

## ON THE ORIGINS OF LANGUAGE

### Vocals and rhythmic aspects of the primary relationship and its absence in autistic states

Suzanne Maiello

#### Introduction

Psychoanalytic thinking has focused its own research especially in the visual aspects of mental activity: much has been written on the imagination, on oneiric images on ideograms and pictograms. Much less has been thought in the auditory and vocal aspects and their role in both the early psychic development and in the psychoanalytic work. The world of sounds was so alien to Freud that he didn't have any difficulty in describing himself as *ganz und gar unmusikalisch* (totally unmusical). He testifies it in a letter to Fliess "I 'm venturing into the chapter of the relationships between sounds with which I have always found myself uncomfortable, because I don't have the most elementary knowledge of the subject due to my lack of acoustic sensitivity" (1898).

Actually, with the postulate of *floating attention* (1912), Freud properly ventures in the area shunned by his "rational bias". He underlines the importance of including not only the discursive and imaginative elements in the patient communications, implicitly claiming the "attention on a type of listening to .... encouraging the mind backwards into the body..... a suspended listening between sound and meaning.... "(Di Benedetto, 2000, 96). In the 50s, after the fascist period, when the interest in the childhood's world had been intensified, Isaacs reflects on the ways that allow the analyst "to draw from the behavior observing the evidence of the psychic process" (1952.146). Among the particularities to be observed, she names the language idiosyncrasy... the tone of the voice, the pace of discourse

and its variations (1952.147). It's still more surprising that Isaacs herself, has omitted in her subsequent description of the first stages of the small child introjective activity, any reference to the hearing experience.

Bion the great explorer of the mental processes that underlie the thought production, writes about the concept of alpha-function, that it "... transforms the sensorial impressions into alpha-elements which have a similarity, although they are not directly the same thing, with the visual images that are familiar in our dreams "(1962.28). However, Bion also reflects on the differences between the visual vertex and that of the other senses and directs a particular attention to what he calls "auditory mental counterpart ", differentiating the noises of the musical sounds. He says, opening a new horizon, that the alpha-elements haven't *only* an ideographic character, but that they include "visual images, the hearing schemes and the olfactory ones (1962, 58). When he parallels the functioning of the mental apparatus which thinks thoughts with the digestive apparatus that digests food, extending the analogy to other apparatus, including "the auditory apparatus, to which are tied transformations as music <-> noise "(1963 , 118).

At this point it appears the question of the meaning of the first expressions of the child's voice in the course of the development of the symbolic function and of the speech. The baby's first sounds and babblings are undoubtedly pre-verbal vocal expressions, but not for this necessarily pre-symbolic. He rather described them as proto-symbolic. Those vowel sounds that are born in "the theater of the mouth" (Meltzer, 1986) tend towards a yet implicit sense, but not because of that nonexistent. Langer writes that they connote the musical forms as "unconsummated symbols": "language is a very high form of symbolism: the presentational forms are far below the discursive level and the appreciation of the meaning is probably earlier than its expression. The earliest manifestation of any tendency to produce symbols is probably a mere *sense of significance* attached to certain objects, shapes or sounds.... "(1951, 150). We could say borrowing Bion: the first positive accomplishments of a sense preconception.

In *Explorations in Autism*, Meltzer (1975, 220-221) makes a list of five indispensable conditions for the learning of verbal language and its use in the communication with the other: It's necessary that the mental functioning would be sufficiently ordered and would be

able to form oneiric thoughts which would be in some way fit for communication and not simply would require to be evacuated (Bion)

Meltzer refers not only to the need of learning the verbal language but to the existence of an also primitive function capable to start the thought process, the *dream-work-alpha* mentioned by Bion (1992), but in particular, he underlines the musical aspect of the language as a basis for the lexical language. Also the author names the indispensable meeting between the desire to communicate of the little one "speaking" and a listener ready to receive his messages. These transformations to be verified must *"find an object in the external world... as to require the vocalization of this internal process and that the communication take place*, i.e. a listener capable of hearing the child's "music", or respectively of a patient, even if at first it can be hidden in his silence or in an echolalic language or shouting, apparently meaningless.

We'll see how early these elements are present in the normal development and therefore how deep the disorder can be when one of these elements lacks. This work's subject is about all the sonorous functions in all its forms, and particularly those early auditory-vocal experiences, including prenatal, towards the search for a part of the position that occupies the musical scale, broadly, in the development process of mental functions and secondly the role played by sonorous and rhythmic elements in the child's communication with the primary figures of reference from birth and on the modality with which they establish what can be described as *"preverbal dialogues"* (Maiello, 2011).

The following dream, dreamed by a young woman who had been raised, being a child, by a beloved nanny gives evidence of a dialectical relationship between the visual dimension and the auditory dimension:

After the death of the nanny I've seen her often in dreams. Every time, although her image shrank and eventually vanished. Then, one night, I dreamed of her voice, that way she had of speaking, as when I listened to her when I was a little girl whispering the shopping accounts. In the dream she said she was giving up and left. I knew I wouldn't see her again. I woke up and cried all night long. But now there's her voice, and with the voice she has also left her image. I won't lose her anymore.

The voice as a substrate on which it's supported and in which the image is rooted, and of that that's in this dream the vision brings nourishment. The foundation- voice: the voice that's in the base, at the origin. Where and when that foundation is formed?

