

## FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND THE LOGICAL OPERATION OF SEPARATION

Research in the field of foreign language acquisition is related to several disciplines including linguistics, sociolinguistics, neuroscience, psychology and education. There is, therefore, a vast array of theories and hypotheses regarding foreign language acquisition. What I propose to explore in this paper is the psychoanalytic dimension of foreign language acquisition, viewed from a Lacanian perspective.

The reflection on the interplay between native language and foreign language has been present throughout my personal and my professional life. In my experience of teaching foreign languages to adults, I often wondered about the forces at play: why were some students unable to “detach” themselves sufficiently from the syntactic, semantic and/or phonetic systems of their native tongue to create enough “space” for those of a foreign tongue, in spite of their desire to achieve this? Why do some people, who are able to master the foreign language’s semantic and syntactic system, retain forever the melody and the sounds of their mother tongue as they speak the other language? Why do others seem to easily mobilize all strategies at their disposal in order to integrate the complex system(s) of one or several foreign language(s), although they didn’t have the experience of early foreign language exposure?

In my second career, experiences with multilingual patients also led to many questions. For example, why do some people want a psychotherapist or a psychoanalyst who understands and speaks their mother tongue while others want an

analyst who, on the contrary, doesn't know their native tongue? What is going on when a patient at times creates and uses a mix of native language and foreign language which he/she can weave in and out of in his/her work?

The complex and enigmatic choice of writers who chose to use (or, perhaps, had no choice but to use) a language other than their native one in their work, is also highly relevant in this context, and of particular interest to me. I'm thinking of Elias Canetti, Jorge Semprun, Samuel Beckett, Andrei Makine, Shan Sa and many others.

As a new immigrant to the US many years ago, I experienced a very surprising and disturbing phenomenon: French, my native language, seemed to step into the shadow, leaving center stage to English; whenever I opened my mouth with the intention of speaking French (for example to my young son), words came out in English. Speaking French therefore involved translating from English to French, which felt and sounded so awkward that I stopped using French for several years, unless I was vacationing in France. This modified itself over time; to this day however, the work of translating orally towards my native language<sup>1</sup> remains a big challenge.

It is clear that many issues are at stake and that, for each individual encountering them, foreign languages come to signify something different. I strongly believe however that an individual's relationship with his/her mother language contains elements which can inhibit, favor or permit to varying degrees, at times even render necessary, the acquisition of a foreign language.

In seminar XI, "the Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis", Lacan developed his notion of the constitution of the subject. Using classical logic as a way to

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<sup>1</sup> The author of this paper occasionally translates for visiting French psychoanalysts holding seminars at Après-Coup.

think and to illustrate this process, he developed the differentiation between two fundamental operations in the relationship between the subject and the Other: the operation of alienation and the operation of separation.

I will explore the role which the acquisition of a foreign language can play in the trajectory of an individual and will establish a link between foreign language acquisition and the second of the two operations, the operation of separation. More specifically, I will develop the hypothesis that, in certain circumstances, foreign language acquisition can play the role of what Lacan called the Paternal Metaphor in the constitution of the subject and produce, as an effect, the logical operation of separation.

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Louis Wolfson was a young American living in New York City when, in 1964, he mailed the manuscript of his first book, *“Le Schizo et Les Langues”*,<sup>2</sup> to the Gallimard Publishing House in Paris. It was the second book to be published in Gallimard’s newly created collection *“Connaissance de l’Inconscient”*.

Although Wolfson grew up a monolingual English speaker, he had written his book in French, a language which wasn’t used by or with anyone in his environment and was unknown to both of his parents. When he wrote his book, he was living with his mother and stepfather, whose mother-languages were respectively Yiddish and English. His mother had come from Bielorrussia and also spoke Russian, and his step-father was originally from English-speaking Canada. His father’s original language was Yiddish.

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<sup>2</sup> Louis Wolfson, *the Schizophrenic and Languages*. Editions Gallimard, “Connaissance de l’Inconscient”, Paris, 1970 (translation of the title by the author).

Even though the languages of Wolfson's ancestry were not spoken at home, they undoubtedly were tied to his trajectory. I will return to this later.

He began learning French and German in high school and continued for a few years in college. His studies were then interrupted for several years by repeated stays in psychiatric hospitals for what was diagnosed as schizophrenia. Back in his mother's home, he returned to his study of languages, this time on his own. From that time on, studying languages became his primary activity. He set about to learn a few more, mostly Russian and Hebrew. He studied them on his own, sitting at his desk, using dictionaries, books, records, a portable radio for foreign stations and a walkman, one of the very first ones probably.

Wolfson's book attracted a lot of attention in France among writers, philosophers, linguists and psychoanalysts. It didn't receive as much attention in the United States in part because, for reasons which will become clear later, Wolfson was opposed to any translation of it.<sup>3</sup> Paul Auster wrote "It is a book that excludes all possibility of translation. It hovers somewhere in limbo between the two languages...".<sup>4</sup> I agree with Auster to some extent; however, the expression "in limbo" evokes some kind of inactiveness, whereas the book, as the reader will see, conveys the sense of an intense struggle playing itself out in the arena of these two languages and in the space between them, a struggle which is the object of this paper.

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<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this paper, the author has translated her quotes into English, remaining as close as possible to the letter. The original quote in French will be systematically bracketed right after the English translation.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Auster, *One Man Language*, the New York Review of Books, New York, 1975.

