Jean-Jacques Rousseau remains today one of the most critiqued and debated thinkers of all time. Some consider him a prolific canonical author, while others confine him to the margins, yet he remains central to many current debates. Conservative authors like Allan Bloom[[1]](#footnote-1) and anarchists like Kropotkine alike have considered his treatises and political texts. Suffice it to note the plethora of writing and analysis that have dealt with *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* and, even more so, with *The Social Contract*. Among the copious bibliography of canonical work produced by Rousseau, one text, while being widely celebrated, has remained understudied––*Emile, Or Treatise on Education*. But what can be made of *Emile,* this renowned treatise that has, thus far, mainly garnered attention from the perspective of the educational contribution of Rousseau’s thought. It is well-known that this treatise has served as the basis of contemporary pedagogy––in particular, the inductive method as advanced by Maria Montessori (Crétois). While the writings of Rousseau are amply discussed in fields like philosophy, literary studies, linguistics, anthropology, and political science, this author has never been studied through the prism of Disability Studies and even less so in Dysfluency Studies. This article aims to introduce Rousseau to this field by reading *Émile, Or Treatise on* Education, which might shed some light on the matter of linguistic dysfluency and stuttering, in particular.

In order to establish Rousseau’s thinking on language and the potential for language to be dysfluent, it is important to define the terms fluency and dysfluency so that ideas presented by the author of *The Confessions* can be situated in this field. Speech pathologists initially proposed these terms before being reconsidered in a humanities framework. Dysfluency Studies can either be considered a sub-field of Disability Studies or an independent field. Chris Eagle wrote a recent book on the subject affirming the autonomy of the field.

Speech pathologist Robin Lickley defines language fluency as follows: “If speech is fluent, the sounds we hear flow smoothly without unexpected breaks. (...) Breath pauses typically occur at structural boundaries, such as sentence and phrase endings, in fluent speech” (LICKLEY). Lickley contrasts this with a definition of dysfluency: “Our definition of fluency concerns the uninterrupted flow of speech; therefore, disfluency occurs when the flow is interrupted, with pauses occurring unexpectedly or in places not typical of fluent speech production” (LICKLEY). I find this definition questionable for several reasons. In this paper, I aim to question the normative outlook expressed in these definitions through an interpretation of Rousseau. Despite my reservations and critiques, these definitions serve as a starting point for the ensuing discussion.

Furthermore, from this perspective, I think it is crucial to grasp the foundational theoretical principles of Rousseau’s anthropological perspective. The stages of child development can be traced in *Emile, Or Treatise on Education*. To do so, we will explore Rousseau’s key educational principles across the five books of the treatise, each of which corresponds to a different age in the life of the fictional child, Émile. Rousseau addresses infant care at the beginning of the book using swaddling as an example. This practice is particularly significant as it illustrates the author’s conception of nature. Swaddling involves wrapping an infant tightly in cloth to provide warmth and security. However, from Rousseau’s time, the 18th century onward, this practice has been brought into question, with many considering it dangerous or unnatural. Rousseau himself echoed these sentiments. He believed that swaddling, which continues today in several forms (baby sleeping bags), is unnatural because it restricts the infant’s movements and inhibits their exploration of their surroundings. Rousseau’s theoretical objections to this practice are expressed in the following quotes: “L’homme civil naît, vit et meurt dans l’esclavage: à sa naissance on le coud dans un maillot (...) L’homme qui a le plus vécu n’est pas celui qui a compté le plus d’années; mais celui qui a le plus senti la vie” (89).

*Émile* is opposed to the use of swaddling as it restricts the infant’s movements and, therefore, his ability to experience the world around him. This experience is necessary for healthy development. Furthermore, Rousseau draws an analogy between the physical imprisonment of infants in swaddling cloth and the symbolic imprisonment of the future citizen into which the infant will grow (*infans*). The issue that underlies this text concerns how we, as educators, can hope to produce free citizens if the first thing we do to infants is restrain them. Rousseau’s objection to the practice takes a radical turn when he compares swaddling to the practice of burying the deceased in coffins: “(…) à sa mort on le cloue dans une bière; tant qu’il garde la figure humaine, il est enchaîné par nos institutions.” This first form of constraint will thus restrict the infant’s development throughout his life.