*The prenatal child hears us – the sonorous object*

Since the 80s, the long *Infant Observation* experience has given me the chance to find the undoubted abilities of the newborn. I have begun to wonder about prenatal roots of mental life, as I found unthinkable that it was the birth itself that would produce in the newborn, from one time to another the undeniable psychophysical and relational skills. I have tried, following the evolutionary process of the five senses, to take their respective potentialities as proto-mental catalyzers. Since the two receptors intangible senses, sight and hearing, the first doesn't receive many stimuli before birth, I found that the ear could occupy a prominent position in the protopsychic development process of the prenatal child. The visual encounter with the mother takes place after the birth; instead, the hearing one takes already place during the second half of the intrauterine life.

Thus, in previous works I have tried to deepen the understanding of the auditory aspects of the prenatal baby experience through the study of the numerous investigations carried out in this field. In particular, I have explored the meaning that the mother's voice could have for his proto-mental development. I have come to hypothesize a true and proper meeting in an auditory-vocal level between the unborn child and the mother. I have proposed the term *sonorous object* to describe the ensemble of the prenatal reminiscences, sonorous and rhythmic quality that the child keeps in his memory after birth (Maiello, 1993).

*The archaic aspects of the sonorous object-the body rhythms*

At the time of birth, the child suddenly loses the sonorous universe of the intrauterine

environment in which he has been immersed from the start of the pre-natal life. However he keeps in his mind the traces of the existence of that universe.

Therefore, prenatal auditory experiences of rhythmical character seem not only be registered in a neutral mnemonic deposit, but they seem to be linked to the *emotions*. If the return to the rhythm lost at birth makes stop the crying of the newborn, its pre-natal presence must form part of a group of auditory and/or vibratory sensations related to the continuity of the being, and, instead, its absence must be perceived as a discontinuity in the being. In other words, these rhythms should meet on an internal proto-object perceived as good, i.e. reliable in its continuity. Rhythm structures time.

*Prenatal listening of the maternal voice-the sonorous object core*

Unlike rhythmic body sounds, which are *continuous and impersonal*, the maternal voice perceived by the prenatal-baby, is *discontinuous* and unmistakably *personal*. As individual the mother communicates to the child, through the volume, the timbre, the cadence, and the rhythm of her voice, not just aspects of her personality but also the fluctuations of her emotional states. The mother's voice faces the pre-natal-baby, from the moment he is capable of perceiving it, with the *otherness* principle, the other with which one can enter into a relationship, the *object-not-me* par excellence. From the bottom of the "*continuous bass*" (*basso continuo*) of the rhythmic bodily noises the sound of her voice stands out. The baby not only hears it but he listens to it and responds with the means he has, i.e. a change in the cardiac rhythm, proof of his attention, and with the movement increase during the waking period. As soon as he's born, the child recognizes the maternal voice, although if because of the aerial transmission, its timbre is not identical to that perceived when he was immersed in the aquatic environment. The voice still seems to keep enough elements of melodic, rhythmic and timbre constancy as to make it recognizable. This means that the maternal "music" has left traces in the still baby's rudimentary memory. He recognizes it. And the fact of recognizing it, in turn, provides the basis for a new knowledge,

that of the mother's aerial voice and the encounter with his own voice, born with his first breath.

One of the characteristics common to all mother's voices is, unlike the body rhythms the *discontinuity*. The voice speaks, the voice is silent. It alternates times of presence and absence that are probably not always in tune with the child's need that is listening and is stimulated by its presence.

This voice being present could be the first source of comfort, but also it could give a sensation of absence or vacuum when it isn't heard, setting the following empty space in which for Bion the thought will be born (1967). It's also the space in which will appear a language having the ability to re-evolve, or rediscover -either by the voice first, and by the words afterwards- the lost object naming it. What's lacking generates desire. There, where desire exists, already exists a glimmer of consciousness of *another place of another oneself*. We wondered if there might be, during pre-natal life, moments of differentiation between "me" the one who listens and "you" the one who speaks, a proto-experience that could be of a separation or of a meeting and of a relationship?

My hypothesis is that the mother's voice is the main "external stimulus" for the prenatal-baby proto-mental development. The real and own material around which that internal proto-object, that I have called *sonorous object*, is formed. The presence and the voice quality are as important as their absence. And it's the *discontinuity* that over time introduces the principle of *difference* and could have for the pre-natal baby a catalyst function for the first glimmers of mental activity appearance.

*The birth of the relationship - Prenatal rhythmic tuning*

Meltzer writes: It seems likely that in the prehistory of the human race the first imagination traces (...) were expressed in the form of song-and-dance (1986, 206). In ancient rituals, songs and dances were held and celebrated even today in groups, never alone. What the author states in relation to the phylogenetic evolution of humans would also be valid for ontogenetic prehistory? And if even the prenatal baby "kicking" and "shaking" were not only a solitary attitude, but

sometimes a juxtaposition in a proto-form of relationship with the mother?: the mother that "sings" and the baby that "dances"?: a sort of pre-verbal *co-construction*.