The book is a kind of memoir of the present written in the third person, where he writes about the daily life of the one he names "le Schizo", about his struggle to free himself from the enormous forces that keep him prisoner and about the linguistic system he created as a tool for his struggle. Wolfson has recourse to an abundance of other names to refer to "le Schizo", including "the alienated language student" [*l'étudiant de langues aliéné*], "the schizophrenic student" [*l'étudiant schizophrénique*], "the mad son" [*le fils fou*], "her dear mentally ill son" [*son cher fils malade mentalement*] and "the schizophrenic language student" [*l'étudiant de langues schizophrénique*].

This "naming" contains three elements: madness (every naming refers to it) and either his status as son or his status as student of languages. Wolfson's naming evokes for me a trilogy (madman - son - language student), a very interesting trilogy since Wolfson's character is never named simultaneously as both son and language student. It is a trilogy which involves an either/or (to which I will return later), an alternative which, I believe to be a reflection of the process of his work. This reflection on a trilogy reminds me of the title of Gerard Garouste's book: "L'intranquille, autoportrait d'un fils, d'un peintre, d'un fou".<sup>5</sup> In reference to the title of Garouste's book, C. Terrisse wrote: "It is a trilogy which enumerates the three Lacanian registers: the Symbolic anchoring of filiation, the abundance of the Imaginary and the Real of madness".<sup>6</sup>

I see the trilogy in Wolfson's naming as a reflection of his work at repairing the knotting of the three registers; this is the process I am describing in this paper.

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<sup>5</sup> Gérard Garouste, *L'intranquille, autoportrait d'un fils, d'un peintre, d'un fou* [*the un-tranquil, self-portrait of a son, a painter, a mad man*] L'iconoclaste, Paris, 2009 (translation of the title by the author).

<sup>6</sup> Christiane Terrisse, *l'Incurable en partage*, paper presented in Biarritz, France, 2009.

The “*mad son*” lives with his mother and step-father. His mother is depicted as a dominating and suffocating presence; when he refers to “*the so-called mother language*” [*la langue dite maternelle*], it is clear that his violent feelings of hatred and rejection of the English language are a function of the same feelings for the mother who incarnates it. She is described as a character who ridicules, constantly interrupts, even tries to prevent her son’s study of languages and makes his life unbearable in every way possible; she insists on speaking English to him in spite of his insistence that she use Yiddish “*which would make him suffer less*” [*qui le ferait moins souffrir*]. Wolfson describes a mother who enjoys singing popular songs, which “*penetrate her son with English words*” [*qui pénètrent son fils de mots anglais*] while accompanying herself on her electric organ set at maximum volume. The *Schizo* spends his days seated at his desk in a room which also contains his mother’s organ (!) and the family’s television set, a room without lock or key.

Wolfson also describes irregular, brief and “*pitiful encounters*” [*rencontres piteuses*] in strange public places of the city between the *Schizo* and his father, whom he refers to as “*the fluid-like father*” [*le père fluide*]. Unlike his mother, his father often accepts to speak Yiddish when they meet.

How does the *Schizo* deal with his situation? He develops a linguistic system involving very specific strategies aimed at “*converting the words of his closest relative into foreign words and thus - as he subconsciously would like to do it - destroy them, so to speak.*” [*convertir les mots de sa plus proche parente en mots étrangers et ainsi - comme subconsciemment il le voudrait faire - les détruire en quelque sorte*]. He becomes completely involved with transforming words uttered by his mother as quickly

as possible into words from one of the foreign languages he knows, or into a cocktail of several of them. There are two criteria for this transformation, this “*metamorphosis*”: the replacement word must be related in meaning and in sound to the original English word.

Wolfson describes the *Schizo*'s learning strategies in a very precise manner: we see him one day for example, getting ready to listen to a Russian record; he has intensely prepared himself for this beforehand by memorizing the Russian side of the bilingual transcription - without, of course, looking at the English translation on the opposite page so as to shield himself from the “*contamination*” by English words. His goal is to be able to remember how to quickly produce a whole sentence just by hearing the first word on the record, as if to ensure that there will be no empty space, no empty time for the words of the language carried by the mother's voice to infiltrate his mind. He listens to the record many times, establishing mental connections between the words he had memorized beforehand, and the sounds pronounced by the voice on the record.

In lesson 15 of seminar XI, Lacan refers to “the gaps that Freud, surprisingly, left in his enumeration of the drives”. He states, referring to the gaze and the voice: “after the ‘making oneself seen’ I will introduce another, the ‘making oneself heard’, which Freud doesn't even tell us about”. Lacan then says to his listeners: “you have ears, it seems; ears are the only type of orifice in the field of the unconscious which cannot close». <sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Norton, trans. Alan Sheridan, 1977, p. 195

Second part of the quote (left out in the Editions du Seuil and Norton), Staferla transcript, lesson 15, translation by the author.

At any time, the *Schizo*'s mother could "burst into the room" [*éclater dans la pièce*]. She might open the door quietly, "extremely quietly" [*à pas de loup*]<sup>8</sup>, to surprise him and start shouting English words "very loud" [*à tue-tête*]<sup>9</sup> or playing her organ. He must therefore be ready at all times to "neutralize" the English words. So, the earphones of his walkman - to access foreign radio stations - never leave his neck and, as a double protection, his elbows are always resting on his books so that he can keep his hands near his ears, ready to plug them, "for fear of hearing the dreaded voice of his mother" [*de peur d'entendre la voix redoutée de sa mère*]. When he ventures outside the house where he is likely to hear or read some English words, he always takes along his walkman, a foreign book and, in his mind, a collection of memorized foreign words.

