderness.4

To give words, to encourage and to nurture a voice, to respect the other, one must learn to listen. Kristeva’s transformative love offers the negative space necessary to hear dissident words (1974: 156). In the negative space, the spoken word is coupled with respectful silence and the unspoken is validated. The mother tongue’s relevancy and applicability is evident: for a productive ethical discourse, the socio-political dynamic of a contemporary society needs to be able to accommodate dissident voices, respectful contemplation, the spoken word, and that which remains beyond symbol and sign.
An ethical model based on the mother/child paradigm: responding to the call for a herethics

Kristeva suggests that if a contemporary ethic is no longer equated with morality but is given flesh, language and jouissance than it “demands the contribution of women”, particularly that of mothers (1977b: 185). This herethics, she warns, might be “no more than that which in life makes bonds, thoughts, and therefore the thought of death, bearable” (1977b: 185). This article proposes that the mother/child paradigm is an ethical model capable of reflecting the inextricable relationship between language development and ethical discourse. Motherhood may begin as a narcissistic act to defy death, but it develops, as Kristeva puts it, into a labyrinth of tenderness and a series of sacred connections (Clément and Kristeva 2001: 137). The mother/child paradigm encourages engagement in a productive ethical dialogue that has applications to the real world that makes bonds and thoughts. Kristeva’s argument for the sacredness of maternal love and the concept of the mother tongue, support the claim that motherhood and the mother/child paradigm represent and harbor language acquisition (the source of words) and ethical development (the emergence of the other offering the possibility of ethical engagement) (1977b: 182). The mother/child paradigm reverberates with authenticity and embraces language acquisition as a dynamic, continual process. In order to understand this ethical model, it is important, of course, to try to continue the investigation into what defines and constitutes motherhood. Kristeva argues in order to do this:

[O]ne needs to listen, more carefully than ever, to what mothers are saying today, through their economic difficulties and, beyond the guilt that a too existentialist feminism handed down, through their discomforts, insomnias, joys, angers desires, pains and pleasures . . . (1977b: 179)

To listen to the mothers is to recognize the complexity of the state of motherhood. Listening to mothers means accepting, as quantum mechanics does, “that our discourse (‘intelligence’) needs to be ‘fractured’, and must change objects and structures in order to be able to tackle a problematics that can no longer be contained within the framework of classical reason” (1969: 84-85). The mother/child paradigm of language acquisition and ethical development reflects motherhood’s fractured intelligence. Motherhood remembers productively (not just with linear historicity) and remembers
in a way that shapes the future. The paradigm recognizes the seemingly contradictory qualities of motherhood, particularly its characteristic singularity and its signature universality. In recognizing this, the paradigm accommodates autonomy, champions tolerance and celebrates individuality by its intrinsic ability to connect the incompatible. The mother/child paradigm stretches across culture and gender. It is encompasses verbal and non-verbal communication, art, music, poetry, and so forth, while dwelling in the symbolic order and simultaneously challenging that very same order. The motherhood condition is one of contradiction and connection: pain/joy, self/other, separation/unity, life/death. Kristeva asserts:

One does not give birth in pain, one gives birth to pain: the child represents it and henceforth it settles in, it is continuous. Obviously you may close your eyes, cover up your ears, teach courses, run errands, tidy up the house, think about objects, subjects. But a mother is always branded by pain, she yields to it. (1977b: 167)

The mother’s pain, once again, exemplifies the many different aspects of motherhood; it illustrates the awareness of different dimensions in which the mother must operate and shows the complexity of the connections in which she participates. Motherhood is rooted in responsibility, reciprocity and otherness, regardless of the activity in which the mother is engaged: running errands, feeding a child, philosophical inquiry, language acquisition or ethical dialogue. The mother/child paradigm necessitates listening. It creates a negative space for listening to the unspoken in all discourse, making room for dissident voices, giving credence to “that which disturbs the mutual understanding of the established powers” (1974: 156). To encourage and to welcome ideas, individuals and thoughts that disturb the power and knowledge of the symbolic order, and attempts to do so without violence, but instead with a transformative power of love using the mother tongue, is to engage in productive ethical dialogue. It is a remarkable engagement that offers a discourse through connections (Clément and Kristeva 2001: 137), while challenging the established order by “a constant alternation between time and its ‘truth’, identity and its loss, history and that which produces it: that which remains extra-phenomenal, outside the sign, beyond time (Kristeva 1974: 156).

It is important to focus upon this aspect of the mother/child paradigm that is critical to its effectiveness as a model for ethical dialogue, its ability to constantly alternate, its ability to adapt. The mother/child paradigm is in a constant state of flux, redefining its relationship with the prevailing social
symbolic order. It must constantly redefine its relationship between self and other (the changing and evolving relationship between the mother and child). It is able to do this by embracing the semiotic analysis.

