

# “Kleng jaa tjeng tjang” – Julia Kristeva and the Transformation of Everyday Language<sup>1</sup>

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## Summary

This article examines the role of linguistics in the work of the French psychoanalyst and professor of linguistics Julia Kristeva and shows how she has developed Lacan’s theory of the relation between mother, child and language further. Her unique contribution favours the inclusion of the semiotic *chora* in the relation and focuses on a type of language used by the child when inside the womb that is characterised by pulsating rhythms. Finally, I will show how this theory is put into practice in the clinic itself. Kristeva’s project is to address the problem of “the relationship between language and bodily experience” (Oliver 2002: xx) and to show how the bodily drives manifest themselves in language. To argue aspects of Kristeva’s views on linguistics, I will refer to a poem by Breyten Breytenbach called “Die tweeveg” (The duel).

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die rol wat linguistiek speel in die werk van die Franse psigoanalise en linguistiekprofessor Julia Kristeva. Daar word onder meer aangetoon hoe sy Lacan se teorie oor die verhouding tussen moeder, kind en taal verder ontwikkel. Haar eiesoortige bydrae is ten gunste van die insluiting van die semiotiese *chora* in hierdie verhouding en fokus op die tipe taal wat die kind gebruik in die baarmoeder en wat gekenmerk word deur pulserende ritmes. Ten slotte gaan ek aandui hoe hierdie teorie in die praktyk werk, Kristeva se projek is om die probleem van die verhouding tussen taal en die beliggaming daarvan (Oliver 2002: xx) te ondersoek en aan te dui hoe hierdie liggaamlike drifte gemanifesteer word in taal. Om my argument te

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1. The title is taken from the poem by Breyten Breytenbach discussed in the second part of this article. The discussion on Kristeva is based partially on Crous (2013).

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illustreer maak ek gebruik van Breyten Breytenbach se gedig “Die tweeveg”.

The *chora* is not yet a position that represents something for someone – Kristeva.

(1984: 35)

## Introduction

Firstly, in this article I will give a broad overview of Julia Kristeva’s writings on linguistics and secondly, show her linguistic analyses in action by reading a poem by Breyten Breytenbach called “Die tweeveg” (“The duel”). Throughout Kristeva’s academic project there is strong emphasis on linguistics and even though she bases her analyses on mostly literary works, Kristeva (Moi 1986: 314) proclaims her scepticism over what she calls “the One Meaning” or “the true Meaning” underpinning most literary criticism. To her, all fiction is already a form of interpretation and she concludes:

If it is impossible to assign to a literary text a pre-existing “objective reality”, the critic (the interpreter) can nevertheless find the mark of the interpretative function of writing in the transformation which that writing inflicts on the language of everyday communication.

My emphasis will be on (a) this alleged transformation of everyday language in writing and (b) how this is accomplished, when one approaches this transformation with Kristeva in mind. Kristeva’s interest in linguistics led to the completion of her doctorate in 1973, which was published in 1974 as *La Révolution du Langage Poétique*. Apart from an interest in linguistics, Kristeva eventually studied psychoanalysis and later qualified as a psychoanalyst.

As professor of linguistics Kristeva published *Language: The Unknown* first in French in 1981 and the translation appeared in 1989. The study is divided into three parts: Introduction to Linguistics, Language in History and Language and Languages. It is particularly in the third part that she concentrates on issues such as psychoanalysis and other forms of language (musical language, the language of gestures, zoosemiotics). In her introduction she points out that in contemporary critical debates language is viewed as “a system and the problems of the functioning of this system predominate” (Kristeva 1989: 5). Her unique views on language go beyond the traditional grammar and structures of grammar and is an attempt to expand language to “other fields of signifying practices” (Kristeva 1989: 328) and in particular the role played by language as a signifying system within a general theory of signification.