The *Schizo*'s strategies become more and more efficient as he discovers new and faster ways of "getting his brain rid of English words." [*débarasser son cerveau de mots anglais*]. His linguistic system acquires a name as it becomes more sophisticated: "the ceremonial of transformation into foreign language" [*le cérémonial de transformation en langue étrangère*]. He is inventing a system to "annihilate" English words by transforming them into foreign words, "the latter engendered in his mind according to his desire to dismember the former by de-boning them so to speak, by stripping them from their skeleton, the consonants." [*ces derniers engendrés dans son esprit d'après son désir de démembrer ces premiers en les désossant pour ainsi dire, en les dépouillant de leur squelette les consonnes.*]

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<sup>8</sup> literal translation: "with wolf steps".

<sup>9</sup> literal translation: "at kill-head".

Wolfson explains how the *Schizo* proceeds: he goes on mental wanderings during which he “encounters” [*il rencontre*] on the one hand, the English words that need urgent substitution, and on the other their suitable foreign replacements. Let’s take for example the word “edge”, a word written on the lid of the “*container of his darling skimmed milk*” [*le contenant de son cher lait écrémé*], a disturbing word since opening and closing the lid represents for him a very delicate operation considering his fear of parasites and contamination. Germs might indeed penetrate him by contact with his lips, just like his mother’s voice penetrates him by entering his ears. The voice and the mouth, objects which are connected for Lacan by the same edge.

In order to “neutralize” the word - and the associated fear - , Wolfson searches for a transformation. He writes: “*when he meets the word ‘edge’, the first word that comes to his mind, if not the last, is the German word ‘Ende’*” [*quand il rencontre le mot ‘edge’ le premier mot qui lui vient à l’esprit, si ce n’est le dernier, est le mot allemand ‘Ende’ (the end, the edge)*] which he chooses as a substitute. In effect, he has replaced the consonants “dg” with “nd” - a procedure he refers to as “*désossement*” [*de-boning*] - and has picked a word related in sound and meaning to the word “edge”.

These descriptions of linguistic errancies and substitutions are often very lengthy due to the profusion of imaginary productions and to the phonetic as well as orthographic considerations involved. The next example of such a transformation takes up eight pages in the book; in this case, the *Schizo* doesn’t just borrow a word from another language but comes up with “*his own invention*” [*sa propre invention*] which he is quite happy about. He writes: in order to “*nullify the psychic damage produced by the word ‘early’*” [*nullifier le dommage psychique produit par le mot ‘early’*] - a particularly

painful word since his mother is always telling him to go to bed early - he *encounters* successively the French words “early” [tôf] and “early in the morning” [de bonne heure], the German “early” [früh], the French “immediately” [suR-Le champ], “matutinally” [matinaLement], “diligently” [diLigemment] and “devouring space” [devoReR L’espace]. The letters L and R are capitalized in order to establish a clearer connection between the foreign words and the word “early”. The *Schizo* then encounters the German “Uhr” (*hour*) and finally “creates” the word “uhrlich”<sup>10</sup> as a replacement for “early”.

A striking example of the *Schizo*’s work of “dismemberment” [démembrement] is the metamorphosis of the mother’s injunction “don’t trip over the wire!” - something she said every time she vacuumed, the noise of which was unbearable to him. Wolfson demonstrates how the sentence gets “truncated” into isolated word units: “tu’ nicht” (German: *don’t do*), “trébucher” (French: *trip*), “über” (German: *over*), “èth thé” (Hebrew: *the*) and “Zwirn” (German: *string, rope*). The disturbing mother’s injunction thus becomes: “tu’nicht trébucher uber èth thé Zwirn”.

Wolfson describes the *Schizo*’s true sense of accomplishment and his feelings of joy associated with this work. He remarks that, at some point, having developed more efficient strategies, he is becoming less “fanatical when it comes to his annihilation” [*fanatique quant à son annihilation*] of English words.

Let us examine his strategies more closely: as illustrated in earlier examples, he seems to proceed by extracting isolated words out of their context. This kind of

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<sup>10</sup> this word is similar in sound to the German word “fröhlich” (happy)

“truncating” strategy also seems to be reinforced by the typography and the punctuation chosen for specific words in the book: all English words to be “*neutralized*”, as well as their transformations systematically appear as isolated italicized units in the text, followed by their French phonetic spelling in a set of parentheses so as to be clearly differentiated from the main body of the text. The reader will find, for example: “*early (prononcé environ e :rli)*” and “*früh (prononcé frû)*”.

Throughout the book, Wolfson’s use of punctuation involves an intricate and systematic use of various grouping, isolating and equating symbols - a dazzling array of brackets, parenthesis, nesting parentheses, dash parentheses, slashes, hyphens and equal signs - used in addition to regular punctuation. His use of punctuation evokes that of algebraic notations. As we know, Lacan used algebraic notations in his work. Referring to *object (a)*, he said: “it’s notation is algebraic, precisely to meet the goal of the pure tracking of identity, since it has been already posited by us that the tracking through a *word*, a *signifier*, is always and could only be *metaphoric ...*”.<sup>11</sup> These words resonate with Wolfson’s linguistic endeavor. The *Schizo* seems to proceed as if he were tirelessly working at a “pure tracking of identity” as he establishes borders and/or frames for his linguistic creations, as he works at cutting, delimitating, differentiating, separating out - thus also protecting - what is his from what is not his, the “inside-me” from the “outside-me”.

