

Language, Communication, and Gifting with Genevieve Vaughan

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Abstract: This essay presents Genevieve Vaughan's writings on language, communication and social praxis for social change. Mothering/being-mothered is thematized, in the framework of gift logic, as a core practice characterizing human relationships, shedding new light on the properly human in terms of gift economy values.

Keywords: Gifting, language, mothering/being mothered, otherness, verbal nurturing

LANGUAGE, GIFTING AND LIFE

A major characteristic of Genevieve Vaughan's work on language and communication theory is her ethical-pragmatic commitment, her attention for other-oriented values and how they influence human action. In this sense her theory is founded in ethics and shaped by pragmatics. Thanks to her ethical-pragmatic commitment, Vaughan's writings can be associated to trends in sign studies open to ethics, founded in the logic of alterity, in particular to what we have denominated as "semioethics" (Petrilli and Ponzio 2010; Petrilli 2010), an approach to sign and language studies that supercedes the limits of purely theoretical reason to concern practical reason and the question of responsibility – towards the other, the human and nonhuman other, towards life over the entire planet, given the objective involvement of human life with all other lifeforms throughout the environing ecosystem.

For what concerns us in the present essay, focused on her book *The Gift in the Heart of Language* (2015), Vaughan addresses important issues in language and communication theory ultimately to the end of affecting social praxis for radical social change. Her hypothesis is that mothering/being-mothered forms a non-essentialist, but fundamental core process that has been neglected by the Western view of the world, a process which is regulated by an original altercentric propensity in human behavior and which calls for thematization in the framework of gift logic.

Restoring such a paradigm offers a new light on language, communication and human relations, thereby contributing to recovery of the properly human in terms of the values of gift economy.

Vaughan's writings (1997, 2004, 2007, 2015) provide a critique of social behaviour and interpersonal relationships through the perspective of language and communication. To speak about "language" and "communication" is not to refer to isolated spheres of human behaviour, nor to objects of study exclusive to the sign specialist, whether verbal or nonverbal. On the contrary, it means to discuss nothing less than human life in its globality insofar as it is perfused with signs, indeed is engendered in signs, verbal and nonverbal.

A pivotal concept in Vaughan's work is that of "gift logic" which she thematizes in contrast to equal exchange logic, of giving for the sake of a return, now dominant over the globe. However, gift logic is described as the very condition of possibility for equal exchange, which means to say for reproduction of the current social form of production which is based on equal exchange market logic of the capitalist order. The relation between exchange economy and gift economy is one of exploitation and alienation, as Vaughan explains. What this means is that in order to subsist and flourish, the exchange economy exploits the gift economy, plunders it. In other words, paradoxically the gift economy is the basis of the exchange economy, that which makes it possible. But the exchange economy is a distortion of the gift economy and in terms of social practice the gift economy is relegated to the margins.

Vaughan's critique amounts to recognizing that otherness is inscribed in the sign, in the body, ultimately in life generally, which amounts to acknowledging that the other is inevitable, inescapable, that encounter with the other is unavoidable, whether we like it or not. Indeed, the lack of awareness, of consideration of the human capacity for otherness (of the inexorable presence of the other), with Vaughan, the lack of consideration for gifting to the other as the main form of interaction, is largely the cause of deviations in human behaviour throughout history as much as in contemporaneity, in the world today.

In the face of impending global disaster throughout the biosphere, affecting the human and nonhuman, nature and culture, the sign's vocation for the other should be recovered and replenished in consonance

with what has been happily described as the “humanism of otherness” The health of life globally requires nothing less (Petrilli 2013, 2016).

THE GIFT OF SPEAKING

With reference to Vaughan’s book, *The Gift in the Heart of Language: the Maternal Source) of Meaning*, particularly interesting from the viewpoint of philosophy of language and semiotics are her reflections on the central role of language in human interactions. As much as human interactions are based on exchange at a surface level – or, better, only at a superficial glance –, Vaughan claims that they are structured as gifts, so that to speak of language in terms of gifting is to go to the heart of social relationships, not only as they exist, but also in the processes of their becoming, as they form and take shape.

All human interactions are subtended by the relationship between mother (or motherer) and infant, the mother who nurtures the infant and the nourishment. Nurturing at a later stage is also what Vaughan calls “verbal nurturing”. Understanding the infant’s needs, vital survival needs, is based on a mother’s capacity to listen to somebody who does not yet know how to speak, the infant, *in-fans* (non speaker). To this “material” gift, of nurturing, gifting nourishment, situated in an interactive communication relation, is gradually added the gift of speaking, verbal nurturing, vocal gifting.