A study carried on in two groups of new Yorkers newborns, one of North American babies and the other of Chinese children, seems to confirm this hypothesis. The research shows that the spontaneous movements of newborn Chinese babies had a significantly slower rhythm than the North American newborns. The linguistic analysis of rhythmic and musical characteristics of the Chinese and of the Anglo-American has demonstrated that the speed difference and the rhythm movement of the babies from the two ethnic groups was respectively similar to the difference between the pace and the rhythm and of the Chinese language and the Anglo- American one (Freedman, D.G & Freedman, N., 1969)

This research confirms in principle the hypothesis the ability of the pre-natal baby to make a transmodal transposition. The cited example is about the transposition of the rhythmic cadence of the mother tongue to the rhythm of the movements of the baby. But it isn't a simple imitation in the postnatal here and now, as long as the baby movements are observable in the absence of the mother

We have hypothesized that the mother's voice can be lived by the prenatal baby, because of his characteristic of avoiding its power by its presence or absence, as passing moments of proto-consciousness as an *object not-ego*. But he doesn't seem to suffer the absence only passively. The baby's "dance" that is tuned to the rhythm of the mother's "song" appears as an activity directed to carry out a meeting, a reciprocity proto-form, that Trevarthen described as *dialogic convergence* (2005). This term synthesizes the relational dynamics, the double movement of two beings that meet themselves, both actively, without melting in an undifferentiated unity, and maintaining the possibility of reciprocity, precisely because of their ability to remain being two. (Maiello, 2010, 2011).

*The word for the other – the word of the other (the voices in the Infant Observation)*

The reciprocal dialogue is only possible if we accept the reality of our separation. The *other* was born with the initially diffuse awareness of being a different *ego* and by his own right. The word is always for another, be it an external object or an internal object and with the word for the other also appears the possibility to listen and to hear the word of the other, uncontrollable in its presence or absence, and in its quality and quantity. If we observe the proto-conversations between a mom and her baby, even a few weeks after his birth, we find between the two of them a rhythmic alternation of the production of sounds or words and of the listening between emission and reception. We note that even when the baby produces a sound or babbling, the mother imitates him and quickly changes the baby's sonorous production, and maybe she says, " what are you trying to tell me with your little speeches"... In this light variation and in the verbal commentary is the presence of the other one in relation to the baby, this other one who listens, understands, but that at the same time, introduces something different, the otherness.

*The discovery of the voice*

The use of the voice and with it the ability to produce sounds, in the dimension of the existence that begins at the birth moment, is a subject that hasn't been too much thought till now. The dialogue between the pre-natal baby and the mother's voice is asymmetric: he feels her voice and responds with the means at his disposal, but not with the voice. It's at the time of with his first breathing that the possibility of a vocal dialogue "*alla pari*" appears (between peers. T). It's with the voice that the baby conquers, at the time of birth and with the beginning of the breath, the power to affirm his own presence at a sound level, to call and to communicate with others: crying, screaming, sobbing, vocalizing, singing, even recalling past experiences. Even a baby of a few days, of a few weeks or of a few months "talks" to the people of his world. This remark shows the discovery that a two months baby girl makes of her own voice in a dialogue with her mother:

Giulia has recently nursed her mother's breast milk. She's in a little chair that slightly rocks to the rhythm of her arms and legs movement, while listening to the mother that leaned towards the baby talking to her softly. Giulia responds with big smiles, and the rhythm of her motor activity grows. Something very intense inside seems to try to be expressed. She's staring at her mother. Giulia smiles while moving her mouth and tongue until a small gurgling appears. The pace of her arms and legs movements further increases. The mother continues to speak in a gentle tone, alternating with brief silences, as if she wanted to give the baby a chance to answer. Giulia's facial expression is highly communicative. The baby opens up her mouth, moving her tongue in all directions and finally emits a little sharp joyous sound. Suddenly, arms and legs stop, and also the rolling of the pushchair. For an instant the eyes of Giulia leave her mother's face wandering, as looking for something. Her facial expression shows surprise and wonder. The girl is motionless but vigilant, her attention seems now to turn inward as if she were listening to the echo of the extraordinary sound that has just come out of her mouth.

This observation brings us closer to the understanding of the intense emotional and communicative valence of the vocal interaction between the mother and the baby, and of the motivation of the newly born to use the voice and articulate the sounds that are the raw material from which emerge the babbling, and finally the verbal language.

*The internalized maternal singing*

Another observation shows the precocious ability of a newborn using *the memory* of the mother's voice as a reliable internal sound object:

John, a two months baby that smiles and vocalizes very much, when the mother puts him to sleep in the stroller sings to him nursery rhymes, and the baby responds by moving legs and arms. When the rhythm of his movements is slower, the mother turns him on a side; she covers him with a blanket and pushes the stroller back and forth rhythmically

while she softly sings a lullaby. The baby accompanies the mother's song producing small sounds with his mouth closed, and slowly falls asleep.

Four months later, John has been weaned and the mother returned to work. During the day an aunt takes care of the child. When she puts him in the stroller for a nap, the child grasps the blanket tightly with one hand, while with the other caresses his face. With the voice he produces the same sweet continuous sounds with which, he accompanied his Mum lullabies. Alone he sings softly until his breathing slows down, his arms falls along the body and his eyes get closed.

(Maiello, 1997a).

John seems to have learned alone to sing the lullaby to himself. First, he has heard and felt the voice of the mother and even his own, and he had introjected the experience of their "duet". At the age of six months, he had become capable of recreate his voice, in the absence of the mother, a ditty able to accompany him to sleep.

*"Preverbal " dialogue between a child and his mother*

The following example shows how the empathic echo and its variations and how the word born of the maternal *reverie* can give relief to a suffering newborn.