I referred earlier to the *Schizo*’s phobia of germs à propos of the word “*edge*”. Tormented by both the fear and the guilt of eating, the *Schizo* oscillates between not eating and what he calls “*orgies of gluttonery*” [*des orgies de gloutonnerie*], i.e.

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<sup>11</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar X*, “*L’angoisse*”, lesson 7, Staferla transcript, p.147 (translation by the author).

between anorexia and bulimia. Throughout the book, the *Schizo's* linguistic endeavors are described in alternation with “*eating rages into which he falls*” [*les rages de manger dans lesquelles il tombe*], which render him ill and incapable of working for hours. He accuses his mother of luring him into eating by stocking up the kitchen with his favorite foods and then leaving the house so that he will eat - he will not do so as long as she is in the house, as long as her gaze is on him. The intensity of his obsession with food and with eating is at the measure of the intensity of his hatred and his fear of English - the poisoned and poisonous *Lalangue* - and of his desire to create a language that can allow him to live.

Following Wolfson in his wanderings evoked in me the image of the slow and systematic construction of a very tightly woven net, a net designed to keep him from falling into the mother tongue. This image of the net is closely linked with another image: the ever increasing network he builds with words from the languages of his ancestors - Russian, German, Hebrew and Yiddish (which he calls “*judéo-allemand*”) -, interwoven with words of French, his language of choice. With his “*cérémonial de transformation en langue étrangère*”, Wolfson is creating a unique system, working at a *sinthomatic* solution which inscribes him in previous generations as he is working at becoming a subject.

As illustrated earlier, the Schizo's substitutions follow very rigorous phonetic and orthographic specifications. In contrast, the semantic associations give an impression of looseness, of elasticity, which may be operating in such a way as to afford him a certain degree of “freedom” (for example in paragraph 1, p. 10). Of particular interest is the lack of investment in - or perhaps, the necessary rejection of - any syntactic aspect in his

linguistic system, as illustrated by the “translation” of the mother’s injunction: “don’t step over the wire” (paragraph 2, page 10).

As I was reading Wolfson’s book, I began to sense the presence of the English language behind his French, so to speak. As I wrote this paper and translated some excerpts into English, I wondered why the translation came so easily. I remembered what Auster said about Wolfson’s writing “hovering between the two languages”. It is indeed as if, behind the French, the mother language’s structure, its skeleton (as I always thought of it in my linguistic career) and perhaps *her* skeleton as well, were always present in transparency. This, as well as Wolfson’s very strong accent when he speaks French - I heard an interview on U-Tube - suggests that his work of “*metamorphosis*” did not only involve rejecting the mother-language but also maintaining closeness with it; furthermore, he often seems to play with it in the space he created between the two languages, for example by using obvious anglicisms (more on this in the postscript).

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Let us return to Lacan’s concept of the constitution of the subject. In chapter 16 of Seminar XI, Lacan reminds his listeners, “First, I stressed the division I make by opposing, in relation to the entrance of the unconscious, the two fields of the subject and the Other. The Other is the locus in which *is situated* the chain of signifiers that governs whatever *may be made present* of the subject - it is in the field of that living

being where the subject has to appear”.<sup>12</sup> In the same chapter Lacan produces the two-part development of the constitution of the subject, namely, the operations of alienation and separation.

To represent the two-part operation, Lacan uses the lozenge divided on a horizontal axis with a vectorization going counterclockwise; in order to discern the two operations, we must place the subject to the right and the Other to the left. The action of the Other is what causes the appearance of the subject, which is still unbarred (not yet divided by language); it has yet to become (*“il est encore à advenir”*) in this moment of logical time. The barring will occur as an effect of the signifier. This action of the Other upon the living being is what Lacan designates as alienation.<sup>13</sup> It is in the continuation of the dialectical movement, in a second moment, that the living being (*“l’être”*) will become a subject (a *“parl-être”*). Going forward, it is on the “return journey” of this circular- but non reciprocal - operation that separation, which characterizes the barred subject, occurs. Lacan says: “that by which the subject finds the return way of the *ve/* of alienation is the operation I called separation”.<sup>14</sup>

In order to develop the link between foreign language acquisition and the second operation in the constitution of the subject, separation, let me first discuss alienation, the first operation; indeed, the two operations are sequential, and separation cannot occur

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<sup>12</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Norton, trans. Alan Sheridan, 1977, p. 203.

Lacan’s choice of words in French for the two italicized words in the quote are *“se situe”* *“se présentifier”*, i.e., reflexive verbs; this grammatical form (or voice) relays an action upon itself on the part of the subject of the verb which is not rendered by the English words. The author would translate these two verbs as: “situates itself” and “makes itself present”[or“presentifies itself”].

<sup>13</sup> In order to follow Lacan, we must try to put aside our habitual understanding of the word “alienation” because he diverts it from its habitual usage.

<sup>14</sup> J. Lacan, *ibid* p. 218

unless there is alienation. Following the logic of the sequential, we also know that when the operation of alienation doesn't take place, there is autism.

