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

Jean-Jacques Rousseau remains today one of the most and debated and critiqued 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 Kropotkin 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 *Of The Social Contract*. Among the copious bibliography of canonical work produced by Rousseau, one text, while being widely celebrated, has remained relatively understudied––*Emile or 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 Rousseau’s writings are amply discussed in fields like philosophy, literary studies, linguistics, anthropology, and political science, this author has never been studied through the question of babbling. This article aims to shed some light on this linguistic dysfluency via the reading of Emile or On Education. In this specific text, Rousseau allows us to think about a subject that has never been studied before babbling and speech dysfluency. While the language question remained an essential topic in Rousseauist studies, this specific subject is a blind spot in actual 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 text 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. Furthermore, it encourages us to rethink our understanding of speech dysfluency.

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 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 eponymous 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, since 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 (such as 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:. “Civil man is born, lives, and dies in slavery. At his birth he is sewed in swaddling clothes (…) The man who has lived the most is not he who has counted the most years but he who has most felt life” (42).

*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 clothes and the symbolic imprisonment of the future citizen into which the infant (*infans*) will grow. 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: “(…) at his death he is nailed in a coffin. So long as he keeps his human shape, he is enchained by our institutions.” (42-43) 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: “The countries where children are swaddled teem with hunchbacks, cripples, men with stunted or withered limbs, men suffering from rickets, men misshapen in every way. For fear that bodies be deformed by free movements, we hurry to deform the children by putting them into a press. We would gladly cripple them to keep them from laming themvelves” (43)

The drive to protect children 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, the entirety of Rousseau’s theories of the state of nature and the experience of education is already in play. 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, especially the act of breast feeding: “Where does this unreasonable practice come from ? From a denatured practice. Since mothers, despising their first duty, have no longer wanted to feed their children, it has been necessary to confide them to mercenary woman who, thus finding themselves mothers of alien children on whose behalf nature tells them nothing, have sought only to save themselves effort. It would be necessary to be constantly watchful over a child in freedom. But when it is well bound, one throws it in a corner without being troubled by its cries. Provided that there be no proofs of negligence on the part of the nurse, provided that her charge does not break an arm or a leg, beyond that what difference does it make that he wastes away or remains infirm for the rest of his days? His limbs are preserved at the expense of his body, and, whatever happens the nurse is exonerated (…) At the slightest trouble that arises he is hung from a nail like a sack of clothes, and while the nurse looks after her business without hurrying, the unfortunate stays thus crucified.” (44)

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 it, 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–– *des mère-cenaires*.

Thus, the nursemaid embodies the archetypal figure limiting children’s natural freedom. The priority that matters above all else becomes that of protecting the child from illness or injury. However, according to Rousseau, following Locke, *experience* matters most of 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 its freedom of movement, regarding the latter to be 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 tortured body *par excellence,* that of Christ: “the unfortunate stays thus crucified” (44). 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. In this way they challenge the natural role of mothers, to use 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:

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 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 “*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, and 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.

Indeed, 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. According to Labarrière, in his work De Anima, 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 (A voice 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, 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 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 Rousseaist 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 langage. 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*, for Aristotle, 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, he 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 from a human, 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 Émile, I will 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 Émile 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 this dichotomy long before it became a staple of philosophical debate in the 19th 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 (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 him considered it no more than an assortment of meaningless sounds. It would be valuable, I think, to briefly remark on the term *to babble* itself.

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: “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,” (Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française). Fascinatingly, Aristotle also debates the question of *phoné* and *logos* in a work dealing 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: “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. 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 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, 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* Aristotle defines language in 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 (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: « For in ‘Whitfield’ the ‘field’ does not signify anything in its own right, as it does in the phrase ‘white field’. Not that it is the same with complex names as with simple ones: in the latter the part is in no way significant, in the former it has some force but is not significant of anything in separation (…)” (44). 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. Indeed, 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.

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.[[2]](#footnote-2) 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 a little further on:

”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 discredits 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, 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, “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 thus 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 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 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” (65).

This maternal language comes about through contact with the nurse. Returning to Rousseau’s argument, the sound is 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 “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 *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. 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 that received a stranger in his or her home. Moreover, this relationship will be constituted by jealousy that Rousseau felt towards Mme de Warens’s lovers. To understand this ambivalent relationship, I will 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 Warrens 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 this 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. 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, 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 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, “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 *Émile*. 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“ (35–6).

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 died. This solicitude remains the most natural feature of motherhood for Rousseau. However, as explained earlier, he substituted his own mother for Mme de Warrens. 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 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 dysfluencies, 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. 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. 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. 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-2)