The drive to constrain an infant in cloth, likened to the shroud he will one day wear in death, expresses the underlying idea that the infant is, in fact, malformed from the moment of his birth by actions meant to protect and care for him. Rousseau writes in this regard: “Les pays où l’on emmaillote les enfants sont ceux qui fourmillent de bossus, de boiteux, de cagneux, de noués, de rachitiques, de gens contrefaits de toute espèce. De peur que les corps ne se déforment par des mouvements libres, on se hâte de les déformer en les mettant en presse. On les rendrait volontiers perclus pour les empêcher de s’estropier.”

The drive to protect the child from illness, according to Rousseau, makes them ill. This, the earliest restraint to which an infant is subjected, will continue to entrap him as he grows through every stage of his development. In this example, which we might see as harmless, finds play the entirety of Rousseau’s theories of the state of nature and the experience of education. Man is born free; man is born good, but culture and so-called progress obstruct his natural goodness and freedom.

A figure that will be essential to our later development appears for the first time in this text––the nurse. Just as Rousseau is developing his ideas concerning constraint, which in modern terms we might call alienation, this figure, essential to our development, emerges and takes on different names and attributes––“nurse,” “governess,” etc.

Rousseau describes the role he attributes to nurses in the following lines: “D’où vient cet usage déraisonnable? D’un usage dénaturé. Depuis que les méres, méprisant leur premier devoir, n’ont plus voulu nourrir leurs enfans, il a fallu les confier à des femmes mercenaires, qui se trouvant ainsi méres d’enfans étrangers pour qui la nature ne leur disoit rien, n’ont cherché qu’à s’épargner de la peine. Il eut falu veiller sans cesse sur un enfant en liberté : mais quand il est bien lié, on le jette dans un coin sans s’embarrasser de ses cris. Pourvu qu’il n’y ait pas de preuves de la négligence de la nourrice, pourvu que le nourriçon ne se casse ni bras ni jambe, qu’importe, au surplus, qu’il périsse, ou qu’il demeure infirme le reste de ses jours ? On conserve ses membres aux dépens de son corps, et, quoi qu’il arrive, la nourrice est disculpée. (…) Au moindre tracas qui survient on le suspend à un clou comme un paquet de hardes, et tandis que sans se presser la nourrice vaque à ses affaires, le malheureux reste ainsi crucifié” (91).

Thus, from the outset, the nurse acts as a substitute for the mother, who, according to Rousseau’s admittedly misogynistic analysis, has delegated her motherhood to another woman, eschewing her maternal “duty”––the natural duty of a mother to her child being to care for him, to be at his side, and to prove her maternal care. I will return before long to the matter of care. Rousseau goes on to employ a very specific terminology to describe these women. He describes them as “female mercenaries,” considering them to be driven solely by payment–– *mère-cenaires*.

Thus, the nursemaid embodies the archetypal figure limiting children’s natural freedom. The priority that matters above all else becomes protecting the child from illness or injury. However, according to Rousseau, following Locke, *experience* matters above all as it forms the basis for all subsequent knowledge. It also lays the groundwork for a child’s developing capacity for reasoning, although reason itself develops much later. Rousseau is opposed to this pre-eminent focus on the child’s health and safety to the detriment of his freedom of movement, regarding the latter of vital importance. If this vitally important value is no longer central to education, then symbolically, as I discussed earlier, the child is likened to a corpse or to the supplicated body *par excellence,* that of Christ: “le malheureux reste ainsi crucifié” (91). Rousseau suggests that nurses are motivated solely by their own interests rather than the well-being of the children in their care. They lack the maternal care that constitutes a mother’s love. Countering Rousseau, I argue that these figures not only threaten maternal care, which should be inherent in a biological mother, but also that nurses, far from having merely a financial relationship with the children, possess a unique bond with them. Thus, they challenge the natural role of mothers, using Rousseau’s terminology.

In summary, this discussion of Rousseau’s treatise has several aims––it introduces the question of freedom in Rousseau’s philosophy right from birth, and it allows me to explore the connection between body and mind, between a constrained body and an alienated spirit. This element is crucial for understanding Rousseau’s educational theory. Furthermore, this text introduces the central figure in this study––the nurse. One key factor that strengthens the unique bond between nurses and children is their ability to speak the children’s language.