Vaughan distinguishes between “language” (Fr. *langage*; It. *linguaggio*) and “mother tongue” (Fr. *langue*; It. *lingua*), in both cases reference is to the level of verbal language. What she understands by “language” is a gift-giving device, one modelled on the giving and receiving of gifts/nurture, and not just a device for conveying gifts. The different “mother tongues” (historical natural languages and special languages forming each mother-tongue) are different constructions based on this model in various ways. “Language” in Vaughan’s description may be associated to what Victoria Lady Welby calls “mother sense” (in Petrilli 2009) – Welby distinguishes between “mother sense” and “intellect,” between the “givings” of mother sense and the “constructions” of the intellect

For Vaughan the necessary giving and receiving of material gifts of nurture is an a priori with respect to language and production of specific sign systems for communication generally. From this viewpoint, language

is characterized by the actual practice and experience of gifting, and by the human capacity for creativity. Such a device is an integral part of the construction of the social and of all the sign systems employed to express ourselves and produce sense. Vaughan thematizes the “altercentric capacity” expressed in the practices of *mothering* – from the verb “to mother”, whatever the sexual gender.

LANGUAGE AND THE “MOTHER WORK SCHEMA”

Linguists and scholars of verbal language generally, semioticians included (for Vaughan too “language” is verbal language), postulate a faculty of speaking, a faculty of (verbal) language, understood as an innate mechanism. Among the distinctions posited by Ferdinand de Saussure between *langage* and *langue*, *langage* stands for the faculty of language: so that *langue*, or multiple *langues* are possible because all human beings at the level of species are endowed with *langage*, a specific, special faculty. With Vaughan all human beings are born vulnerable and survive because they are nurtured freely to some extent, that is, they are mothered.

Thomas Sebeok’s (2001) distinguishes between language and speech, where language is not simply the faculty of speaking, but rather is an innate species-specific device and a priori with respect to speech. This device appears much before the appearance of *homo loquens*, that is, of *homo sapiens*. From an evolutionary perspective it is antecedent with respect to verbal language, speech, which indeed is based on this device and arises thanks to it, just like the languages of nonverbal communication before the appearance of the verbal as much as after. The maximum degree in hypostatization of the dichotomous vision between the faculty of speaking, interpreted for the occasion as “innate universal grammar” and (speaker) linguistic competence, accompanied by relative linguistic usage (utterance), can be traced in Noam Chomsky’s linguistic theory, who even thematizes innate grammatical rules.

Vaughan disputes the concept of “innate” in light of recent findings in the neurosciences with special reference to interpersonal neurobiology. She argues that the so-called innate faculty of language is not at all innate, but rather is acquired in the first year of the child’s life through maternal care. She presents her position very clearly in *The Gift in the Heart of Language*, developing it in subsequent writings. Recent research in infant

psychology has revolutionized our understanding of childhood: the infant is considered highly social from birth and no longer as passive and solipsistic, opening to a new vision of mothering. Vaughan replaces the innate mechanism with the “mother” or “nurturwork schema”, interiorization of primordial unilateral gifting interaction between “motherer” and infant: she believes that this new understanding makes the care-giving mother a partner in altercentric interaction, with an alert and intelligent other, who is already able to represent her supramodally as ‘Like Me’. In her interchanges with the mother the child is not only a receiver but also a unilateral giver: of signs, gestures, vocalizations and bodily products.

The centrality of giving and receiving in material nurturing interaction is validated by recent studies on the child’s mirror neurons. These studies communicate the extremely important idea that each partner in the maternal dyad at least subconsciously knows what the other is feeling when giving or when receiving (and vice versa) and perhaps also knows *that* the other knows. Emotionally, at least to some extent, receiving is giving and giving is receiving. All the same thematization of “material giving and receiving,” of “mother work,” “nurture work” is mostly lacking from the new infant psychology, just as an adequate understanding of the maternal, of mothering is lacking in conceptualizations of the gift economy. Research in interpersonal neurobiology integrates attachment theory and neurobiology and operates an important shift in perspective placing a more central focus on the mother, showing how *nurture (gifting) becomes nature*, so that the motherer’s care is incorporated into the physiology of the child’s brain.

Vaughan (2015) goes a step further to maintain that the core patterns of neuron connections across cultures are necessarily the patterns of giving and receiving, and that this is not sufficiently evidenced, not even in neurobiology. The psychological continues to be privileged over “material interactions”. Instead, material interactions provide the very substrata for the psychological interactions. The growth of the brain, the neuron activations and emotional responses all arise in relation to free unilateral gifts and giving, in the context of what for the child is free gift economy. The gift perspective is common to the maternal, while at once allowing for culturally specific interactions between motherers and their children. With specific reference to the symbolic order, Vaughan rejects the idea

that language learning comes about through innate mechanisms: not an innate grammar but the learned patterns of giving and receiving form the communicative mechanism that is actualized in languages and reposed verbally in syntax and merging. In this sense rather than innate, she describes such mechanisms as “circumstantial”. From this point view, Vaughan too marks her distance from Chomsky’s linguistic theory.