For an ethical model to encourage productive discourse, it must accommodate an inclusive paradigm and a willingness to engage in a self-critique, particularly in consideration of keeping faithful to a semiotic analysis. It must recognize the inseparable relationship between language acquisition and ethical development and the manner in which that relationship forms of the perception of self and the world in which the self lives. The mother/child paradigm meets the necessary criterion for a working ethical model.

**Conclusion**

As language separates and defines us from one another, it also fuses us together. Engaging in dialogue means to engage in an on-going assessment and reassessment of the self, an assessment and reassessment of the other. It means creating connections where before, none existed. Engaging in ethical discourse expands the context in which to put subsequent discussion: ethical dialogue has a cumulative effect. Motherhood exponentially expands the points of intersection between united souls, geometrically increasing the ability to find connections and increase understanding, allowing for a productive ethical discourse. Language acquisition requires a broad definition reflective of this complicity, legitimizing that it is more than a process of labeling objects in our environment. This article defended the proposal that motherhood harbors primal language acquisition and ethical development and that the mother/child paradigm is an effective and productive model for ethical discourse.

Kristeva’s defense of motherhood presents itself through a semiotic analysis of language acquisition. It allows for a fluid, inclusive and multifaceted discussion of ethical development. She argues that a semiotic analysis illustrates the need to replace “the concept of linear historicity with the necessity of establishing a typology of signifying practices from the particular models of the production of meaning which actually found them” (1969: 85). She reiterates the importance of demystifying the symbolic order when she introduces the concepts of maternal love as the sacred and the mother tongue as being at the source of words (Clément and Kristeva 2001: 137). These references ensure the preservation of ethical development and language acquisition via the mother/child paradigm. Motherhood does not accept the recidivism of language; instead, it creates connections and harbors the source of words.
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The mother/child paradigm of ethical discourse has monumental temporality according to Kristeva (1979: 191). By focusing on the importance of listening in dialogue, this paradigm calls the location of ethical discourse on the space-time continuum into question. It recognizes the importance of the unspoken in discourse (1974: 156). If credence is given to the unspoken in discourse, the spoken becomes more clearly part of the symbolic order, part of the paternal order of genealogy (1974: 152). Kristeva illustrated that exclusion from language results in a repression of the self, particularly for women, when they are separated and restricted by the symbol and sign (1974: 152). The monumental temporality of the mother tongue communicates to the future and to the past, but also to the unspoken, particularly through its willingness to validate necessary moments of silence to allow for listening. Through its innate ability to make connections, maternal love remembers without necessarily employing temporal, linear memory. It does not need to refer to a timeline, but it recollects by unifying souls and with mindfulness of the effects of our actions.

Kristeva continues to refute the idea that verbal communication is nothing more than an exchange of information, by showing that the spoken word is the part of the temporal order that provides the reference point, the possibility of measurement, “distinguishing between a before, a now and an after” (1974: 152-3). The mother/child paradigm, on the other hand, through female subjectivity essentially “retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations” (1979: 191). It is not limited to that definition, however, because it is monumental temporality, too. The mother/child paradigm is neither a paternal identification, nor an exclusively maternal identification, enabling it to function within the symbolic order and to challenge that same order. This division, this ability to grow, adapt and change is what strengthens the paradigm. The mother/child paradigm recognizes that “a mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh. And consequently a division of language – and it has always been so” (1977b: 178). Instead of lamenting this, the mother/child paradigm embraces and even celebrates it, ensuring that it preserves and perpetuates language acquisition and ethical development, arguably and definitively illustrating that it is a capable working model for ethical discourse.
References

2 In many of Kristeva’s writings about love, she discusses maternal relationships, maternity and the feminine self as they apply to her work as a psychoanalyst. I am focusing on the application of her work in semiotics to philosophy and linguistics only.
3 Martin Buber’s concept of universal reciprocity helped me to articulate this connection.
4 It is worth mentioning that while not all mothers are capable of nurturing (or choose to do so), the mother/child paradigm accommodates for the absence of maternal love from a biological mother in two ways. First, the paradigm allows adoptive parents (including homosexual parents) to experience the transformative love that becomes the mother tongue. Secondly, it emphasizes the importance of the responsibility for the other. This includes, but is not limited to, the manner in which those embracing the communication of the mother tongue feel a responsibility to care for the other regardless if they are biological mothers and regardless if the other is their biological or adoptive child. “Care, culture, civilization” (Clement and Kristeva 2001: 57).