**The language of nurses**

The first passage that I will analyze addresses the issue of children’s or infants’ language, that is, children before they use a language as spoken by adults. I consider this passage instructive because it not only describes the connection between children and caregivers but also expresses and characterizes a much more complex relationship with spoken language by blurring the distinction between what we traditionally consider a language and what is not a language or does not pertain to linguistic discourse:

*Toutes nos langues sont des ouvrages de l’art. On a longtems cherché s’il y avoit une langue naturelle et commune à tous les hommes : sans doute, il y en a une ; et c’est celle que les enfans parlent avant de savoir parler. Cette langue n’est pas articulée, mais elle est accentuée, sonore, intelligible. L’usage des nôtres nous l’a fait négliger au point de l’oublier tout à fait. Étudions les enfans, et bientot nous la rapprendrons auprès d’eux. Les nourrices sont nos maitres dans cette langue, elles entendent tout ce que disent leurs nourriçons, elles leur répondent, elles ont avec eux des dialogues très bien suivis, et quoiqu’elles prononcent des mots, ces mots sont parfaitement inutiles, ce n’est point le sens du mot qu’ils entendent, mais l’accent dont il est accompagné. Au langage de la voix se joint celui du geste, non moins énergique. Ce geste n’est pas dans les foibles mains des enfans, il est sur leurs visages.  (121)*

The first noteworthy element is that language is, according to the author, a form of *savoir-faire* or a skill. It is clear that he considers languages to be a human creation, referring to them as “*ouvrages de l’art*.” This term is used in the sense of creation or technique. Consequently, he asks whether “natural” language exists—referring to language that exists prior to the establishment of cultural convention. A language that embodies a technique, a human “*art*,” but is not yet cultural. He answers this question in the affirmative, stating “C’est celle que les enfans parlent avant de savoir parler.” This statement is quite astonishing; it suggests that children speak a universal and natural language that precedes the language commonly spoken by adults. Thus, there indeed exists a natural language before language, I dare say, a language *avant la lettre*. Only children possess this forgotten idiom.

This language that precedes language––this arch-language––is already contaminated by the linguistic codes ascribed to it by Rousseau (accented, sonorous, intelligible); this arch-language “is not articulated.” Indeed, to speak of an unarticulated language is already to analyze language from the perspective of an articulated language. In Rousseau’s view, when a language is analyzed, it is already placed under the prism of articulation. Articulation is itself a category that defines a language based on an articulated language. In sum, to think about inarticulation is already to think about children’s language from the perspective of adult language. This paradox raises the idea that the unarticulated language of children also contaminates the notion of articulated language in its more classical frame. In this definition, language unravels just as it asserts itself.

This first characteristic calls into question language fluency in its entirety. Indeed, when a sentence is stuttered, it remains entirely “intelligible,” “sonorous,” and “accented” to use Rousseau’s terminology. Therefore, I can deduce that according to these principles, language disfluency is not a hindrance to understanding a language; it meets the constitutive requirements of a language deemed “fluent” according to Rousseau. In other words, this means that a language, even if it does not seem articulated or is not a full language in the sense defined by speech pathologists, remains a fully-fledged language, according to Rousseau.

Furthermore, for a spoken language to be considered as such, it must be recognizable and repeatable, that is, communicable. Derrida effectively demonstrates in his paper *Signature, Event, Context* that all communication is defined by what he terms its “iterability.” This means that a language can be repeated and deciphered. However, we posit an imaginary language, the codes or meanings of which are understood by a single person, could still be considered a language because the possibility that another person could understand or decode exists and, indeed, is probable. In a way, no code is absolutely indecipherable. Indeed, if we follow the radical approach outlined in his paper, we can infer that every code, even if seemingly unique, is never entirely so. If it is repeatable, it can eventually be identified.

I emphasize that this element is implicit in Rousseau’s thinking. However, if the language of infants cannot be spoken, communicated, and thus duplicated, nurses would not be able to reproduce it. It would need to be invented anew with each infant. However, according to Rousseau, this language does indeed exist and possesses its own codes.

