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**Babbling and Beyond: Rousseau and the Nurse as Supplement**

Among the copious bibliography of canonical work produced by Rousseau, one text, while being widely celebrated, has remained relatively understudied––*Emile: Or On Education* (1979). But what can be made of *Emile*,a 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 advanced by Maria Montessori (Crétois). While Rousseau’s writings are amply discussed in fields like philosophy, literary studies, linguistics, anthropology, and political science, he has never been studied through the question of “babbling” via speech dysfluency. While the language question has remained an essential topic in Rousseauist studies, this specific subject, studied via the question of speech dysfluency and the figure of the nurse remains, with one partial exception (Hochart) a blind spot in current research.

Speech pathologists define speech dysfluency as interruptions in the flow of speech, with pauses occurring unexpectedly or in places not typical of fluent speech production (Lickley). Stuttering is the most common speech dysfluency. However, Lickley’s definition broadens our understanding of speech dysfluency and allows us to consider another kind: babbling. Babbling is significant as it represents the genesis of language, speech, and language learning. Children begin their learning process by producing sounds that are considered dysfluent. Initially, these sounds may not be regarded as proper language due to lack of continuity in speech, inarticulation, pauses, etc. However, viewing this specific speech dysfluency through the lens of Rousseau’s *Emile* allows us to reconsider the legitimacy and dignity of babbling as a form of language, emphasizing the necessity to study it in order to understand what constitutes a language. While Rousseau does not explicitly use the term babbling [*babi]*), following Hochart's analysis in his article devoted to Rousseau and the question of babbling, it is reasonable to assume from the excerpts studied in this text that Rousseau considers infant language as babbling.[[1]](#footnote-2)

A figure that will be essential to our study is the nurse. This figure emerges and takes on different names and attributes––nurse,governess, etc. Moreover, Rousseau is clear that one key factor strengthens the unique bond between nurses and children: their ability to speak the children’s language. More broadly, the question babbling will enable us to think about nurses' specific role in Rousseau's *Emile*. The nurse's figure especially will allow us to explore how Rousseau's language theory could be reconceptualized through this figure.

Babbling: 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. Rousseau wrote the following:

All our languages are works of art. Whether there was a language natural and common to all men has long been a subject of research. Doubtless there is such a language, and it is the one children speak before knowing how to speak. This language is not articulate, but it is accented, sonorous, intelligible. The habit of our languages has made us neglect that language to the point of forgetting it completely. Let us study children, and we shall soon relearn it with them. Nurses are our masters in this language. They understand everything their nurslings say; they respond to them; they have quite consistent dialogues with them; and, although they pronounce words, these words are perfectly useless; it is not the sense of the word that children understand but the accent which accompanies it. (65)

The first noteworthy element is that language is, according to Rousseau, a form of *savoir-faire* or a skill. It is clear that he considers languages to be a human creation, referring to them as “works of art [ouvrages de l’art].” This term is used in the sense of creation or technique. Consequently, he asks whether “natural” language exists—referring to a 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, referring to “the one children speak before knowing how to speak” (65). 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, we might say a language *avant la lettre*. Only children (and, as we shall see, their nurses) possess this forgotten idiom.

This language that precedes language––this archilanguage––is already contaminated by the linguistic codes ascribed to it by Rousseau (it is accented, sonorous, intelligible); but this archilanguage “is not articulated.” The terms that Rousseau uses are inherited from a long philosophical tradition, especially from Aristotle, and are the features of a complete, whole, full adult language. His terminology intertwines with a normative definition of language where the intelligibility of language is concomitant with articulation. Rousseau places his definition of infant language in the continuity of a particular tradition of language conception that his text will go on to question.

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 language as based on articulation.

When Rousseau describes this infant language, he uses a terminology inherited from a philosophical tradition, especially an Aristotelian one, that defines human language in analogous terms. In his work De Anima (1993), Aristotle characterizes human language through three terms: “Apotasis, Melos et Dialektos” (Labarrière). The question of translation remains a complex topic, and Labarrière has devoted many articles to this subject. However, essential translations of these terms in French and English allow us to draw an analogy and demonstrate a continuity between Aristotle’s definition of language and Rousseau’s.

For Labarrière, the term apotasis means “allongement (lengthening),” which refers to the stretch of a sound and how a sound can be modulated. This definition appears very close to the term *accentuation*, defined as the sounds’ length, stretch, and intensity. The term intensity encapsulated in the definition of accentuation reinforces the proximity between Rousseau and Aristotle. As Labarrière argues, in another possible translation, the term apostasis means “une intonation de la voix *(*Avoice intonation*)*” (Bertier). This definition describes the intensity of the sound, which appears to be contained in the definition of accentuation as well.