Lacan calls the lower part of the lozenge, the "alienating *vel*". He writes:

"Alienation consists in this *vel*, which - if you do not object to the word *condemned*, I will use it - condemns the subject to appearing only in that division which, it seems to me, I have just articulated sufficiently by saying that, if it appears on one side as meaning produced by the signifier, it appears on the other as *aphanisis*."<sup>15</sup>

The term "*vel*" (from the latin "or") is a connector representing an alternative in classical logic. Classical logic defines two *vels*, two forms of alternative: an exclusive one and an inclusive one; the exclusive *vel* is characterized by an "*either/or*". The inclusive *vel* is characterized by an "*or*". Lacan introduced a third form he called the "alienating *vel*". He says it is an "alternative which feigns to give the choice"<sup>16</sup> and "has as its consequence a "*neither one, nor the other*". The choice then, is a matter of knowing whether one wishes to preserve one of the parts, the other disappearing in any case."<sup>17</sup> He refers to it as a "forced choice."

To illustrate this "*vel*", Lacan produces two didactic examples.

In the first example, "your money or your life," a robber gives the following choice to a man he runs into in the woods: if you choose your money, you lose both your life and your money and if you choose your life, you have a life without money, "namely, a life

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<sup>15</sup> J. Lacan, *ibid*, p. 210.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Michel Vappereau: *le vel de l'alienation et son articulation commune en logique classique*, Buenos Aires 28 mai-24 juillet 2006

<sup>17</sup> J. Lacan, *ibid*, p. 211.

deprived of something.”<sup>18</sup> Even though this looks like an option, there is actually no possible choice for most of us, because there is no common measure between what will be lost if one makes one choice as opposed to the other. In Lacan’s other illustration, “your freedom or your life”, our main possibility is obviously the choice of life; we therefore end up with a life without freedom, a life where there is always lack.

What is at stake in the “forced choice” is the alienation of the subject captured by the signifier, submitted to the effect of language by the Other, the Other who speaks about the subject before his birth and interprets, in his own way, any utterance coming from the subject, including the first scream (“*le cri*”), defined by Lacan as “the aspiration into oneself of a milieu which is fundamentally Other.”<sup>19</sup>

Lacan tells us:

Through the effect of speech, the subject realizes himself ever more in the Other, yet he is pursuing there but half of himself. He will simply find his desire ever more divided, pulverized, in the circumscribable metonymy of speech. The effects of language are always mixed with the fact, which is the basis of the analytic experience, that the subject is subject only from being subjected to the field of the Other. The subject proceeds from his synchronic subjection in the field of the Other; that is where he originates and that is also why he must get out, get himself out, and in the *getting-himself-out*, in

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<sup>18</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Norton, trans. Allan Sheridan, New York, 1977, p. 212.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar X, “L’angoisse”*, Editions du Seuil, 1963. Translation by the author of “l’aspiration en soi d’un milieu foncièrement Autre” quoted by Catherine Ferron, “*L’enfant et la pulsion invocante*”, ALI, 2011.

the end, he will know that the real Other has, just as much as himself, to get himself out, to pull himself free.<sup>20</sup>

For Lacan, every subject is constituted leaving something of him/herself behind. Because of this, he can only appear as a subject caught in a conflict. If he appears as a subject, which is what happens in the movement of the operation of separation, it is thanks to (and because of) the fact that he is recognized as “*meaning*” (*sens*) by the Other. We could say that the subject, because he/she is lacking in being (Lacan’s “*manque-à-être*”), is a subject who wants to be.

The term *aphanisis* comes from the greek *aphanes*, invisible. Ernest Jones used it to refer to the fear of not having desires. It is the term Lacan uses to refer to the operation of eclipse, which takes place when the subject is captured by the signifier during the process of alienation. He says that the subject appears, at the cost of a disappearance. In other words, there is a price to pay in order to no longer be the object of *jouissance* of the Other, to have access to a different position, the position of “*le manque-à-être*”. There cannot be any “freedom” without that. Again, there can be no separation without alienation.

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<sup>20</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI*, p.188. The bolded words signal errors in the English translation, which the author has rectified. “Par l’effet de parole il se réalise **toujours plus** (rectified as “**ever more**”) dans l’Autre, **mais** (“**yet**”) là, il **ne** poursuit déjà **plus qu’**(“**but**”) moitié de lui-même ...] [...il ne trouvera son désir que toujours plus divisé, pulvérisé, dans la cernable métonymie de la parole. L’effet de langage est tout le temps mêlé à ce quelque chose qui est le fond de l’expérience analytique, l’actualisation de ce qu’il n’est sujet que d’être assujettissement, assujettissement au champ de l’Autre. Assujettissement synchronique dans ce champ de l’Autre : que ce soit de là qu’il provient, c’est aussi pour cela qu’il lui faut en sortir, s’en sortir, et dans le « s’en sortir », à la fin, il saura que l’autre réel a tout autant que lui à « s’en sortir », à s’en dépatouiller”

Vappereau introduces his paper “The *velle* of separation”<sup>21</sup> with these words:

“After alienation and its *vel* (‘or’ in French), we are now addressing the definition given by Lacan in his *Écrits* of the second fundamental operation called by him separation, ‘in which the causation of the subject is to be formulated’<sup>22</sup> in a process in which the *vel* makes it’s return as *velle*.”<sup>23</sup> The word “*velle*” in latin, corresponds to the injunction “*veuille!*” (want!) of the French verb *vouloir* (to want).