**From Babel to Babyl**

This infantile language initially appears foreign, meaning, in Rousseau’s terms, that it is not language in a conventional sense, then becomes a complete and full-fledged language. It is worthy of knowledge and a knowledge that, in turn, redefines the very notion of language. This point is central to Rousseau’s thinking. He is the first thinker, to my knowledge, to consider child language as such—an inherently legitimate object of study. Through his explorations, he questions the very concept of language itself.

In addressing the question of articulation, Rousseau takes his position in an ancient tradition that he both complicates and rethinks. He revisits the longstanding dichotomy established by Aristotle between *phonê* and *logos*. *Phonê* signifies voice, but specifically the unarticulated voice, whereas the articulated voice, *logos*, for Aristotle, to a certain extent, denotes human language––discourse guided by reason. However, as we have seen earlier, for Rousseau, the language of infants is described as “accented, sonorous, intelligible.” According to Aristotle, *phonê* consists of three components as outlined in his treatise *De Anima*: “register, musical sound, and language” (Tricot), terms derived from the Greek “*apotasis, melos, and dialektos*” (Labarrière).

Rousseau initially adopts this ancient dichotomy which runs through the history of philosophy. According to this view, articulated language is characteristic of humans who possess reason or who fully exercise their reason—essentially, adults, to use Rousseau’s terminology. In its classical definition, the child, not yet possessing full reason, *de facto* does not possess articulated language. Mais comme je l’ai souligné un auparavant, il y ajoute à cette terminologie d’autres caractéristiques qui font entrer la langue des nourrissons dans la sphère conceptuelle des langues « pleines et entière ». Dans un sens, il est hérité d’Aristote dont il va muer et transformé la notion qu’il a établie de la *phonè* pour la rendre déjà logos.

Moreover, from the perspective that Derrida describes in Of Grammatology, the signifier *voice* is already contaminated by *logos* and *signification*. In a certain philosophical tradition, there is no pure voice; it is either impossible or needs to be invented. However, Rousseau uses the term *language* to encompass the notion of *logos* and *phonè*. In effect, what causes a non-language to become a language is that it has conventions, is meaningful, and can be reproduced, as I have previously demonstrated. In order to understand the argument in Émile, I will revisit the internal logic of this excerpt to explicate Rousseau’s reasoning.

First, this language for Rousseau is “accented, sonorous, and intelligible.” This language is sonorous, which was implied by his discussion of articulation, thus relating to the voice. Moreover, it is “accented,” meaning it is musical and is not monotonous or uniform. Finally, it remains “intelligible,” a term that warrants further examination. The matter of intelligibility in Rousseau’s work is a subject of debate. It refers to the idea that, for Rousseau, humans are endowed with reason. This raises the question of the dualism between the *sensory* and the *intelligible*. Authors like Fabre and Gouhier see a direct connection between Rousseau and Descartes, drawing parallels between Émile and Descartes’s *Meditation*. The question of Rousseau’s relationship to rationalism, positioning him as a precursor to Kantian thought or, conversely, to Romanticism, is a broad debate, notably discussed by Cassirer. Delving into this debate is beyond the scope of this essay. Still, I maintain that Rousseau challenged this distinction by questioning this dichotomy long before it became the staple of philosophical debate in the 19th century. Thus, intelligibility can be interpreted, in my opinion, through a definition that was inherited from Plato but which Rousseau amends as he adopts it. An intelligible language, then, would be a language grasped by reason, the *logos*, but also nourished by sensory experience, which gives substance to this thought. For Rousseau, pure thought cannot exist without experience, making him an heir of Locke in this regard. However, a form of rationality is also necessary to comprehend this thought. These characteristics make this childlike language worthy of being defined as such.

In this analysis, inherited from Aristotle and Plato, Rousseau returns to the enigma surrounding the difference between languages, although he does so differently from Aristotle. The Tower of Babel becomes the Tower of Babble (Pierssens), reworking the expression of Michel Pierssens. Indeed, babble is the language spoken by children par excellence. This proto-language, if you will, is analyzed as a linguistic object by Rousseau. In contrast, the majority of thinkers who came before considered them no more than an assortment of meaningless sounds. It would be valuable, I think, to briefly remark on the term *to babble* itself.