MATERIAL GIFTING AND VERBAL NURTURING

In *The Gift in the Heart of Language*, conceptions of language learning that not only belittle, but even deny the paramount importance of material gifting by the mother, and of verbal nurturing (which semiotically speaking is also “material,” see Petrilli 2010, 2014), are called to question extensively, carefully and very closely. The motherer does not simply gift language (*langue*), the mother tongue, but rather language (*langage*) as the faculty of speaking, of gifting, so that the motherer gifts gifting. Vaughan speaks of *virtualization*: the schema, we could say in the Kantian sense, is the *schema of gift-giving*. It follows that it is not correct to say that the sign is that which stands for something that it replaces. The relation is not one of substitution. There are two levels that run parallel to each other: the level of material things and the level of words. Thanks to the maternal gift, these two levels enter into a relationship that is not static, but rather dynamical and continuously renewed – because it is based on gifting interaction.

In verbal gift-giving as it gradually emerges in the mother-child relationship, the mother’s gifting finds a correspondence in the child’s gifting, in a relationship that is completely outside the exchange paradigm, given that each time the child makes a request, an observation, expresses something, underlines one of its needs, or plays with words, it “gifts” an expansion of the mother’s visual, experiential, imaginative space. The mother satisfies the child’s cognitive and communicative needs. And as part of the same interactive, indeed “dialogic” process, from the very beginning the child’s cries and gestures help the mother to know what the child needs, so she can give her child the appropriate gift.

Moreover, without interpreting language as gift-giving the human imagination is not explained, if not partially, and in this case too only by resorting to innate faculties. The imaginary rises from the fact that language is not based on equal exchange relations: rather than evolving

out of equal exchange relations, language always involves a sort of excess. Such excess can only be explained if we abandon the semiotic “standing for” schema. This “standing for” paradigm contradicts and obstructs any explanation of the imaginative use of language. In verbal language there is always a presence-absence relationship, and it is also in this capacity of rendering the absent present, of bringing absence into presence that the gift mechanism functions.

To explain that if it is possible to converse with words this is only thanks to the gift mechanism that subtends them, beginning from the mother’s original gifting to the child – so that linguistic education, education in language is education in the gift, in gifting –, Vaughan refers to Marx’s concept of “the commodity form of value”. The materiality of exchange is not sufficient to explain exchange itself. In this sense, Vaughan speaks of the virtualization of language and its devirtualization into commodity exchange. The gift schema and virtualization through language explain linguistic situations like dialogue: if it is effectively a dialogue – where each partner “grows,” so to say, in the relationship – what occurs is not a mere equal exchange, giving to receive, reciprocal exchange, for the sake of receiving: here too we are in the gifting turn-taking mode.

The same principle applies when we wish to understand how the relationship between writing and reading functions. The gift mechanism is at work here too. The writer is a giver and reading is not mere reproduction, repetition, it is not the mere sonorization of the text, recitation of the text. Instead, we could claim that reading is “responsive understanding,” to the extent that the reader puts the maternal gift of speaking, understanding, welcoming and listening back into circulation. In addition to explaining, researching and re-elaborating, dialogue and reading, another linguistic practice that necessarily involves gift-giving is translation. The translator is a giver. To translate is not merely to represent a text in another language; translation is not mere reproduction. Translation is a feminine practice, not because translators are mostly women; but rather because translative practice recovers the gift of language which was originally received in the relationship with the mother.

These are only some areas of the gift, but the central idea in Vaughan’s conception of language as gift-giving is that *all life is based on gifting*, on the motherer’s material and verbal nurturing, on vocal gift-giving, verbal gift-giving. This is because gift-giving and language based on gifting,

organize life, distinguish among relationships, establish orientations, orient responses, decide on behaviors, modify situations, indicate ways out.

MORE REFLECTIONS ON LANGUAGE, GIFT-GIVING AND IMAGINATION

Vaughan dedicates a part of *The Gift in the Heart of Language* to clarifying that the function of language is not only that of naming. In a sense Saussure also maintained that language is not a nomenclature. But in Vaughan's book, we are not talking about this or that other language, we are not talking about mother tongues, so that as Saussure rightly claimed, learning a language does not mean only learning a nomenclature. Instead, we are talking about language as a gift, about language as gift-giving, the gift of the faculty of language itself.