What is the link between the “*velle*” and the operation of separation? Whereas because of language, the subject cannot avoid alienation - Soler says it is of the order of destiny - , separation is of a very different order. It may or may not occur in an individual, it is of the order of an action of the subject. Therefore, separation requires that the subject wants to separate from what Lacan calls the signifying chain; “*it supposes a want to know what one is*, beyond what the Other can say, beyond what is inscribed in the Other.”<sup>24</sup> But for separation to take place, there has to also be a condition in the Other: there must be something lacking in the Other also, so that the dimension of desire can be present. This lack and therefore this desire, are a necessary

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<sup>21</sup> Jean Michel.Vappereau, *Le velle de la séparation*, Buenos-Aires - Paris, 2009.

Original quote translated by the author: “Après l’aliénation et son *vel* ( ‘ou’ en français), nous traitons de la définition donnée par Lacan dans ses *Écrits*, de la seconde opération fondamentale cette fois, dite par lui séparation ‘où il convient de formuler la causation du sujet’ dans un procès qui voit le *vel* faire retour en *velle*”

<sup>22</sup> Jaques Lacan, *Position de l’Inconscient, Ecrits* (vol.1) Editions du Seuil. Paris, p. 839

<sup>23</sup> Ibid p. 843

<sup>24</sup> Colette Soler, *The Subject and the Other, Reading Seminar XI: Lacan’s Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: the Paris Seminars in English*, edited by Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Janus, State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 49.

condition for the Name of the Father to occupy its place as the S1 in the chain of signifiers, and for the inscription of the subject in the Symbolic Order to take place.

Pura Cancina, an Argentinian psychoanalyst, discussed the creation of the lack.<sup>25</sup> Within the context of the alienation to the signifier of the Other, she told us about the production of what she called “*el borramiento*” of the subject - an erasing, an effacing, an *aphanisis*; she emphasized the importance of thinking not only of the effect of *aphanisis* but of its function: the possibility of appropriating oneself the *aphanisis* effect, “carves” the lack in the other. This is what happens in the game of hide-and-seek for example; P. Cancina spoke about the “*auto-borramiento*” the artist Yayoi Kusama creates in her art when she covers all surfaces with dots. In my opinion, this kind of “erasing” is also what is at stake in Wolfson’s “*cérémonial de transformation en langue étrangère*” [*ceremonial of transformation into foreign language*].

Lacan states: “It is in this point of lack, that the desire of the subject is constituted;”<sup>26</sup> he also states: “to the *vel* of alienation, there is only one exit - the way of desire.”<sup>27</sup>

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Let us return to the original question regarding the relationship between the acquisition of (a) foreign language(s) and the logical operation of separation.

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<sup>25</sup> Pura Cancina, “*Portmanteau Words*”, Après-Coup Psychoanalytic Association, *Savoir faire in Psychoanalysis*, New York, September 21, 2013

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Lacan, Seminar XI, Ed. Norton, p. 219

<sup>27</sup> *ibid* p. 224

According to Lacan, the phallus is a signifier which represents what we lose when we enter the world of language, it represents the loss tied to the fact that sexuality is caught in language, it represents what will always be lacking, what will always be out of reach. For Lacan, the neurotic wants to be the phallus for the mother. If the Oedipal process unfolds optimally, the intervention of the father prevents the child from assimilating itself with the object of the mother's demand. It distances the child from the mother, it gives the child possibilities of leaving the universe of the mother; the child gives up wanting to be the phallus for the mother - and the mother gives up wanting the child to be the phallus for her; this renunciation itself is what Lacan refers to as the symbolic castration. The phallus becomes more of a signification for what is missing, a symbol of desire. It is within this dialectical movement that the Paternal Metaphor takes place. The desire of the mother is substituted with the Name of the Father and the subject can enter the symbolic order.

Wolfson was placed in the position of being the phallus for his mother. He could not be a subject because he was the object of her desire and of her *jouissance*; there was no gap, no lack operating where the Name of the Father could be inscribed. He was alienated by and within the mother language itself. I am also suggesting the emergence in Wolfson of the "velle!", the "want-to-get-himself-out", the willingness to pay the necessary price in order to change position vis-à-vis the Other, the necessary condition for the constitution as subject. The "want" is there when, as a very young man, he repeatedly "escapes" [*il s'échappe*] from the psychiatric hospitals where his mother has him committed, when he "develops a passion" [*il se passionne*] for the study of several foreign languages he has chosen, when he works at acquiring his linguistic

knowledge by developing intricate and unique learning strategies, a “*savoir*” which brings about the “*cérémonie*” and of course, the writing in French of a book about his trajectory and his creation.

Looking at Wolfson’s trajectory - from the time and place where he is spoken, where he is inhabited and possessed by language up to the time and place when he gains access to his own speech -, I consider his writing as an account of the constitution of a subject, an account of the search for and access to his “*sinthomatic* solution”; clearly, his writing is, in itself, part of the *sinthome* he invented, his way of creating an articulation between the position of alienation in the field of the Other, and the act of separation.

I suggest that when he combines foreign languages, he creates new signifiers; these new signifiers liberate him from the *aphanistic* effect of the set of signifiers that originally came from the primordial Other. We can view his writing as an “inscription of the new” which renders possible the introduction of the Name of the Father (the Paternal Metaphor) and the inscription in the Symbolic Order. In this way, he is putting into place the Name of the Father at the place of the S1; there is creation of a *third*. Like Kusama, like Garouste and many other artists, Wolfson created a unique way of fabricating for himself (“*de se bricoler*”) a repair in the knotting of the three registers, a way to hold them together. We might actually refer here to a “*suppléance*” of the Name of the Father, something which, so to speak, stands in for it.