Firstly, the verb *babiller* has been used in French at least until the 12th century as a synonym for *bégayer* (to stutter). Secondly, this term can have a positive connotation, as noted by the dictionary of the Académie Française, as it is associated with the singing of birds: “*Émettre des sons mal articulés mais qui peuvent être agréables ou harmonieux. Dès son réveil, le bébé babillait dans son berceau. Par analogie. Le merle, la grive babillent*” (Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française). Fascinatingly Aristotle debates the question of *phoné* and *logos* in a work dealing with with birdsong.

Lastly, *babil* or *babillage* has been and still is associated with two figures: children and women. Indeed, in the Académie Française dictionaries of 1762 and 1798, the example sentence illustrating this term is: “On dit que les femmes aiment à babiller.” This remains the case today, as the current version of this dictionary uses the example of “little girls” who babble. In these cases, babbling is considered trivial language—speech without purpose or speech for the sake of speech that loses its force and purpose, in the classical sense, as a vehicle of meaningful communication. Thus, the nonsensical is associated with femininity and childhood. These categories of people are seen as producers of meaningless utterances, and they are characterized by linguistic intemperance. These two archetypal figures remain linked to the term even in the current definition.

According to him, babbling is a universal language common to all children; they all speak the same language—a universal language. However, who are their primary interlocutors? The nurses. This proto-language, spoken by proto-mothers who are also post-mothers, is not an obscure or unintelligible language. On the contrary, it is the most comprehensible language, provided one can decode its signs. The Tower of Babel collapses before the power of babbling. What classically is considered parts of language that do not make sense when existing in isolation become the parts of a meaningful language.

In the *Organon*, in the well-known chapter *On Interpretation* Aristotle defines language the following terms. He uses the word *ὄνομα* (translated as *name*) to signify a linguistic unit which in modern terms we call a grammatical unit of meaning (signifer), in these terms: “Le nom est un son vocal, possédant une signification conventionnelle, sans référence au temps, et dont aucune partie ne présente de signification quand elle est prise séparément” (90). Each constituent sound of a word makes sense only within the word as a whole. Moreover, he uses a counterexample to illustrate his point: “Dans le nom Καλλιππος, en effet, ιππος n'a en lui-même et par lui-même aucune signification, comme dans l'expression Καλος ιππος. — Pourtant ce qui a lieu dans les noms simples n'a pas lieu dans les noms composés : pour les premiers, la partie ne présente aucune signification quelconque, tandis que, pour les derniers, elle contribue à la signification du tout, bien que, prise séparément, elle n'ait aucune signification (…)”(91). Aristotle underlines that a “name” cannot be reduced to its parts without revealing that the part is meaningful in itself. In the compound name, the signifier can be broken up into its constituent parts. Can we say the same thing about etymological practices, which consider the different parts of “names”?

Any translator or philologist with an interest in Aristotlean, though, finds himself before the paradox of both affirming this principle and, at the same time, revealing the etymology of a large number of words. Yet, this etymological practice, central to philosophical thought, contradicts the fact that the signifier is a whole. However, according to the Aristotelian definition, Rousseau clearly expresses that the language of infants is a language like any other since it possesses “conventions”––rules that allow each interlocutor to repeat a certain number of identifiable sounds.

Furthermore, this Aristotelian definition of a “name,” which we call a *signifier*, highlights the fact that language unfolds outside of time, meaning that a word possesses stable meaning between individuals and over time. Later, the language of babbling infants must be forgotten, or at least that is what we tend to believe. Rousseau shows us that this is not the case. The nurse is the guardian of this lost language. Indeed, it is not forgotten because nurses continue to speak it to the children in their care year after year. Moreover, far from being forgotten, this language incarnates in our present under new guises.