In this discussion on Kristeva's contribution to linguistics I will focus on the role of psychoanalysis and in particular her questioning of some of Lacan's theories, in particular the role of bodily sensations and the separation between mother and child. Lacan points out that in order for the subject to enter language, it has to relinquish its bond with the maternal body and separate from it. I will argue some of the points by referring to a poem by the Afrikaans poet Breyten Breytenbach called "Die tweeveg" (The duel), from his first collection of poetry, *Die ysterkoei moet sweet* (1964), in the second part of my contribution. Ostensibly the poem deals with two men fighting a duel and the poet attempts to recreate the sound patterns made by the swords. However, Louise Viljoen (2014: 254) reads the poem on a metapoetic level as the description of the poet who is busy playing with sounds whilst writing his poem, almost as if living up to what Kristeva (1978: 337) suggests:

It is therefore necessary to read, hear, plunge into its language, recover its music, its gestures, its dance, to bring its time, its history, all of history to life.

## Positioning as Psychoanalyst and Linguist

In positioning herself as a psychoanalyst and linguist, Kristeva indicates that the words used by the subject form the basis of interpretation:

While the psychiatrist may look for a physical lesion as the cause of a disturbance, the psychoanalyst refers only to what the subject says, but not in order to find there an objective truth that would be the "cause" of the problems. He listens with as much interest to the real as to the fictitious part of what the subject tells him, for both have an equal *discursive reality*. He discovers in this discourse first the unconscious, then the more or less conscious *motivation* producing the symptoms.

(Kristeva 1989: 266)

Psychoanalysis is a vital tool to the linguist to "leaf through language, to separate the signifier according to the signifier that produces it, and vice versa" (Kristeva 1989: 272). Psychoanalysis is effective in this regard because as Oliver (2002: xx) observes, "signification is like a transfusion of the living body into language" and it is the task of the analyst to "diagnose the active drive force as it is manifest in the analys and's language."

The titles of Kristeva's first books published in English already suggest the central role played by language in her work, namely *Revolution in Poetic Language*, and *Desire in Language*. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), Kristeva examines the semiotic and the symbolic and the influence of the semiotic *chora* on the psychosexual development of the subject. In the Introduction, Leon Roudiez (the translator) points out that Kristeva examines

poetic language as a “signifying practice” (1984: 1) which emphasises the fact that language is:

“a semiotic system generated by a speaking subject within a social, historical field.”

Kristeva’s speaking subject is “the split subject of psychoanalytic theory, a subject divided between psychosomatic processes and social constraints” (Leland, 1989: 93), whereby the biodynamic processes refer to Freud’s view on oedipalisation, whereas in Lacan’s case, the Oedipus complex is a condition of culture. The speaking subject, according to Kristeva (1989: 268), “uses *la langue* to construct there the syntax of logic of his discourse.”

The Oedipus complex is one of the cornerstones of psychoanalysis and according to Rycroft refers to

[a] group of largely unconscious ideas and feelings centring round the wish to possess the parent of the opposite sex and eliminate that of the same sex. The complex emerges during the oedipal phase of libidinal and ego development, i.e. between the ages of three and five though manifestations may be present earlier. ... The complex is named after the mythical Oedipus, who killed his father and married his mother without knowing that they were his parents.

(1988: 105)

For example, the boy child will identify with his father and renounce his mother, which will eventually lead to a rediscovery of the mother in his adult sexual object. The rivalry between the boy and his father for the attention of the mother is also the cause of what Freud termed “castration anxiety”, which does not refer to castration in its anatomical, surgical sense (removal of the testes) but more frequently to either (a) loss of the penis – as in castration threats used to deter little boys caught masturbating; (b) loss of capacity for erotic pleasure; or (c) demoralisation in respect of the masculine role (Rycroft 1988: 15).

Lacan subscribes to Freud’s views on the Oedipus complex, but one instance where he differs from Freud is his belief that “the subject always desires the mother, and the father is always the rival, irrespective of whether the subject is male or female” (Evans 1996: 127).

For Kristeva (1984: 13), it is important to develop a new way of viewing the philosophy of language which, according to her, is “nothing more than the thoughts of archivists, archaeologists, and necrophiliacs”. For this purpose she wants to “[explode] the subject and his ideological limits” (1984: 15) and focus on the relation between the subject and the body. Two modalities that play a vital role in the signifying process and that highlight the relation between the subject and the body are the semiotic and the symbolic (Kristeva 1984: 24). We should note that for Kristeva, the subject is divided and always *en procès*, which could be interpreted as being-in-process or being

constrained by the Law (*Der Prozeß*) imposed by social structures or the family. In order for the subject to express its needs and desires it requires language, yet language is associated with the symbolic, the realm of the patriarchal. In her revisionary approach to the psychosexual development of the subject, Kristeva includes the term *chora*, to refer to “a theoretical womb” or the “unrepresentable maternal Thing” (Oliver 1993: 144).