A baby of twelve days suffers from colic and is shaken by hiccups that contract his whole little body. The mother comforts him and she wonders aloud, how her baby should be feeling: "... a big volcano... everything must be burning inside you ...". The following week the colic are always strong after breastfeeding, but not as much as at the beginning. The baby makes a hiccup; afterwards he stops, then makes another hiccup and he stops again. The mother waits with him and when another hiccup appears, she also makes "hic". Around the end of the month, the baby makes a hiccup, the mother imitates him, the baby looks at her, he makes a hiccup, the baby laughs, the mother repeats again " hic " afterwards there's a pause . The child makes another hiccup and looks at the mother's face. When he's ten weeks, this exchange has become a game in which the child "observes" his own hiccups,

looks at the mother's face and both laugh at the appearance of the expected "hic" (Urwin, 2012, 79-80).

The mother has heard and accepted the suffering "word" of his son. The echo, its variations, and the word of consolation have diminished the suffering till transform it into a shared small game.

*The denied dialogue*

On the other hand, in the following observation, the mother had great difficulty to recognize the proto-conversations with her child, "the word of the other and for the other". This girl is the second child; the mother has a very conflicted relationship with the first child who is now three years old. After a few weeks of being born, the girl starts making her first vocalizations in a particularly active and articulate way, the mother repeats these sounds exactly imitating the intonation, as if she would be ironically returning the baby her vocal communications. The interaction turns out to be an echolalic, adhesive and saturated of sounds mirror, that lose their proto-relational meaning. There's no exchange, no variations, no *dialogue*, neither at the level of the vocal variations melody in the vocal productions of the girl, or at the level of maternal verbalization of the sounds uttered by the baby girl.

The mother seemed to seek defensively, on a vocal-auditory level, to avoid any differentiation between she and the girl, perhaps in an attempt to prevent the appearance of hostile feelings as those that had overwhelmed her with the older child. The girl shouldn't be *another* but the same even on vocal level. The unison that denied any difference seemed to be the only solution, because any "*duet*" should have contained an intolerable threat of dissonance, linked to the recognition of the separation from and towards the girl. Even the fact that the observer had not heard until the age of five months the name of the girl seemed to be the result of the maternal fusional fantasy and of her intense separation anxieties. The mother pronounced the name of the girl, for the first time, five months after of exclusive breastfeeding, when the grated apple was introduced in the girl's diet. This "other" food seemed to have allowed the mother to recognize the girl as another person

having her own name, after the prolonged union illusion enhanced by the maternal fantasy of "twinning" even on the vocal level.

If it's true that in normal development not only the word but also the vocalization and babbling enroll in the natural human predisposition to the encounter, they are born *with* the other, are *for* the other and, consequently, *of the* other.

*The development of symbolic function and of the verbal language*

At the moment we see the vocalizations as an activity both expressive of an internal state and communicative in relation to another-of-itself in the external world or in the inner world, and if we consider the vocalism as a source of expertise that can be used for new learning containing those precedents, but that also explore possible expansions and enrichments, the question of the principles of language takes us back in time to the beginning of life itself. It seems that vocalism communicative potential is rooted in the origins of the proto-mental activity in the remote times in which a memory is formed, a continent able to preserve and to treasure past experiences and learn from experience. The vocalism and the potential of the verbal language derive from the same source and constantly redirect from one to another.

The Chinese and American newly born babies "dance" to the rhythm of their prenatal mother's song. At eight weeks, Julia uses the vocal language to talk with her mother and in another tonality, with the father. At six months, Juan sings to himself the lullaby recalling the singing of the absent mother. The language was created in the relationship and is, at the same time, *product* and *source* of mental activity, in an coil emotional cognitive learning circuit that, starting from a *proto-symbolic* potential moves towards the ability for real and proper symbolic representation.

*The power of speech, expression and messenger of the symbolic function*

An extract from the *infant observation* of a child of 22 months shows how the access to verbal language, or rather to the ability to explore the animate and inanimate world *nominating* objects and *confronting* them, finding differences and similarities, can open new worlds to the child and leads him to the creation of countless mentally new ligaments that are always more complex:

Daniel takes a book and sits beside me on the couch. The boy observes carefully an image and points out with the right hand finger a figure and says "hand". Afterwards he observes his left hand and shows it to me saying "hand", following the gesture with an affirmative nod, stressing that the hand is truly a hand. Afterwards pointing out my left hand says "Raia hand" (the name of the observer is Treier), immediately after he looks for my right hand, when he has found it, he, with conviction, says again "hand". Now his eyes look down. He seems to reflect a moment and says in an interrogative tone "foot?". When he has found my left foot he exclaims "foot". He continues searching until he also gets to see my right foot and to nominate it saying "pie".

Satisfied, he observes again an image in his book. He points out with his finger a little piece of moon and he says "moon". Later, his gaze will rest on a piece of cardboard moon that is attached to the window. Immediately relates both objects. Pointing out with his finger to the moon in the window, he says "Moon", then returns to the Moon in the book and then showing it to me he says "moon"...

The older sister draws with her finger a shape on the window's fogged glass and says "look, it looks like a dolphin". Daniel observes the shape carefully, and then he makes another association. With his finger, he points out a balloon having the shape of a dolphin that is hanged at the foot of her sister's bed and he also says "end" ("anche fino"- in Italian and not "anche delfino" T.).