Furthermore, stuttering is almost always connected with childhood. This condition often arises during childhood and remains associated with children. Indeed, the various texts on speech dysfluencies that we identified in Rousseau refer to the childhood of Émile and his development as a child (Books I and II). There is no mention whatsoever of stuttering, stammering, or babbling regarding Émile once he reaches adulthood. Moreover, with only very rare exceptions, the literature on the subject in every field approaches the origin of stuttering or stuttering itself through the prism of childhood.[[2]](#footnote-2)

However, the originality of Rousseau’s analysis remains the fact that he considers babbling to be a language––a language that we can remember, a language that we *should* remember: “L’usage des nôtres nous l’a fait négliger au point de l’oublier tout à fait. Étudions les enfans, et bientot nous la rapprendrons auprès d’eux (…)” Therefore, we must make efforts to study it anew. Rousseau is the philosopher of origins. He seeks out origins––the origins of inequality, the origins of language, the origins of evil, the origin of corruption. Yet, when this origin is rediscovered, it is no longer an origin at all. Indeed, to speak the language of childhood as adults does not mean rediscovering childhood within childhood but childhood within adulthood. Babbling, stuttering, and stammering allow us to reconnect with this childhood. This archaeology of childish language reveals traces of a lost language, which, if found again, unavoidably offers revelations about human nature.

Indeed, the nurse or, ideally, according to Rousseau, the parent, listening to this language of childhood, speaks this lost language in turn, which is rediscovered in the act. Consequently, speech dysfluencies that interrupt signification, repeat sounds, and render speech “accented” allow humans to reconnect with a new linguistic melody. The term “accented” refers to the realm of musicality. Rousseau urges us to reconnect with the music of childhood, with a language of melody. Indeed, Rousseau was an important thinker in the field of music theory.[[3]](#footnote-3) Stuttering goes beyond childhood for Rousseau. It allows us to reconnect with meaningful utterances even before the emergence of so-called adult language. This excerpt needs to be contextualized in terms of another text by Rousseau, his *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. In this text, the philosopher addresses the question of the origin of languages but, more broadly, the origin of language itself. This text is opportune for putting the issue of disfluency into perspective along with the matter of musicality in Rousseau.

“*Il est donc à croire que les besoins dictèrent les premiers gestes, et que les passions arrachèrent les premières voix. (...) elles sont vives et figurées. On nous fait du langage des premiers hommes des langues de géomètres, et nous voyons que ce furent des langues de poëtes.”* (*Essai sur l’origine des langues*)

“*Comme les voix naturelles sont inarticulées, les mots auraient peu d'articulations ; quelques consonnes interposées, effaçant l'hiatus des voyelles, suffiraient pour les rendre coulantes et faciles à prononcer.*”  
 (*Essai sur l’origine des langues*)

For this author, the consonant is what impedes “natural utterances,” and hinders fluidity. This analysis, originating in *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, is a common theme in studies on stuttering. Stuttering is often more frequent on consonants (Lickley). Therefore, the consonant obstructs language both anatomically and in terms of communicative capacity, yet it also renders language social because it enables articulation. Conversely, vowels, the absence of consonants, lean more towards singing than speaking. The entire question of musicality that we have touched upon resonates with these various ideas in Rousseau. He writes a little further on: *“QUICONQUE étudiera l'histoire et le progrès des langues verra que plus les voix deviennent monotones, plus les consonnes se multiplient, et qu'aux accens qui s'effacent, aux quantités qui s'égalisent, on supplée par des combinaisons grammaticales et par de nouvelles articulations (…) il devient plus juste et moins passionné ; il substitue aux sentimens les idées, il ne parle plus au cœur, mais à la raison.  (…) l'accent s'éteint, l'articulation s'étend ; la langue devient plus exacte, plus claire, mais plus traînante, plus sourde, et plus froide. »* (*Essai sur l’origine des langues*).

I find this analysis illuminating in understanding the rejection of and discomfort felt towards stuttering and faltering. The consonant erases the accent, the fluidity, and the relationship that humans maintain with emotion. Fluidity takes away a part of what makes us human––our connection to feelings, “to the heart.”

Therefore, Rousseau exhorts us to reconnect with this practice of a language that we have “neglected.” Language dysfluencies are no longer to be stigmatized; instead, we must reconnect with them. Throughout his text, he discredits nurses and governesses. He also asserts that they should serve as examples for us in this learning process. Nurses and governesses, according to Rousseau, are prosthetic figures, avatars of mothers and fathers, unnatural figures that should be done away with. However, they possess knowledge that we should relearn. Human beings must reconnect with their language dysfluencies, symbols of their lost childhoods and creations. Rousseau thus revisits classical terminology that defines language in order to question it, undermine these contradictions, and ultimately give language a completely different role.