The mother’s body plays an important role in this regard because it becomes the “ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*” (Kristeva 1984: 27). The mother’s body therefore becomes significant because it contains this space where the infant is able to experience feelings and instincts and is able to communicate with the mother through rhythmic movements and pulsations. The subject-in-process does not have the linguistic capacity to name things or to use words and so this is its way of communicating.

Once the infant is separated from the body of the mother and as soon as the infant starts to learn language, he/she breaks with the semiotic *chora* (Kristeva 1984: 47). The result of this break is that the subject now “confines his *jouissance* to the genital, and transfers semiotic motility onto the symbolic order” (Kristeva 1984: 47). The subject finds him/herself now in the realm of language, of the signifier and of the impositions and preconditions of patriarchy.

## The Subject and /in Language

Kristeva expresses admiration for the linguist Emile Benveniste, particularly because he is one of the few linguists who “incorporated Freud’s discoveries into his work” (cited in Guberman 1996: 8). In an interview discussing her intellectual roots, Kristeva comments on the influence of Benveniste on her approach to linguistics:

Benveniste’s work is important because it shows the necessity of introducing the notion of the “subject” into linguistics. Chomskyan linguistics, even though it recognises the place of the speaking subject (although in its Cartesian form), has still remained very far behind the great semantic and intersubjective field within discourse that Benveniste’s perspective has opened up. What Benveniste wanted to found was not a grammar that generates normative sentences in limited situations. He wanted to institute a linguistics of discourse, and that is what is happening now. In other words, the object, language, has completely changed. Language is no longer a system of signs, as Saussure thought of it, nor is language an object in the sense of generative grammar, that is, sentences generated by a subject presupposed to be Cartesian.

(cited in Guberman 1996: 15-16)

The notion of the Cartesian subject alludes to Descartes' famous logical supposition, “Cogito ergo sum” and refers to the subject as unified and aware of the self. Man's existence is determined by his rationality.

Benveniste's preoccupation with subjectivity in language has influenced the reasoning behind Kristeva's positing of the concepts of the speaking and the writing subject. Compare Benveniste's remark that “in and through language man constitutes himself as a subject” and that the speaker has the capacity to position himself as a subject (Benveniste 1971: 224). The linguistic status of the speaker determines his subjectivity and constitutes his ego. Important here is his remark about the splitting of the “I”, which is a predominant feature of postmodern subjectivity: “There is no concept ‘I’ that incorporates all the I's that are uttered at every moment in the mouths of all speakers” (1971: 226). The use of pronominal words to refer to ourselves is always, according to Benveniste, “dialogical, relational and shifting”. (Garman 2009: 183) Kristeva initially developed her theory on the subject in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) and her several later essays could be read as further engagement with the theory on subjectivity.

Kristeva's interest in the position of the speaking subject started in reaction to the way in which it was treated by French structuralism. Her criticism is also aimed at Saussure, who ignored the speaking subject in his writings on linguistics. For Kristeva there is no unified subject and “there is more to the subject than the judging transcendental ego” (Oliver 1993: 92). Whereas the Cartesian subject is a unified ego, Kristeva's subject is one in process. In line with Benveniste's thinking, Kristeva posits a so-called *subject of enunciation*, which she explains as follows:

This *subject of enunciation*, which comes directly from Husserl and Benveniste, ... introduces, through categorical intuition, both *semantic fields* and *logical* – but also *intersubjective – relations*, which prove to be both intra- and trans-linguistic.