The notion of *melos* could be translated as a “son musical (musical sound)” (Labarrière). This term and the word *sonorous* used by Rousseau are two idioms that belong to the same lexical field of sounds and acoustics. They describe a common aspect of language: its acoustical feature.

Finally, the idiom *dialektos* is translated by Rodier as “l’accent, la prononciation (accent, pronunciation),” in other words, what makes a sound as Rousseau says intelligible and comprehensible. The accent and pronunciation refer to the capacity to modulate sounds with a particular pattern. This last term appears to be noteworthy because it underlines the notion of articulation; indeed, Aristotle defines dialektos in his book *History of Animals* (2019) as: “ διάλεκτος δ’ ἡ τῆς φωνῆς ἐστι τῇ γλώττῃ διάρθρωσις » « Now speech, on the other hand, is articulation of the voice by the tongue” (Zirin). This definition implies that articulation is encompassed in dialektos. Regarding this definition, it is also possible to assume that accentuation could be used as a synonym, as articulation implies a form of voice variation that could also be perceived as already a form of articulation. Then the notion of dialektos possesses in itself articulation as a component of its definition. Those analogies between the Rousseauist conception of language and Aristotelian’s one act as a marker of a long philosophical tradition regarding the characterization of human language.

In sum, to think about inarticulation is already to think about children’s language from the perspective of adult language and already constituted language. This paradox raises the idea that the unarticulated language of children also contaminates the notion of articulated language in its more classical frame.

This first characteristic calls into question language fluency in its entirety. Indeed, when a sentence is babbled, 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. 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. Indeed an imaginary language, the codes or meanings of which are understood by only a single person, could still be considered a language because the possibility that another person could understand or decode it exists and, indeed, is probable. In a way, no code is absolutely (“structurally,” as Derrida says) 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 could not 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 but 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, and 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, primarily 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.”

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, *ipso facto*,does not possess articulated language. But as I previously emphasized, Rousseau adds other characteristics to this terminology that elevate infant language into the conceptual realm of “full and complete” languages. In a way, this is still inherited from Aristotle, as Rousseau modifies and transforms Aristotle’s concept of phonè to render it more akin to logos. Moreover, following Derrida’s gesture in *Of Grammatology*, the notion of the voice as a monolithic concept where the voice is distinct from reason could be questioned and destabilized. Any sound remains an act of interpretation, regardless of the type of sound: human, an animal other than a human, or an object.

However, Rousseau uses the term *language* to encompass the notions of both logos and phonè. 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 Emile, it is necessary to revisit the internal logic of this excerpt to explicate Rousseau’s reasoning.

First, this language for Rousseau is, as we saw, “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 naturally 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 Emile and Descartes’s *Meditations*. 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 dichotomy long before it became a staple of philosophical debate in the nineteenth century. Thus, intelligibility can be interpreted, in my opinion, through a definition that was inherited from ancient philosophy 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*, reworking the expression of Michel Pierssens. Indeed, babble is the language spoken by children *par excellence*. This proto-language is analyzed as a linguistic object by Rousseau. In contrast, the majority of thinkers who came before him considered it no more than an assortment of meaningless sounds.

The term babble can have a positive connotation, as noted in the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française*, as it is associated with the singing of birds: “To produce poorly articulated sounds that can still be pleasant or harmonious. Upon waking, the baby was babbling in his crib. By analogy, the blackbird and the thrush also babble.” Fascinatingly, Aristotle also debates the question of *phoné* and *logos* in a work dealing with birdsong.

*Babil* or *babillage* has been and still is associated with two figures: children and women. In the Académie Française dictionaries of 1762 and 1798, the example sentence illustrating this term is: “It said of women that they like to babble.” 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. Consequently, the nonsensical is associated with both 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.

The Lost Language

According to Rousseau, babbling is a universal language common to all children; they all speak the same language—a universal language. However, who are their primary interlocutors? Nurses. This proto-language, however, 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 *On Interpretation* (1992),Aristotle defines language in the following way: He uses the word *ὄνομα* (translated as name) to signify a linguistic unit, which in modern terms we call a grammatical unit of meaning (signifier) in these terms: “A name is a spoken sound significant by convention, without time, none of whose parts is significant in separation” (43). Each constituent sound of a word makes sense only within the word as a whole. Moreover, he uses a counterexample to illustrate his point:

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”?

Furthermore, this Aristotelian definition of a name highlights the fact that language unfolds outside of time, meaning that a word possesses stable meaning between individuals. 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 exists in our present under new guises.