This ephemeral language, which is forgotten by the child when they reach adulthood, is not trivial; it is already spoken before any spoken language takes root. The term *ephemeral* comes from the Greek ἐφημέριος, “composé de  *epi*, ‘during,’ and *hêmera*, ‘jour ” (Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française). It refers to something that lasts only one day. However, if we break down this term, the root ἐφη is related to the conjugated verb φημί, meaning *to say*, *to think*, or *to know*. If I apply babbling itself as a reading practice similar to etymological analysis, I could read the term *ephemeral,* in a babbled form, as *ephé-phēmí-hêmera*––the single or first day that brings into being the acts of thinking and saying. In this case, *saying* precedes language as it is commonly understood. The ephemerality of the moment or the utterance signifies it means something, and it defines this period of a child’s life, often considered to be absent of language. In a sense, it is the very moment of saying, that dissipates the instant learned language comes to replace it. The substitute mother, the prosthetic caregiver, the supplement of maternity, embodies the interlocutor of this dialogue. She is among the few who possess the ability to decode absolute speech, incomprehensible to common mortals, the language that precedes language. This primary language, through its movement, speaks, acts, and shifts. Babble is thus not a proto-language but a language in its own right, a language that exists and possesses its own codes and which, according to Rousseau, can be decoded. Nurses learn this language through habit and practice because they are always in contact with children. Therefore, it is not mothers or fathers who speak with infants or understand them, but rather the nurses. Those who understand children the best are often not from their own families. Anthropologists would say they are not from their nuclear family. However, for Rousseau, this represents an imminent danger. Rousseau is concerned that nurses might become mothers. What would then be the consequences of such a substitution?

*Nurses, ephemerality or the “effet-mère”*

Moving on. If we take the term phonetically, *l'éphémère* can be recast as *l'effet-mère*. This language that lasts for an instant, yet already moves towards the language to come––this proto-language is omnipresent in the language that will be spoken subsequently since it already possesses all the characteristics Rousseau ascribes to language in that it is “accented, sonorous, intelligible” (121).

This maternal language comes about through contact with the nurse. Returning to Rousseau’s argument, the sound is meaningful and becomes meaningful. This signifier is communicable because it is identifiable by nurses. It is also composed of conventions since nurses speak this language with other children. So, it is the substitute mother who introduces the child to language; the child is in “dialogues” with her. The contact with this substitute mother, who can replace the mother, is the idea that preoccupies Rousseau. As highlighted by Derrida in the seminar *On Hospitality*, Rousseau himself, as detailed in *Confessions*, experienced this game of substitutions where his mother, through Madame De Warrens, becomes the mistress and the hostess, or the provider of hospitality, becomes simultaneously hostile and erotic.

In short, the mistress of the house becomes a fantasy mistress for the young Rousseau. He is well aware that substitution exists, even though he believes it should not, for the sake of societal balance and well-being. What would happen if mothers were no longer mothers? Would children stop being children? Would this undermine childhood or perhaps challenge the possibly already mythologized figure of the mother as the original symbol of hospitality? Could the very notion of origin already be at risk? Derrida offers us a hint at the consequences of erasing the maternal figure. If mothers stopped fulfilling their natural duties, they would cease to be mothers, according to Rousseau, but children would remain children. However, they would be deprived of that primal acceptance and the essential, unconditional, even fretful care that allows a child to, in turn, show hospitality. It is human nature in its original purity that would be affected and corrupted, jeopardizing the very future of humanity. If the initial hospitality is removed or replaced, would any possibility of unconditional hospitality be lost for these children, these orphans of care? These prosthetic mothers, who can also be fathers or even teachers, are they deficient? They receive these first words and respond to them. Babbling becomes the first words of the language; the language of the infants would thus be these first words. Words foreign to their own bodies that echo the foreign body of their nurse or other caregivers. This universal language can be learned by all parents, but as Rousseau asserts, “Les nourrices sont nos maitres dans cette langue.” They are the masters of this proto-language, and this mastery is unacceptable for Rousseau, who holds that mothers ought to be the masters of this primal or “archlanguage.” One source of care is substituted with another, one mistress with another, One mastery with another. Does abdicating love equate to abdicating power? For Rousseau, on this count, there is no doubt. Thus, language arises from contact with the maternal substitute. But does this language enter into conflict with maternal language? Is this the anxiety that lies beneath Rousseau’s treatise? It is clearly expressed throughout the first two books of *Émile*. Derrida, for his part, precisely and forcefully identifies this anxiety in his seminar *On Hospitality*: “*Loin de simplement disparaître dans le jeu des substitutions métonymiques ou prothétiques, contre lesquelles Rousseau semble s’indigner ou protester, la maternité, telle qu’elle se trouve déterminée à partir de cette sollicitude maternelle, c’est justement ce qui reste étranger et inaccessible à toute cette prothéticité, à tout ce remplacement : on peut tout remplacer, la gestation, la fécondation, le sein, la nourriture, le lait, on peut remplacer toutes les parties remplaçables de la maternité, mais on appellera mère l’irremplaçable, comme solicitude” (59).* Further along, he goes on to say: “*On peut tout remplacer chez la mère, sauf la sollicitude désintéressée, cette figure irremplaçable de l'hospitalité qui doit rester intacte, indemne, sauve.”*