He returns to his book and leafs through, looking for other moons.

Daniel is now able to communicate with verbal language . He's able to nominate objects and to form very brief phrases. The ability to nominate shows the presence of the symbolic thought. The name *is because* of the object but it isn't the object. This qualitative leap becomes possible when a feeling of oneself has been developed. The experience and the acceptance of the own separation are the conditions to develop the sense of identity that step by step goes together with the ability to recognize the otherness

of the other . The differentiation ability leads in its turn to the possibility of recognizing *analogies* and opens the way to a more abstract thinking.

The search for the child is not limited to verify the body schema and its correspondence with that of the observer in the external reality. Daniel gives another step. He starts with the image of a hand shown in a book, he confronts it in the physical reality with his own hand and with that of the observer, then he returns to the book's image. In his inner world, there is a shape "hand", thanks to which he's able to recognize the hands as hands. With the trajectory of his gaze, the child mentally designs triangles relating the hand on the book with the internal image of "hand" and with his particular hand, extending the connection to the observer's hand and recognizing it as his simile.

Afterwards, Daniel makes a similar association between the moon's book and the moon fixed in the window. Both are representations of the celestial object "moon" that isn't visible in this moment but that exists as an image in the child's memory. It's this image internalized that allows him to recognize the analogy between the two representations of the moon. He has a memory of the moon, an *Erinnerung*. The German term that comes from *innen* indicates that the evoked memory is inside the mind. It's the same process that takes place with the two dolphins but in this case, Daniel still goes forwards. He doesn't say only "end", he says "also end." The word "also" is to indicate an analogy, a similarity, a substantial affinity that the child can recognize, among the forms of the dolphin on the tarnished glass and the dolphin-shaped balloon. Both representations, as in the case of the moon, are caused by an absent object, both are reproductions that can be related between them by means of a mental image, and they finally can be named with the verbal language, proof of their access to the symbolic function.

### ***The absence of vital rhythms and communicative vocalism in autistic states***

#### *The rhythmic stereotypies*

In the autism states the experience of space as well as the experience of time with its rhythmic aspects is lacking. On the other hand the change is present in a repetitive circularity in all the child's activities. The isolation in a no-time or in a circular temporal

modality is accompanied by the absence of shared primary rhythmic patterns which are an indispensable prerequisite for the development of the deep and confident sense of being in a relationship. When Kanner (1943), that has conceptualized autism as a specific psychopathology, refers to symptomatic actions and rhythmic movements of autistic children, he uses the term in a purely descriptive sense. In reality, the autistic repetitive *stereotypies* have nothing in common with the *rhythmicity* expressed in interpersonal and intrapsychic relationships.

In the psychotherapy of these children, it isn't difficult to distinguish the stereotypies of the first shared rhythmic manifestations. The countertransference is a reliable instrument to differentiate the mental states from which a rhythmic activity arises. When the child isolates himself in his solipsistic stereotypes, the therapist feels himself excluded, bored, sleepy, sometimes irritated and even desperate. These activities are desolated and desolating caricatures of the rhythmic aspects of the primordial dialogues that move themselves in the axis of time on a reciprocal basis. The stereotypies assure the child the maintenance of the sameness (in English in the original T.), of the "continuity" and of the freezing of any vital movement.

The rejection of any change protects him from the panic born of the perception of limits, of discontinuity and consequently, of its individuation. On the contrary, the first rhythmic communication of a child that begins to emerge of the autistic state are among the most emotionally intense countertransferential experiences. The feeling is to have reached the child, albeit for the briefest moment, at profound mental levels. For these patients it seems essential to be able to make interactive experiences in the rhythm dimension, when they start to leave the totalizing control on the reality previously obtained through the auto generated stereotypies.

Tustin describes the autistic children as "broken heart" children when he writes: "Their grief goes beyond what we usually understand by the term. The feeling of having a broken heart comes from the fundamental characteristics of their being. As we have seen, the collapse "original torment" was verified when the sensuous experience of "being one", guaranteed by the "nipple-tongue" was broken and the perception of "being two" Having in mind that the rhythm of the breastfeeding had been associated with the heart beat, it was the "nipple-tongue-heart" that was broken... For these patients, the body

awareness of their individuality is experienced as an interruption of the pulsating rhythm of the continuity of their existence (going-on-being) "(1990.136).

The absence of the vocal "music"

Autistic children tend not to produce, during the first months of their life, the vocalizations, the *laeos* and the babblings that may have a dimension both communicative and proto-symbolic. In the normal development, Meltzer writes, "the *laeos* constitute a game with sounds...which are formed in the physical space of the oral cavity, used as the theater of the fantasy and of the play, a point which is in the half way between outer game and internal oneiric thought (Meltzer, 1986, 179). The autistic spectrum children, when being small, haven't "played" with the voice, haven't discovered the musical aspects of preverbal language and the vocal exchange reciprocity, as each otherness perception must be obliterated. The need, that everything must be the same, not only refers to the verbal language, to the words that can be said in an echolalic way, repeating the words of the other that had been denied in his otherness, but it also relates to the same voice that preferably flattens the mechanical cartoon voices, repeated ad infinitum: in this way, any other emotional valence of the word for another ends. . The voice itself can be used as an "autistic object". (Rhode, 1997).