In the last chapter, the *Schizo* reflects on changes which are occurring in him: he is having to “*modify*” his “*pejorative conclusions*” [*modifier ses conclusions péjoratives*]

about his parents and to own his “*distrustful tendencies*” [*tendances méfiantes*]; he mentions a “*young woman he loves without ever speaking to her*” [*une jeune fille qu’il aime sans jamais lui parler*] who speaks English, French and German; he acknowledges that his mother uses the “*judéo-allemand*” more and more often to address him; he recognizes that he cannot change the world and that he is trying to get used to it, in Lacan’s words, “*de s’en dépatouiller*” (*of muddling through*). Finally, he adds that his fear of eating has subsided, that his mother-language has become more and more “*bearable*” [*supportable*] since he has been pursuing his “*linguistic games*” [*ses jeux linguistiques*] and that he hopes “*he will be able, some day, to use the famous English language in a normal way*” [*qu’il sera capable, un jour, d’employer normalement le fameux idiome anglais*].

Wolfson ends his book with an acknowledgement of what he owes (of a symbolic debt) and enigmatically - and not without humor - with an ellipsis: “*the author wants to thank those he must thank and to dedicate his book to the meriting people of the past, of the present and of the future, presuming ...*”.<sup>28</sup> Strikingly, he addresses the Other from the position of the author, the author of the quest for and of the acquisition of a “*savoir*” about himself. It is the position of the one who enunciates and writes. By re-naming himself from “*the Schizo*” of the entire book, to “*the author*”, Wolfson underlines the distance and the space (*l’écart*) he has created between the two positions, through his act. Even though he uses the third person in his book, I believe he is, as “*the author*”, using or at least foreshadowing the “*I*” (*le “je”*).

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<sup>28</sup> Original text: *L’auteur enfin tient à remercier ceux qu’il doit remercier et à dédier son livre aux gens méritants du passé, du présent et de l’avenir en présumant ...*

Referring to the third moment of logical time, the time to conclude, the time of the “*assertion subjective*”, Lacan states: “There, the logical subject is none other than the personal form of the subject of knowledge, which can only be expressed through ‘I’ ”.<sup>29</sup> When Wolfson is ready - actually twenty years later - after his mother’s death, he will publish a second book written in the first person. The title appears on the cover of the book as follows:

*“My mother,  
Musician,  
Has died of malignant malady at midnight,  
Tuesday trough Wednesday,  
In the middle of the month of May one thousand977,  
At the memorial mouroir<sup>30</sup> In Manahttan”.*<sup>31</sup>

Lacan uses the example of Julius Cesar’s crossing of the Rubicon to illustrate his notion that the subject who enters the Act and the subject who exits the Act are not the same subject; the subject of the entrance of analysis is not the same as the subject of the end of analysis. In a similar way, the *Schizo* is not the same subject as the *author* of the *Schizo*.

In his “Hommage à Marguerite Duras”, Lacan says: the psychoanalyst must remember that “in his work, the artist always precedes him and he does not have to play

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<sup>29</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI*, Ed. Norton, p. 205. “Le sujet logique n’y est autre que la forme personnelle du sujet de la connaissance, celui qui ne peut être exprimé que par “je””.

<sup>30</sup> a pejorative French noun for a place where people are left to die.

<sup>31</sup> Louis Wolfson,  
*Ma mère,  
Musicienne,  
Est morte de maladie maligne à minuit,  
Mardi à mercredi,  
Au milieu du mois de Mai mille977  
Au mouroir mémorial  
À Manhattan*

Editions Attila, Paris, 2012. [A first version had been published in 1984 by Navarin].

the psychologist where the artist paves the way for him.” He adds: “Marguerite Duras knows, without me, what I teach”.<sup>32</sup>

I will end by quoting part of a dialogue which takes place between the *Schizo* and one of two francophone workers he has heard speaking to each other in the yard next to his mother’s house from his opened window. After a long and difficult struggle which lasted several weeks, he has finally gone out to the yard, moved by the desire to speak French, a language he has never yet spoken with anyone:

*Worker*: - “how is it going?

*Schizo*: - how are you?

*Worker*: - ok, ok ...”

..... (a bit later)

*Worker*: - “what kind of work do you do?

*Schizo*: - I just study a few languages.

*Worker*: - which languages?

*Schizo*: - for the most part, French, German, Hebrew and Russian.

*Worker*: - All that? that’s a lot! ... I lift my hat up to you!

*Schizo*: - but I don’t get any money for that” ... regretted the psychotic out loud. Right away, he continued: “but I **exist!**”, happy to be using this last word of which he had recently discovered that the “x” is pronounced “gz” and not, as he had always thought “ks”.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Jaques Lacan, *Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras, du ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, Ornicar, Revue du Champ freudien 34, Paris, 1985. p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> Louis Wolfson, *Le Schizo et Les Langues*, Connaissance de l’Inconscient, Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1970. p. 191-192

*Worker (W)*: - “ça va?

*Schizo (S)*: - comment allez-vous?

*W* - ça va, ça va ...

*W* - quelle sorte de travail faites-vous? ...

*S* - je ne fais guère rien qu’étudier quelques langues

*W* - quelles langues?

*S* - pour la plupart le français, l’allemand l’hébreu et le russe

*W* - tout ça? c’est beaucoup! ... je soulève mon chapeau à vous !