Global semiotics maintains that the primary function of language is not naming things, but constructing new worlds, worlds prone to transformation and growth, in becoming, where the role of the imagination is of central importance. The fundamental function of language is neither to nominate nor to interpret, but to imagine and create in response to the other, nominating, signifying, interpreting.

Vaughan dissents on this point: "I don't agree. I think we have to learn the word gifts to which diverse world gifts are related. I also think that projecting the giving and receiving relation on to the world is the way we know it and this is a kind of primordial interpretation of which we are not usually conscious" (personal email exchanges of 16 April 2016). According to Vaughan, words are connected to the world on the basis of gifting, so that gifting is the structure of language.

To this I respond that to underline the role of the imagination in language and interpretation does not mean to undermine the role of nomination. Once we are born into a so-called "natural language," there is no doubt that we must engage in learning how words relate to the world in that given, specific language. Here Vaughan further suggests that nomination in the usual sense of naming is like claiming – sort of modelled on private property –, while a gift concept would be more like accompaniment as the mother does with the child in "joint attention".

Moreover, all this is possible thanks to a primordial form of semiosis before the appearance of verbal language for communication. This is

semiosis as modeling specific to the human species, a modeling device also denominated “language” (Petrilli and Ponzio 2005, 2013) thanks to its syntactical structure – Vaughan’s “gifting device” – that only subsequently in human evolutionary development finds expression in different communication systems.

Interpretation is possible thanks to the human capacity for imagination: interpretation and imagination are closely interconnected and interdependent. The main function of language *is* the imagination and thanks to this mechanism we are able to proceed as speakers to nomination. The imagination is other-oriented and highly creative. In terms of inference it proceeds according to abductive associative procedure. In terms of Peirce’s most renowned sign triad it is regulated by iconicity.

The mother imagines what the infant’s needs are. When we speak, in giving and responding to the other each partner in the interaction also imagines what the others’ communicative and cognitive needs are. In everyday life we each imagine a better life. A flow of gifts occurs where the gift is never a question of symmetrical exchange, but rather an extensive process of responding to and anticipating what we imagine are the needs and desires of the other, beyond the limits of equal exchange logic, of symmetrical exchange. What we experience is a succession of gifts, a gift-giving process in which gift-giving is never a conditional giving of this for that: “I give you this, only if you give me that,” but rather a unilateral gifting mechanism where the bids are always higher in open-ended turn-taking interactional processes.

However, in the economic order of things mothering is displaced by the market. Instead, Vaughan foregrounds the centrality of mothering/gifting acknowledging that before sentimentality, before love, before subjectivization, before personalization of the motherer-child relationship, before morality, mothering/gifting is structural to the social and as such is “material.” This materiality is endowed with a value of its own, namely gift value, the value of “unilateral giving,” of “free gifting,” and all this is in net contrast with the *do ut des* logic of the market.

From a biosemiotic perspective (where “life sciences” and “sign sciences dialogue), Sebeok evidences how all inhabitants over the planet are interrelated by a bacterial network which converges with the sign network and renders us all, all life-forms interdependent and co-

participative. Before Sebeok, Peirce and Welby had also shown how we are all interconnected as actors in the great semio-signifying universe. With respect to this state of affairs, Sebeok posits that where there are signs there is life. And where there is life there are signs; indeed signs are the criterial attribute of life. All this underlines the sign nature of life and the vital nature of signs.

THE “MATERIALITY” OF WORDS AND HUMAN VALUES

Vaughan’s gift economy shows that we are all interconnected as “mothered beings”. Mothering/gifting (free gifting) is the original interface between the child and the world, just as it is at the basis of the connection between words and the world. Vaughan finds validation for her thesis in Alan Schore’s (2003) interpersonal neurobiology which she relates to research by Valentin Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929).

Voloshinov analyses the complex problem of the interrelationship between basis and superstructure indicating the close link with questions of philosophy of language and how the former could benefit from the latter. In fact, he illustrates how the relationship between basis and superstructure can be explained in terms of the “material of the word” (p. 19). The essence of the problem concerns how actual existence, the basis, determines the sign and how (far from a relation of mechanical causality with the basis) the sign reflects and refracts existence in the process of its becoming.

The word is endowed with ideological materiality to the highest degree and this is what renders it most suitable to register social change, not simply as something that has already occurred, already fixed in ideological terms, but in the dynamical process of its becoming, even in its most subtle expressions. Social interactions take place in sign material and are conditioned by social organization, Voloshinov speaks of the “social life” of the sign. All social signs are endowed with value and in the face of the complexity of the basis are accentuated by different values. Signs are everywhere, they are ubiquitous and even communicate contradictory values. In this sense social signs are “multiaccentuated”. The actual process of verbal communication and interaction (semiotic

communication and interaction) provides the transitional link between the sociopolitical order and ideology with reference to science, art.