(1984: 22)

Regarding the subject of enunciation, Kristeva alludes here to Lacan's distinction between the subject of enunciation and the subject of utterance, which, according to Homer (2005: 45), refers to the subject who speaks and the subject who is spoken, respectively. The “I” in speech does not refer to anything stable, and the “I” can be represented by the subject, the ego or the unconscious. For Lacan, the subject is a speaking being but he/she is also “divided, castrated, split” and is something represented by a signifier. Consequently, Evans (1999: 196) explains the different meanings of “subject” in the Lacanian context:

In philosophical discourse it denotes an individual self-consciousness, whereas in legal discourse, it denotes a person who is under the power of another (e.g. a person who is *subject to* the sovereign).

For Lacan, the philosophical connotations of the term *subject* are suggested by the Cartesian subject, “who appears at the moment when doubt is recognised as certainty”.

(Evans 1999: 196)

Kristeva’s subject of enunciation or speaking subject is always a “phenomenological subject” and associated with the transcendental ego (Kristeva 1984: 23) but is also a divided subject. Phenomenology is “the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning (which represents the object) together with appropriate enabling conditions” (Smith 2008).

On the one hand, the speaking subject has to adhere to the principles of linguistics and societal prescriptions associated with the symbolic order, but on the other hand, s/he is also ruled by bodily desires and drives. Whereas the latter is generally overlooked by most linguists (other than psycholinguists), Kristeva problematises the relationship between language and the body and in particular the relationship between the subject and the pre-oedipal raptures and pulsations in the *chora*. As a result, she prefers to talk about the subject-in-process because the subject is never homogenous and unified. The subject is disruptive because his/her use of “rhythmic, lexical, even syntactic changes” (Kristeva 1984: 101) disturbs the “transparency of the signifying chain”.

Kristeva (1980: 127) believes that, traditionally, linguists opened up “the gap between the signifier and the signified” and claimed a “logical, mathematical formalization” as the basis of language. Furthermore, she points out that structural linguists tend to eliminate the speaking subject. The subject should be regarded as “an operating consciousness” (Kristeva 1980: 131) and not only be associated with linguistic logic but also with “interlocutory relationships” – again a call for inclusion of the body and the subconscious mind in linguistic analysis.

This shifting of subjectivity from a position of authority and ego-driven control to one that takes cognisance of pre-oedipal communication implies that when a reader interprets poetic language, for instance, there should be a consideration not only of meaning and signification but also of what “in the poetic function departs from the signified and the transcendental ego and makes of what is known as ‘literature’ something other than knowledge” (Kristeva 1980: 132).

In contrast to the speaking subject, Kristeva also addresses the writing subject, through which the “forces” (1984: 7) that brought about a work are being channelled. The writing subject includes both the consciousness and the subconscious of the writer, as well as the non-conscious, referring to the ideologies and myths according to which we live. Based on her reading of

Bakhtin, in particular his collaborative project with Medvedev on “sociological poetics”, Kristeva (1980: 68) observes that the “person-subject of writing” becomes problematic when taking into consideration that writing is “both communication and subjectivity.” Bakhtin regards any literary text as “a mosaic of quotations” and “any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva 1980: 66), a notion which forms the basis of Kristeva’s theory of intertextuality.

Bakhtin’s concepts of *heteroglossia* and *dialogism* have also influenced Kristeva’s thinking about language. For Bakhtin

[...] at any given moment, languages of various epochs and periods of socio-ideological life cohabit with one another [...] Thus at any given moment of its historical existence, language is *heteroglot* from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form .... Therefore languages do not exclude each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways.

(1992: 291)

Based on Bakhtin, Kristeva opted to describe the literary text as a *polylogue*:

The term *polylogue* derives from two ancient Greek words, namely *poly-* and *logos*. *Poly-* can be translated as “many”, while *logos* has a number of important meanings, including, for example, “word” and “reason” in its most basic signification as well as its most relevant implications. If used as a compound word, *polylogue* signifies “garrulity” or “chattiness”, or in German, *Geschwätzigkeit*, a term describing a state in which everyone is talking at once while nobody is actually listening. In other words, when used to describe a person, a polylogue could also refer to someone who speaks without reasoning.