*S* - mais on ne me donne pas de l’argent pour ça, le psychotique regretta tout haut. Aussitôt il continua: “ mais **j’existe!**”, heureux d’employer ce dernier vocable dont il avait depuis peu découvert que le x se prononce gz et non, comme il avait toujours pensé ks ...”

We can assume that Louis Wolfson was aware of his sources, as the *Schizo* essentially says to the worker: “I learn foreign languages, therefore, I exist”.

Annie Muir, LCSW  
December 12, 2013  
New York.

## ADDENDUM 1

Although in and of itself, the grammar of Wolfson’s writing deserves a lot more attention, I want to highlight the following points, which I regard as points of departure for further work:

- In the dedication at the end of his book, Wolfson the author addresses the “meriting people of the past, the present and the future”. These three moments of time correspond to the main tenses of the indicative mood of French grammar, a mood also referred to in English as the “*realis* mood”. Of the four moods of French grammar, - indicative, conditional, subjunctive and impérative - , the indicative is the mood of “maximal actualization”<sup>34</sup> , the mood which “inscribes action in a real world”.<sup>35</sup> When the indicative is used, there is no room for uncertainty or doubt, which are usually expressed with the conditional or the subjunctive (what English grammar may refer to as the “*irrealis* mood”, i.e.: the mood used to express something “not known to be the case in reality”<sup>36</sup>). For the most part, Wolfson doesn’t use either the present or the

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<sup>34</sup> Wikipedia, definitions of moods of the English grammar

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*

future tenses of the indicative mode in his book. He frequently uses the extremely formal “*passé simple*” of classical literature and, in a very striking way, the conditional which is used in general to express something “uncertain and submitted to a condition”<sup>37</sup>; the conditional is usually accompanied by a conditional clause introduced by “if”. In French, the conditional is referred to as “*le mode de l’imaginaire*” (the mood of the imaginary). Wolfson’s use of the conditional however is very unique: it is not accompanied by a conditional clause, it doesn’t imply any specific condition other than “if it were real”. He uses it almost like a past tense; his choice of that mood may well serve the purpose of adding a degree of “veiling” capacity to his writing, a degree of protection from the Real in which he has been taken. His use of the conditional directly evokes the manner in which French children tell an imaginary story which could begin for example with “on serait dans la forêt, il ferait nuit et il neigerait ...”.<sup>38</sup> This aspect of Wolfson’s writing is well illustrated in the chapter called “*Episode of the Prostitute*” [*Épisode de la prostituée*]: “it would be a saturday night at the beginning of June. He would be walking around for a couple of hours on the 6th and 7th avenues]... [he would recognize a few more or less notorious whores [...] [he would have grabbed his partner’s forearms [...]”<sup>39</sup>. Interestingly, there is a striking correspondence in this chapter between the potentially threatening content (the *Schizo*’s dealings with the

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> “*We would be in the woods, it would be night time and it would be snowing ...*”

<sup>39</sup> Louis Wolfson, *Le Schizo et Les Langues*, p. 75  
*Ce serait un samedi soir au commencement de juin. Il se promènerait un couple d’heures dans les 6e et 7e avenues [...] il reconnaîtrait quelques putains plus ou moins notoires [...] il aurait saisi les avant-bras de sa partenaire[...]*”

*“prostituée”*) and the higher than average frequency of use of the *“mode de l’imaginaire”*.

- Surprising “anglicisms” contrast throughout the book with Wolfson’s otherwise highly sophisticated use of French. The reader frequently finds, for example, the expressions *“un couple d’heures”* [a couple of hours] used in the place of *“quelques heures”* [a few hours], which makes the expression in French sound like *“a pair of hours”*; another example is the expression *“je soulève mon chapeau à vous”* [I take my hat off to you], used in the place of *“je vous lève mon chapeau”*, which sounds very awkward in French. I suspect that these “anglicisms” are intentional on Wolfson’s part and represent for him a playful way to appropriate the French language, to make it his own with a *“clin d’oeuil”* (a wink) to his reader<sup>40</sup>. I see these “anglicisms” as Wolfson’s way of playing with the two languages and in the space he created for himself between them. Earlier (p. 21), I mentioned Wolfson’s reference to the healing power of his *“linguistic games”*. I see them in part as a tool he uses to control the distance from and closeness to the mother language. One could perhaps say that Wolfson is using the French language as a transitional object. Winnicott says: “The transitional object and the transitional phenomena start each human being off with what will always be important for them, i.e. a neutral area of experience which will not be challenged.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> the author is reminded of children she taught, who delighted in creating similar kinds of “voluntary anglicisms” when speaking French and “voluntary frenchisms” when speaking English.

<sup>41</sup> Winnicott, D.W. *Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena*, I.J.P, 1953, XXXIV p.95, quoted in Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Ed. Norton, trans. by D.Nicholson-Smith, New York, 1973, p. 465

## ADDENDUM 2

During the course of my research for this paper, I stumbled across something very intriguing in a psychiatry article on schizophrenia: it referred to Metaglossotherapy (or MGT) and defined it as “the method of treating schizophrenic patients by teaching them a new foreign language.” The article was citing, in connection with MGT, a “decrease of negative and positive symptoms” and an “improvement of relationships with the environment.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> V. Maciulis, S. Marceviene, K. Dapsys, V. Banaitis, J. Utkuviene, *European Psychiatry*, volume 24, supplement 1, 01/2009.

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