To the question of which signs enter society's attention and what determines their value, Voloshinov responds in terms of Marxist dialectics and pointing to the link with the material conditions of a given society, the vital socioeconomic conditions.

Vaughan offers a further response in light of recent research in neurobiology on the relationship between external stimuli and the brain, which emphasizes the "valence-tagging" function through which perceptions of the world are perceived as pleasurable or unpleasurable. With reference to mother-child interaction and how it affects the brain, the mother and her perception of the world act as a model for the child. This amounts to validating the idea that the self develops in the sharing processes of mother-child emotional-affective interactions. She further observes that much of the emphasis of valences takes place within the framework of the mother-child interaction, as motherers emotionally process the shared environment in resonance with the child. Motherers satisfy children's needs unilaterally, thereby investing them with value, emphasizing their importance and creating in them feelings of well being and self esteem. Vaughan describes "gift value" as a positive valence that the mother attributes to the child, which she communicates in her nurturing interaction with the child, and which the child in turn perceives, such that it may even feel a commonality with other positively valenced things.

These processes are semiotic processes, they take place through signs, multimodally, initially nonverbal signs, later verbal signs, signaling to the child how the perception is to be perceived. And let me recall here how all this occurs during the initial years of life at least, when human survival is completely dependent upon the other, when the single individual is exposed to the other, presenting itself to the attention in its total vulnerability and "absolute otherness" (Levinas 1961).

Gifting signs is part of the material nurturing process, which it continues at a more abstract level, in the symbolic mode, especially when a question of communication through verbal signs which as social signs are totally impregnated with values, intonated, multiaccentuated. Unilateral giving and receiving processes create relations of mutuality among the participants in communicative interaction, as receivers of the

same verbal and perceptual/conceptual gifts. Word gifts are gifts of verbal “valence tags” which are given both to the child and to the things, which are world gifts. By giving and receiving them we create joint attention with others to the words and to the world. In the practice of “joint attention” we receive together with others specific perceptual and conceptual gifts that are available for us in our cultural and ecological niches. By this attention things are “positively valenced,” that is they are revealed as gifts. Even if the perception or experience in question is negative, the attention to it has a gift aspect in that it satisfies our need to know that we should avoid it.

MATERNAL GIFT-GIVING, A NEW PERSPECTIVE FOR LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES

In Vaughan’s studies on human relationships, the formation of self and society, “gifting” emerges as the basic unit of analysis in both verbal and nonverbal communication. From this viewpoint, she offers an original contribution to our understanding of language and its formation, even at the level of the relation among what she calls “word-gifts,” the level of syntax. And in the context of “linguistic mother work,” interpersonal relations are further developed. However, in the face of “civilization and its discontents” (Freud), of distortion in human relationships (Welby 1983), Vaughan promotes reflection on the relationship between the gift economy schema and conscious use of language, between gifting and the physiology of the brain, the gift and consciousness. In this framework, knowledge of the gift economy is eliminated, and together with the emphasis on the exchange paradigm our concept of the self has been altered (Petrilli 2013). To the economic structure of gifting there corresponds a superstructure of values and ideas. The values of care are the superstructure of the gift economy. Care and gifting are pivotal in meaning making processes, irrespective of gender. Moreover, to evidence the centrality of gift-giving not only in material nurturing but also in verbal nurturing, in language, and to underline the social nature of the gifting mechanism is significant on a political level, beyond the psychological, neurobiological, cognitive, or gnoseological.

The Gift in the Heart of Language as much as the research leading up to it and after it, is not only an important contribution to reconsidering the role

of the maternal for life, in both the private and public spheres, the social. It also contributes to linguistics, philosophy of language, the language sciences generally. Moreover, it elaborates a critique of political economy in a Marxian sense, but founded on gift economy, ultimately the maternal gift of language. Through analysis of the relationship between gift economy and language, Vaughan evidences how gifting is the fundamental structure of our humanity. But the exchange paradigm has eliminated awareness of the gift economy, altering self-awareness as a species to *homo economicus* instead of *homo donans*. Instead, for Vaughan not only are we *homo sapiens*, but also, if not primarily, *homo donans*. Indeed, the “gift magic” characteristic of humanity, that renders human gifting truly human is the capacity for “meta gifting” (Vaughan, personal communication, 16 April 2016): “The gift of a gift is a gift, a meta gift”.

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