(Chen 2010: 55)

The literary text becomes polyphonic because it contains several strands of language, speech patterns and an intersecting network of disparate voices, all contributing to the creation of meaning within the particular text. Referring to Bakhtin’s reading of Dostoyevsky, Robinson (2011) circumscribes this as follows:

The author does not place his own narrative voice between the character and the reader, but rather, allows characters to shock and subvert. It is thus as if the books were written by multiple characters, not a single author’s standpoint. Instead of a single objective world, held together by the author’s voice, there is a plurality of consciousnesses, each with its own world. The reader does not see a single reality presented by the author, but rather, how reality appears to each character. [...]The role of the author is fundamentally changed, because the author can no longer monopolise the ‘power to mean’.



## Rereading Lacan

In discussing the role of psychoanalysis and women's rights with Boucquey in 1975, Kristeva, who constantly reiterates the role of the mother in the psychosexual development of the child, remarks as follows about Lacan:

Lacan claimed that the decline of the father's image and the increased role of the mother create a crisis because they encourage the return of the repressed to take on some dangerous and totalitarian forms. The psychoanalytic response to this crisis in the monotheistic regulation of the Western family has been to specify and to reinterpret the authority of the law – not “dad's” authority but the Name of the Father, since the returned repressed was obviously repressed, it is obliged to disobey the paternal law.

(cited in Guberman 1996: 108)

Lacan's reference to “the increased role of the mother” illustrates the main point of difference between him and Kristeva. Kristeva rereads Lacan's theory on the “Symbolic Order” and posits the semiotic chora and emphasises the pre-oedipal stage. In his re-interpretation of Freud, Lacan identifies the mirror stage during the development of the child. During this stage, the child develops a sense of “I” when it is confronted by its image in a mirror, which is not necessarily a literal mirror, but any reflective structure such as its mother's face (Homer 2005: 24). As a result the child subject becomes dependent on external objects such as the mother and the image that it has of himself is seen as his Ideal-I (Lacan 2006: 75-81). Taylor (2006: 57) observes that for Lacan the mirror stage “remains a repression of pulsions, drives and maternal identification.”

According to McAfee (2004: 35), Kristeva differs from Lacan about when the infant begins to differentiate itself from its mother. She places the break before the mirror stage, when the infant begins to expel (object) that which it finds “unpalatable”.

The end of the mirror stage indicates for Lacan (2006: 79) the beginning of “the dialectic that will henceforth link the I to socially elaborated situations.” Kristeva is in agreement with Lacan regarding the theories of the mirror stage, castration, the oedipal situation and sexual difference but differs from him when she examines the logic of signification before the onset of the mirror stage. She is also critical of Lacan's insistence on a structured language that is only associated with the symbolic order as well as his negation of the type of language associated with the maternal chora. The break with the semiotic occurs during what Kristeva describes as the *thetic* moment (Kristeva 1984: 43).

The term *thetic* is borrowed from Husserl (1859-1938), who was the founder of phenomenology, which “has us focus on the essential structures that allow the objects naively taken for granted in the ‘natural attitude’ (which is characteristic of both our everyday life and ordinary science) to ‘constitute

themselves’ in consciousness” (Smith 2008). Kristeva explains *thetic* as follows:

We shall distinguish the semiotic (drives and their articulations) from the realm of signification, which is always that of a proposition or judgment, in other words, a realm of positions. This positionality, which Husserlian phenomenology orchestrates through the concepts *doxa*, position and thesis, is structured as a break in the signifying process, establishing the identification of the subject and its object as preconditions of propositionality. We shall call this break, which produces the positing of signification, a *thetic* phase. All enunciation, whether of a word or a sentence, is *thetic*. It requires an identification; in other words, the subject must separate from and through his image, from and through his objects. This image and objects must first be posited in a space that becomes symbolic because it connects the two separated positions, recording them or redistributing them in an open combinatorial system.

(1984: 43)

The child starts to communicate through gestures and phrases – but not in full sentences. These utterances are *thetic* because they “separate an object from the subject and attribute it to a semiotic fragment” (Kristeva 1984: 43). When the child says woof-woof for a dog and subsequently to all animals, it shows that the child attributes certain sounds to animals and realises that it is in a position of difference to the maternal object and the animals that it is trying to “name”. The *thetic* phase is also “the threshold” between the semiotic and the symbolic (Kristeva 1984: 49).