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: “The habit of our languages has made us neglect that language to the point of forgetting it completely. Let us study children, and we shall soon relearn it with them” (65). 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. To speak the language of childhood as adults does not mean rediscovering childhood within childhood but childhood within adulthood. Babbling allows 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.

The nurse or, ideally, according to Rousseau, the parent, listening to the 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. Moreover, Rousseau was an important thinker in the field of music theory.[[2]](#footnote-3) Babbling 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:

It seems then that need dictated the first gestures, while the passions stimulated the first words (. . .) They are vital and figurative. The language of the first men is represented to us as the tongues of geometers, but we see that they were the tongues of poets. (14)

Since natural sounds are inarticulate, words have few articulations. Interposing some consonants to fill the gaps between vowels would suffice to make them fluid and easy to pronounce. (16)

For Rousseau, 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 dysfluency. Dysfluency 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:

Anyone who studies the history and progress of the tongues will see that the more the words become monotonous, the more the consonants multiply; that, as accents fall into disuse and quantities are neutralized, they are replaced by grammatical combinations and new articulations (. . .) it becomes more regular and less passionate. It substitutes ideas for feelings. It no longer speaks to the heart but to reason. Similarly, accent diminishes, articulation increases. Language becomes more exact and clearer, but more prolix, duller and colder. (18)

I find this analysis illuminating in understanding the rejection of and discomfort felt towards speech dysfluency 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 denigrates nurses and governesses. But he also asserts that they should serve as examples for us in this learning process. Nurses and governesses, according to Rousseau, are prosthetic figures, unnatural avatars of mothers and fathers, figures that in principle should be done away with in favor of true mothers and fathers. And yet, these substitutes will have a positive role to play. In *Of Grammatology* (2016), Derrida already identifies this double gesture in Rousseau's text and describes this play of substitution as the specific role identified by Rousseau concerning nurses. He writes the following:

Yet all education, the keystone of Rousseauist thought, will be described

or presented as a system of substitution [suppléance] destined to reconsti-

tute Nature’s edifice in the most natural way possible. The first chapter of

Emile announces the function of this pedagogy. Although maternal solici-

tude cannot be supplemented at all, “it is better that the child should suck

the breast of a healthy nurse rather than of a petted mother, if he has any

new evil to fear from the same blood that formed him” (ibid.) [p. 12; trans-

lation modified]. It is indeed culture that must supplement a deficient na-

ture, a deficiency that cannot by definition be anything but an accident and

a deviation from nature. Culture is ­ here called habit; it is necessary and in-

sufficient from the moment when the substitution of mothers is no longer

envisaged only “from the physical side.” (158)

Derrida identifies the Rousseausit gesture of the mother's substitution in play in this text and, more broadly, how education is defined as an infinite chain of substitution. Derrida also already identifies a passage that my text will analyze later via the reading of On Hospitality (2023), about maternal solicitude, and how the nurse already possesses this ambivalent role that threatens the mother's motherhood and the necessary substitution of the mother. Moreover, he underlies a fascinating point beyond the scope of this article, with the introduction of the notion of culture, which appears as the natural supplement of the “nature déficiente.” According to Derrida, nurses embody this complex, ambivalent, and essential role in Rousseau's text.

For nurses, systemically denigrated by Rousseau, nonetheless possess knowledge that we should relearn. Human beings must reconnect with their language dysfluencies, symbols of their lost childhoods and creations. Rousseau 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, “composed of *epi*, ‘during,’ and *hêmera*, ‘day’” (*Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française*). It refers to something that lasts only one day. However, if we break down this term, the root *ἐφη* appears by coincidence as a homograph 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, nourished by this uncanny homographic accident, 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 devoid 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 therefore not so much a proto-language as 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. However, for Rousseau, this represents an imminent danger. Rousseau is concerned that nurses might become the mothers. What would then be the consequences of such a substitution?

Nurses, Ephemerality, or the “Effet-Mère”

If we take the term phonetically, *l’éphémère* can be recast as *l’effet-mère*. This language that lasts for an instant, yet 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” (65). This maternal language comes about through contact with the nurse.

Returning to Rousseau’s argument, the sound is meaningful, and 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 “dialogue” 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 *The Confessions* (2013), experienced this game of substitutions when his mother, through Madame De Warens, becomes the mistress and the hostess, or the provider of hospitality becomes simultaneously hostile and erotic. For Derrida, the mother’s solicitude constitutes a figure of hospitality, which is irreplaceable and unsubstitutable. Moreover, this solicitude as hospitality remains linked to the notion of mastering, being a master of the house of a place, the host, is maître ou maîtresse de maison (master or mistress of the house) in French. The term mistress in French, as in English, is also a synonym for a lover. Derrida links this feature of the host in order to displace it with the mother in this substitution play, where Rousseau calls his hostess “maman” (mommy), a woman with whom he will fall in love and take as his mistress. Rousseau then replaces his mother with a substitute figure, an erotic one, and at the same time, as hostile as every host who received a stranger in his or her home. Moreover, this relationship will be constituted by a jealousy that Rousseau felt towards Mme de Warens’s lovers. To understand this ambivalent relationship, it is necessary to briefly describe and summarize some features of this relationship in *The Confessions*.