"What day is today?" "Today is Saturday." "Mom, would you come?" "Yes, I'm going." In the verbal exchange between a non-autistic child and his interlocutor, the question is expressed not only by the meaning of the words, but also by the modulation of the vocal melody. With that vocal melody that remains held up with the question, the voice asks for an answer, asks to be carried along with the other's response to the "tone", musically speaking, i.e. the base tone, that of the starting point. It can't remain held up there. He needs a response that also vocally reports to earth to whom has asked the question that has to saturate the unsaturated of the doubt and of the fact of not knowing. To be able to ask a question and to be able to trust, or at least to wait for an answer, it's necessary to have accepted to be an individual himself, or to be in a state of separation that recognizes the otherness of the other and to be able to be

exposed to the risk that that response arrives late, or doesn't arrive at all. The autistic child omnipotently protects himself from each experiential risk of discovering himself alone and isolated. And this is even reflected in his "vocal music".

An autistic child generally protects himself with two kinds of stratagems to prevent each risk in relation to the other. On one hand, he'll not pose questions, avoiding remaining suspended, even at speech level, waiting for an answer he has already omnipotently saturated avoiding the question. On the other hand, if the other doesn't exist as another, it's useless to ask questions that would expose the child to the perception of his minimum need of the other and of his listening. The other stratagem is to repeat ad infinitum the same phrase that might initially have any meaning, to repeat it with an incongruous intonation, always the same, also from session to session, leaving it without any meaning, whether symbolic or communicative.

A young autistic patient, a five years old boy, capable of verbal language, had discovered looking out of the window, between one session and the other, that a balloon, tethered to its string, had been entangled in the curvature of the streetlight. The boy said, verbalizing correctly, his observation to the therapist: "Globe on the streetlight." It was a communication made to the therapist done as any other child could have done it. The therapist confirmed his observation and asked him what could have happened and why the balloon could have finished entangled on the streetlight. The boy repeated, "Balloon went away flying" and repeated this phrase several times, using the same intonation the therapist had used. In some point he said, always with the same intonation: "streetlight went away flying" confusing the subject balloon with the object streetlight, but repeating ad infinitum the meaningless phrase of the streetlight that had gone away flying. The content of the communication had lost its meaning, and the child's voice had changed the four words in a chant with a foolish repetitive melody "streetlight went flying away; streetlight went flying away ....."

The person who works with autistic children knows the boredom, the irritation and the sense of desolation that these children can make us perceive in the counter transference when they get to transform every communication in a solipsistic stereotypy. The deepest

part of our disappointment comes from the feeling that the child empties our words as well as his not only of their semantic meaning, but also of their melodic substrate in which emotions inhabit. Draining the musicality of his language as well as ours, he takes possession of it, turning it dry and making it die in the no-sense.

**From the autism monologue to the dialogue - The discovery of voice  
and of a shared rhythm**

Rosetta's clinical material -an autistic little girl who was less than five years old at the beginning of his psychotherapy- shows the importance that may have the vocal and rhythmic aspects in the therapeutic process, and how its development can be a significant signal in the changes of the child's psychic apparatus. Rosetta's parents told that before Rosetta's pregnancy, the mother had had several spontaneous abortions. They also said that Rosetta's prenatal life had also been in serious danger because of threats of abortion, but thanks to a cerclage at the fifth month, the baby was born in term. The mother had had two abortions in the first fifteen months of Rosetta's life. The girl was isolated since her birth, and the initial development of language underwent a stop after the first little words when she was more or less a year old. Then the acquired language was almost exclusively echolalic. Her rhythmic solipsistic activities -such as, for entire sessions, tapping her heels against the door of the closet on which she was sitting- kept the girl in a noisy atmosphere allowing her to exclude the outside world, including me and my attempts to enter into communication with her through the voice and the words.

*Rosetta's voices*

The vocal register Rosetta used more frequently at the start of the therapy had a sharp and artificial tonality. I knew that for hours she watched cartoons. When she was adhered in an echolalic way to the voices of the cartoons and to the dialogues of the characters, the articulation of her language was clear, the pronouns and the verbs were

correctly used, but Rosetta was totally inaccessible. When she sang the melodies she listened while watching her DVD it seemed that she was going to dissolve herself in the musical forms.

Rosetta's personal voice was a little bit more than a fleeting whisper at the start of the therapy. Her language, as well as her whole being was a liquid quality. It was as if her words were immersed in a sonorous continuity without having acquired the indispensable autonomy to shape themselves in order to establish meaningful links among them. This development could take place either in her thought and consequently in the language only if the separation process hasn't been stopped in a very early stage. Rosetta was able to clearly articulate the words when she got to form a part of the whole echolalic adhesive with the cartoon's voices, but when it was her own voice, the anguish linked to the perception of her own separation was very intense, and the words should remain piled indifferently.

It was much later, in the third year of therapy, that Rosetta's parents reported me that she was still wetting her bed. It hurt me not so much by the fact itself as by the lightness with which the late information of her primary enuresis was given to me. I tried to reflect with them about the practical interventions that could have helped Rosetta to acquire control of her sphincters also at night. After a few months, Rosetta managed to do it. At my surprise, her language simultaneously became more articulated and understandable. It was as if to bring under control the opening and closing of the urinary sphincter had found its counterpart in a more aware investiture of the mouth and in a more coordinated management of far more complex mentally tasks beginning to be represented in the oral space. Let us go back in time.