For Derrida, maternal care involves a relationship with language. But there is also violence in motherhood. Hence, the use of the term *mistress* with its intimate connection to the erotic. Maternal care would thus be the form, perhaps the only form, of this unconditional hospitality, though Derrida is not fooled by it. It also embodies violence and mastery. The mother is no longer a mistress, or to use a common expression, she is no longer the mistress of the house; a mistress in her own home. She becomes a guest herself, visiting her household, merely passing through as she spends her time in the city or entertaining herself. In short, she steps out of its economy—the very term comes from ancient Greek, meaning the laws of the house: *oikos* (house) and *nomos* (rules, laws). From a Derridean perspective, for Rousseau, the mother steps out of a natural economy and lets herself be replaced by the nurse. Derrida views maternal care as a sign of unconditional hospitality, but this maternal care is both natural and beyond nature; it is necessary and contingent. It exists within a mother-child relationship economy and beyond it, as it is asymmetrical, generous, and anxious. In other words, it is riddled with paradoxes.

The term *mistress* analyzed earlier is quite interesting because the eroticization of the mother transfers to the nurse, her substitute. The risk that bothers Rousseau is the possibility of the nurse re-entering this economy. She would become a *mère-cenaire*, driven solely by money and self-interest. The author of *Émile* dreams of and conceptualizes a mother who is not motivated by these factors but by the unconditional hospitality that only a mother can offer her child.

**Conclusion**

There are indeed several paradoxes in Rousseau’s approach to language disfluencies, yet these paradoxes also pave the way for an original perspective on what constitutes language. He regards “children’s language” and babbling to be fully-fledged languages in communion with nature and musicality. Parents should once again embrace this language. Stuttering is thus accepted for its musicality, and the learning of language might hinder certain natural ways of speaking. The stuttering or babbling of a child possesses the same characteristics attributed to fluent language. The silences, pauses, or prolongations associated with stuttering do not render the stuttered language incomplete or disfluent. This language is fluent, musical, free, akin to singing—it is a language that, for Rousseau, belongs to childhood, to the origin, the authentic language.

The characteristics associated with stuttering no longer obstruct understanding but instead make it understandable and intelligible. Babbling could be this forgotten, perhaps original language. Therefore, the stigma shifts from the babbling child or stuttering adult to the listener who hears without truly listening, who listens only to correct. Language must be received with hospitality by the listener, not with distrust or fear. The nurse speaks this language—full, complete, and original, according to Rousseau. Therefore, he would demand that parents learn it as well, perhaps to envision a society where disfluency is not an abnormality but an ethic of welcoming the voice, the voice of the other, the primal voice.

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1. Translator of l’*Émile ou De l’éducation* de Rousseau [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The DSM-5 considers stuttering in terms of its presentation in childhood. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rousseau wrote several works on the subject. The most well-known are *Projet concernant de nouveaux signes pour la musique* and *Dissertation sur la musique moderne*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)