At the beginning of *The Confessions*, his autobiographical book, Rousseau, who lost his mother when he was a child, recounts his encounter with Mme de Warens after a long wandering and when she decides to take care of the young philosopher. She treats him as family; he calls her maman (mommy). Later in the book, he relates his love and jealousy for her. The use of the term maman shows that Rousseau himself performed the substitution of his mom by a prosthetic mother. She protected him as a mother; she received and hosted him. She played the role of the mother and the mistress. He had for her a limitless admiration and concomitantly an aggressive and possessive behavior. Then, Rousseau experienced and described this ambivalent experience where the mom or the caregiver could endorse a role that she is not supposed to play and then blur the lines between the “real mother” or caregiver and the substitute one. This fear that another person could replace the “real mother” tormented Rousseau because it could spoil his theoretical edifice.

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.

According to Rousseau, if mothers stopped fulfilling their natural duties, they would cease to be mothers, 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, in turn, to 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 the child’s 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 foreign to their 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, “Nurses are our masters in this language” (65). 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 “archilanguage.” One source of care is substituted with another, one mistress with another, one mastery with another. 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 *Emile*.

Derrida, for his part, precisely and forcefully identifies this anxiety in his seminar *On Hospitality*:

Far from simply disappearing into the play of metonymic or prosthetic substitutions that Rousseau seems to wax indignant about or protest against, maternity—as determined on the basis of this maternal solicitude—is exactly what remains foreign and inaccessible to all this prostheticity, to all this replacement: everything can be replaced—gestation , fecundation, the breast , nourishment, milk—all these replaceable parts of maternity can be replaced, but it is the irreplaceable as solicitude that one will call mother. (35–36)

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. In this seminar, Derrida retraces the complex etymology of the term solicitude and argues that anxiety is linked to this term. The anxiety of the unsubstitutable mother and her solicitude remain the only characteristics that cannot be replaced, that cannot be changed or substituted. Nevertheless, this solicitude is also spanned by the question of death. The maternal solicitude is irreplaceable. However, the death of the mother will happen. The pregnant question asked by Derrida is the following one: “How to make oneself replaceable so as not to weigh on the other with the weight of one’s own singularity, hence, of one’s own death?” (36). This quote problematizes the prevalent paradox of being unique and at the same time, the necessity of the replacement of the mother when she dies. This solicitude remains the most natural feature of motherhood for Rousseau. However, as explained earlier, he substituted his own mother for Mme de Warens. He lost his maman as a young child and decided to use the signifier maman to another woman. He appears to be particularly aware that this gesture could endanger the role of the mother. However, the possibility of substitution haunts the notion of maternal solicitude. This notion could only be conceived from a perspective where the possibility of loss and substitution remains constitutive of maternal solicitude.

The term *mistress* analyzed 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 dysfluencies, yet these paradoxes also pave the way for an original perspective on what constitutes language. He regards “children’s language”—or babbling—to be fully-fledged languages in communion with nature and musicality. Parents should once again embrace this language. Babbling is thus accepted for its musicality, and the learning of language might hinder certain natural ways of speaking. The babbling of a child possesses the same characteristics attributed to fluent language. The silences, pauses, or prolongations associated with speech dysfluency do not render the babbled language incomplete or dysfluent. 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 babbling 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 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. 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.

The infant language is closely linked to the figure of the nurse. The nurse speaks this language—full, complete, and original, according to Rousseau. They give dignity to this language and allow it also to be a translated. Through their conversation with infants, nurses show that babbling could be repeatable, which is an essential language feature and allows it to be considered complete besides the aspect of being “accented, sonorous, intelligible.” The central role of the nurse in this essay appears essential to understanding Rousseau’s conception of infant language and, more broadly, to his language’s conception. Moreover, the nurse could also threaten the mother’s role and the nature of the parental relationship. By analyzing Rousseau’s anxiety about nurses as mothers’ substitutes, this text shows how this figure can trouble his theoretical framework notably in regard to his conception of nature.

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1. Even though, Hochart will use this term metaphorically to displace the question of babbling and take a critical approach to it. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. 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)