At the third month of therapy unexpectedly appears, with the same acute echolalic voice of the cartoons and the liquid fleeting whisper, a third voice. It was an eruption of vocal sounds of unexpected power with a primordial and archaic quality. They evoked voices of wild animals: the lion's roar, the cries of the hyenas, the wail of the wolves. At that time - it was generally at the beginning of the session- this petite girl stood up straight and looking directly into my eyes, she produced those powerful sounds coming from the depths of her

being. It isn't easy to describe my countertransferential feelings. To me it was the "voice of the jungle", that voice was neither crazy, nor terrifying, nor aggressive. It simply *was*, a powerful sonorous presence stating itself and it was addressed to *me* as a listener and potential interlocutor.

My perception of that vocal eruption was that Rosetta had felt it as coming from *inside* herself. The girl seemed to have had the sensation of her own body as a vibrant volume and to have discovered at body level, even before that at psychic level, the potential dimensionality of the internal spaces. This "archaic" voice was at odds regarding the defensive use she made of her voice when she gave a speech about cartoons or got tangled in her melodies musical forms. Now, it seemed that she would like to experience the continuity of her existence (going-on being) at vocal level. This gave her a sense of compactness hitherto unknown. The new sonorous basis should then become the starting point for gradually exploring the full scale of his vocal resources. The girl invented *variations* on the issue of the primordial sounds to attribute them afterwards to animals that she could *name* and to enter in contact both with ancient terrors as well as with aggressive feelings. The discovery of her vocal mobility, along with the fact that the sounds emitted were sheltered by an available and thinking "sound box", had helped Rosetta to explore new dimensions also at mental level.

*The breakdown of speech and listening alternation*

Although Rosetta had already acquired a less adhesive and more communicative language, there was still the problem of the lack of shared rhythmic connections. This fact continued making difficult any verbal exchange between us. The girl seemed to lack the awareness of temporal sequentiality of talking and listening, i.e. of the spontaneous rhythmic alternation developed in the dialogue between a mother and her child. During the session, it could happen that after a period of silence, Rosetta started talking at exactly the same time when I was about to make a remark about what she was doing that moment. I then stopped to listen to her, but she also stopped at the same moment. I then expected her to speak again. If she stayed silent and I wanted to point her with a word that

I was listening to her, she begun to talk at the same time, and once again I could not understand what she was saying.

The absence of a rhythmic alternation made any "conversation" impossible. It was as if we were both deaf, and to a certain extent, also mute. In the echolalic language, that can be equated to an *autistic form*, the separation is obliterated through the adhesive identity of the words and of its intonation, in this circumstance the potential dialogue imploded and the words melted into an indistinct sounds hodgepodge because of the absence of rhythmic connections of interpersonal reciprocity, normally developed through the time axis. Two voices reciprocally coincided and annulled themselves, and two pairs of ears became useless (Maiello, 1998).

*From echolalia to the first rhythmic and vocal shared experiences*

The following material shows, carrying it to its extreme consequences, the power of control on reality and on the relationship that the autistic child guarantees himself by the echolalic verbal modality. After nearly two years into psychotherapy Rosetta, one day, comes to session bringing with her a plush parrot containing a microphone and a loudspeaker:

The girl turns on the parrot's switch and she says a few words. The parrot repeats her words. The articulation is indistinct, but the tone of the voice is imitated to perfection. This activity lasts a little bit, with the parrot unfailingly repeating what the girl says. Rosetta is completely absorbed in her mono-dialogue, leaving me, in the mean time, totally excluded. At a certain point, I intervene trying to describe what's happening. The parrot reproduces an indistinct parody of my comment melodic line. Rosetta, imperturbable, continues talking without noticing my intervention, and I have the choice between a new attempt to say something

- knowing that the parrot would have repeated the vocal caricature of each communication of mine- or to move away in silence what would have allowed Rosetta's sonorous *autistic forms* (Tustin, 1986) to continue undisturbed.

Tustin (1986) and Alvarez (1992, 1999) describe the tenacity with which these children protect themselves against any unpredictable aspect of reality, and their tireless efforts to reproduce endlessly what's familiar to them. With the parrot, Rosetta had finally achieved her need for absolute control over any danger of change. In the autistic states the only tolerable form of reality is the sameness, the sterilizing immobilization of constancy and continuity, while the elements of variation and discontinuity what means that all that's opened to the experience of novelty, of development, of transformation and of surprise, and therefore to the encounter of another self alive, different than oneself ends excluded from the perception.

During the third year of psychotherapy, Rosetta that was already eight years old, began to show the first signs of a nascent awareness of temporality, of gaps' existence, and of the rhythmic aspects of the relationship.

The first thing Rosetta does, when we entered the office at the beginning of the last session on the previous week to the summer vacations, it's to look at my wrist watch and to ask me (for the first time) at what time the mother would be coming to fetch her. (Rosetta can't tell the time yet. However, she's aware of what is to wait; of a time that must pass by). She leans towards me and tries to hear the sound of my watch. After some time I ask her if she hears something. She gets up, gives me a direct look and says, "tick-tock, tick-tock". Afterwards she approaches me and slightly leans her head on my chest. After having heard at length she says: "the heart".