In the social order there are two types of “events” that one could see as counterparts of the *thetic* moment, namely, sacrifice and art (Kristeva 1984: 75). Sacrifice is associated with the *thetic* break because it suggests a violent end to something: In the case of the child’s acquisition of language, it underpins the “structural violence of language’s irruption” to end the rhythmic and somatic communication between the maternal object and the child. This process is also associated with “a violent and unmotivated leap” (Kristeva 1984: 78) in order to enter the realm of language.

Referring to the Dionysian festivals in ancient Greece, Kristeva (1984: 79) maintains that they serve as a good example of the “dissolution” of the symbolic order because by expressing themselves through dancing and singing and poetry, they “[crack] the socio-symbolic order, splitting it open, changing vocabulary, syntax, the word itself”. One could draw a parallel here with the Mediaeval west-European “carnival”, which also disputed the symbolic order with ribald fun and mockery. This echoes Bakhtin’s study *Rabelais and his World* (1984) in which he focuses on the carnivalesque and the way in which the counter culture of the carnival transgresses the dominant cultural norms and leads to a demotic celebration of equality in both cultural expression and in language usage. Writing about Bakhtin’s study of the carnival, Kristeva characterises carnivalesque discourse as follows:

[It] breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, it is a social and political protest. There is no equivalence, but rather, identity between challenging official linguistic codes and challenging official law.

(1980: 65)

To explain the applicability of her theories, in her book *New Maladies of the Soul* (1995) Kristeva shows how she applies her theories of the symbolic and the semiotic in her practice as a psychoanalyst. In one of the chapters titled “The Inexpressible child”, she comments on a patient with neurological difficulties, who at the age of three was unable to speak. Following her clinical diagnosis, she concludes:

I decided to communicate with Paul and his mother by using something that was accessible to him – *song*. The *operas* we would improvise, which must have seemed rather absurd to any onlooker, were composed of signification that I (or we) wanted to share. Yet they were initially composed of the meaning of the affect and drive representatives encoded in the melodies, the rhythms, and the accents that were more easily (if not the only thing) available to Paul.

(1995: 106)

What this has proven is the efficacy of the semiotic *chora*, of the nonverbal, non-analytic approach to language. For Kristeva this is a clear example of the reassessment of the maternal function and the role assigned to the bond between mother and child in the *chora*. Subsequently she used fairy tales to activate his imaginary side, since the imaginary is also not associated with language but with images and fantasy.

### **Kristeva and Poetic Language in “Die tweeveg”**

To illustrate Kristeva’s views on poetic languages, I will refer to a poem in Afrikaans by the South African poet Breyten Breytenbach. Kristeva uses mostly poems by Mallarmé when discussing poetic language, because “the distortion of words, the repetition of words and syntagms [...] reveal that a *semiotic network* – the *chora* – has been established” (Kristeva 1984: 152).

The Breytenbach poem is from his first collection of poetry, published in 1964. The title, “Die tweeveg” can be translated as “The duel” and is an attempt by the poet to capture the sounds made by the swords when the two men are engaging in a duel:

**Die Tweegeveg**

Die vaandels roer soos flou donkies in die wind  
En die son trek sy wolke stywer om sy skouers,  
Want dis koud  
Die man met die swart oë kom sugtend oor die kweek  
En hef sy swaard op, 'n versteende paling in die lig  
En ek trek my swaard blink soos 'n proefbuis of 'n draaktong

En garde!

Kleng jaa tjeng tjang tjeng kleng  
Ai joei tsji tsjan bik sjoeing tjôrrr  
Fuut tjeng wam kieng op sssip  
Hû klang klang tjing sssip  
Hû merde tjong fuut kleng jaa  
Sjoeing klub kieng konk hoender dirr  
Rrruf tjang tjenk wam aaa sssip  
Kak tjeng kleks zem zem ung ha

Touché

Aaa  
(ek voel sy swaard soos 'n graat in my gorrel)

[The standards stir like weak donkeys in the wind  
And the sun pulls his clouds tighter around his shoulders,  
Because it is so cold  
The man with the black eyes comes sighing across the grass  
And lifts his sword, a fossilised eel  
And I draw my sword glistening like a test-tube or a dragon's tongue  
En garde!

Kleng jaa tjeng tjang tjeng kleng  
Ai joei tsji tsjan bik sjoeing tjôrrr /Fuut tjeng wam kieng op sssip  
Hû klang klang tjing sssip  
Hû merde tjong fuut kleng jaa  
Sjoeing klub kieng konk chicken dirr  
Rrruf tjang tjenk wam aaa sssip  
Shit tjeng kleks zem zem ung ha

Touché

Aaa  
(I feel his sword like a fish-bone in my throat) – *my translation.*]

This poem illustrates the clear split between the so-called Semiotic and the Symbolic: the first stanza with its grammatical Afrikaans and poetic language falls within the ambit of the Symbolic; the realm of language, of the Father and of the Law. The sword mentioned is symbolic of the phallus, the signifier of male authority and language. Conversely, the second stanza explains the drives and pulsations within the Semiotic, with the words “merde” [shit in French], “hoender” [chicken] and “kak” [shit] as examples where the Symbolic language tries to silence the phonic rabble of the Semiotic.

The first stanza is also written according to rules of syntax, containing several sentences following the V2 principle, even though the poem is in narrative form and the different lines are joined in a run-on fashion by the use of “en” (“and”). The adjectival use in this stanza is also descriptive and poetic; compare for example the use of “sugtend” (“sighing”) to describe the man’s demeanour.

According to Kristeva any literary text or work of poetry refers to at least one other text. By the same token, the relationships in the text follow a dialogical principle. The signifier as a minimal unit is also dual. In this light, the text is seen as “a system of multiple connections that could be described as a structure of paragrammatic networks” (Kristeva 1998: 32). Prudhomme and Legare (2006) explain this as follows:

In each network, the elements (phonetic, semantic, and syntagmatic) are presented as (signifying) peaks on a graph (the infiniteness of the entire code); in other words, they are overdetermined elements in the signifying process. Moreover, each peak is multi-determined in that it necessarily refers to another peak (by correlation), making it a dialogical system. The signifiers are thereby set in motion, which is why the signifying structure created by them (poetic language) is a moving gram – a paragram.

In Breytenbach’s poem there is sustained repetition of /eŋ/, as well as /kl/ and /tʃ/. The /s/ and the /ʃ/ sounds are also repeated and a prominent sound is the /sss/ in the word “sssip”, which is repeated thrice in the poem. Similarly the /r/ sound is also repeated in “Rrruf” and “dirr”. The three words “tjeng tjang tjong” in the first line suggest the play with words and sounds associated with the art of writing poetry. The writing subject is hard at work to create a revolution in poetic language. In the following parallel lines both start with /h ə/: Hû klang klang tjing sssip *and* Hû merde tjong fuut kleng jaa.

When indicating which sounds children acquire first, Sharon McCleod summarise those aspects appropriate to children 0,0 – 1,0 year as follows – and I select this age group because of the positioning of the chora within the maternal body before birth:

By at least 2 days of age, the neonate has an ability to discriminate language specific acoustic distinctions ... Consonants: Nasal, plosive, fricative, approximant, labial, lingual ... Primarily mono-syllabic utterances ... 1;0 =

/m, d, b, n/ most frequently reported consonants in inventory ... “Low, non-rounded vowels are favoured in the first year. Front-back vowel differences appear later than height differences”.

Geerts (2011: 8) comments on this as follows: At first the child is completely absorbed in this chora, and utters nonsensical cries and sounds, until it enters the Symbolic realm, where the semiotic chora is suppressed, as we have already seen. The *chora* nonetheless is always operating in the shadows of the symbolic (in the Symbolic), and sometimes finds its way out of its situation of repression, and hence causes disruption within discourse.

In the speech patterns of the subject in the poem there are clear correspondences to that of the young infant’s type of speech: there are examples of the plosive /kl/ and /tʃ/, as well as the fricative in /fɪt/. Acoustic distinctions are present throughout and there is a distinct semiotic motility present in the writing subject’s verbal games.

Regarding semic expansion in the poem, the juxtaposition of “hoender” and “diir” is equally important because the Afrikaans word *dier* refers to an animal: the mental apparatus makes the link between *hoender* and *di[e]r*. Poetic language, posit Prudhomme and Legare (2006), does not match the signifier to a frozen signified, but to a (multi-determined) signification that is constantly renewed by the ties it maintains with the other signifiers. In order to read the poetic message, we must find the correlations between its semic components.

There is a correlation in significance between the expression used to describe the sword and the final duel action. Meaning can only be produced, according to Kristeva, when the semiotic meets the symbolic and they seem to interact in an almost dialectical, yet intertwined manner. They necessarily co-operate in producing meaning. The man with the black eyes as challenger symbolises the father figure with whom he has to fight in order to gain access to the Symbolic Order. The act of fighting a duel to the death could also serve as metaphor for the subject’s resistance to let go of the safety of the Semiotic and resist the Oedipal submission to the Law of the Father. The poetic subject in writing this poem expresses his resistance through his use of language – his melodic emphasis on rhythmic language and giving voice to his experiencing his lack and desire for unity with the maternal chora.

Several semes are used to describe the sword, namely “a fossilised eel”, “a test tube”, “a dragon’s tongue” and in the final line, it is called a “fish-bone”. The inactivity of the phallus is suggested by the use of “fossilised” – which stands in direct contrast to “dragon’s tongue” with its active and fiery connotations. In contrast to this, the sword is finally described as a mere fish-bone, suggesting its incapacity to really accomplish its goal. Within the psychoanalytic signification of the poem, this refers to the inadequacy of the Symbolic Order to control the enunciation of the writing subject. The large voluminous sword is reduced to a mere fishbone, which suggests that the subject does not revere the paternal phallus, suggesting that there is no

castration anxiety experience by the subject. According to Kristeva (1984: 47) castration “puts the finishing touches on the process of separation” whereby the subject is posited as signifiable.

It is significant that the poetic subject sets his poem within the context of a violent duel, as if to suggest his physical rivalry with the father figures for control over language. The sword is the metaphorical phallic signifier with which the poetic subject is trying to slay his poetic father-precursor and carrier of meaning but eventually turns out to be a mere fish bone.

This poem anticipates the later “poems under erasure” (Viljoen 2014: 276) by Breyten Breytenbach where, following McHale, Viljoen shows to what extent Breytenbach’s poems are “half-erased or infiltrated by white space; words over-written by other words” and where the poems “unmake” themselves. These latter poems are emblematic of the poetic subject ability to transcend the limitations of the father within the Symbolic Order and establish himself as a signifying subject producing his own unique signs and significations.

The metapoetical nature of this poem echoes Kristeva’s remark that the essence of this poem is “a subject who speaks his being put in process/ on trial through action” (1984: 210). The unconscious desires of the poetic subject to avenge himself on authoritarian paternal figures suggests a sense of *différance* whereby he defers him reaching full subjecthood.

One should also consider the strong humorous element underpinning Breytenbach’s poem. A serious death defying dual ends in some ridiculous manner and makes the reader laugh at the poor man’s ordeal. Laughter, as Kristeva (1984: 222-225) sees it, “posits prohibitions” that is more than mere witticism. Laughter is a violent, liberating drive that lifts inhibitions. This results in an experience of textual *jouissance* by poet, reader and subject within the poem. Laughter becomes what Lechte and Margaroni (2004: 139) call “the prototypical instance of a truly innovative practice”. To laugh at the imposing phallic power of language and the Father/father’s law is an attempt to ward it off.

### **Conclusion: From Everyday Language to *Bedeutung***

In defining *poetic language*, Kristeva (1984: 2) describes it as “a deviation from the norm of language” which activates “infinite possibilities of language and all other language acts”. The significance implied by poetic language is that it is “an unlimited and unbounded generating process”. Breytenbach’s ostensibly nonsense poem consisting mostly of polylogic sound patterns illustrates to what extent the poet transforms everyday language, thus opening a possibility of readings. Art (and poetry as part of that) necessitates, according to Kristeva (1984: 65), “reinvesting the maternal *chora* so that

transgresses the Symbolic Order” and despite this transgression, the poetic “maintains a signification (*Bedeutung*)”.

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