Can we think that, for the first time, Rosetta could have been able to reproduce and to represent primary experiences that in the past would have "broken her heart" and to find and to recognize temporal and rhythmic aspects of reality? The rhythm of sessions was about to be interrupted, but now the girl had verified that inside my body there was a beating heart. Rosetta could tolerate that the beating of my heart was *there*, beyond a limit, and consequently out of her control. There wasn't any switch that could give her the power to turn it on or off as she had done with the parrot or as she used to do ad infinitum with the light switch. Rosetta seemed to have internalized the rhythmic aspects of the

relationship and of the sessions that came one after the other, and that each time they had a beginning and an end.

Afterwards, the state of mind of Rosetta was permanently oscillating between some moments in which, for brief moments, she could tolerate and acknowledge rhythmic frames of the interpersonal relationship, and others, in which these frames imploded, with the result of a renewed loss of each meaning. I wondered if this was happening under the pressure of intolerable emerging anguishes, or if, at even more elementary levels, the effort to reach a *consensuality* (Meltzer, 1975) was in itself still so great that it could only be maintained for a while.

One Monday, during a session, on the same period, Rosetta shows me her hand and says she's wounded. I tell her that she has come to the doctor to be taken care of and that the wound could be cured. Rosetta agrees. While I speak about the last weekend and about the breaking of the sessions' rhythm, that she could have felt like a wound, I imitate, without touching her, the gestures of someone healing the wound that the girl has in the hand; with her hand stiff she continues pointing towards me. For my part, with barely sketched gestures of someone who smears an ointment and bandages a hand, accompanying that with a verbal description of what I'm doing, I say slowly, in a low voice and singsong intonation, "ointment-ointment", then more rapidly, with a circular gesture: "bandage-bandage" (1977b).

It was the first time that Rosetta spoke of a wound, of a pain perception, and she asked my help. Spontaneously, I alternated my comments about the weekend without session with a more melodic rhythmic cadence discourse to accompany my gestures of my taking care of her. Rosetta was very pleased and asked me the same treatment for the other hand and for other parts of her body. From that moment I felt, however, that the repetitive modality began to take advantage of the previous shared experience.

In the next session, Rosetta wanted quickly to reproduce the scene of the precedent day. She said "ointment-ointment-bandage-bandage" with the same identical rhythmic pattern and the same intonation she had used the last session, but there wasn't any wound. After having lived an experience that had put her in touch with the pain of separation,

Rosetta would have quickly emptied the words of the care of their emotional meaning to transform them again into a protective shell against the pain. The relationship of cares that involves the need and the dependence had given the way to the echolalia repeatability. Even if Rosetta was more in touch with the external reality and was more able to listen and to speak in a communicative way, her reaction showed how fragile were still his conquests and how easily the rhythmic interpersonal interaction could lose its dialogical dimension again.

In a later phase of therapy, very frequently it occurred that in the inner fight between the need to preserve a circularity always identical with itself and the ability to progress towards the experience of a linear temporality and a sense of greater continuity of herself as a separate being, Rosetta could get to maintain herself more at length in the relationship. She began to sing little songs and she needed me to sing in unison with her. The coincidence of our voices was no longer at the service of the separation denial and of each difference, but should strengthen Rosetta's ability to bear it. Particularly, she liked a song that we gesticulated and that named one after another the days of the week. The melody was accompanied by claps of palms, hers and mine, in a rather complex alternation. Our vocal unison seemed to give the girl sufficient confidence in a time experience as to accept the shared exploration of rhythmic variations of clapping our hands. Besides, with this song she became interested in the days of the week and the alternation of the "days-yes" with those she wasn't coming: the "days-no". The schedule was beginning to have a sense, and with it the recognition of the alternation of presence and absence in an incipient awareness and acceptance of existing in the space-time as a separate being. The discovery of the rhythmic aspects of the being and of a shareable vocalism of her own had allowed Rosetta to internalize the necessary confidence in supporting rhythm of safety (Tustin, 1986), which had allowed her to approach to a less traumatic experience of existing as a separate individual, and not to live any longer the discontinuity as the threat of falling endlessly, and finally to use a new verbal language, integrating rhythmic and vocal experiences genuinely dialogical to communicate with the other recognized in his otherness.

### **Conclusions**

A brief review of the psychoanalytic thinking on the subject of "musicality" of the language shows how the vocal aspects of the verbal expression have been often neglected in the past in favor of the primacy of the visual image and of the word's semantic content.

From an evolutionary perspective, we have sought to understand the role and the meaning of the first rhythmicity and vocalism experiences for the development of the primordial states of mind. Exploring the origins of perception and auditory memory has led us through the caesura of birth and to get into the first rhythmic and vocal experiences of the child's prenatal life. The *observation baby's* material has allowed us to understand not only the meaning of the fact that, with the birth, the child is no longer only a listener, he becomes the protagonist and the first producer of vocal sounds, and after the precursor preverbal babbling follows the verbal language. At the same time he's an active part of a dialogue spontaneously rhythmic in which he alternates the own "word" and hears the word of the other. The "word" of a small man, also at the origin of the verbal language, is never a "mere" sound. The child's voice, his crying, his vocalizations, move over a double layout and are contemporaneously messengers of emotional valences to communicate to the other and of symbolic proto-meanings that will be refined and articulated in the course of the mental development and of the learning of the verbal language, thanks to the ever greater diversification and ability for the abstraction of the mind. The voice is jointly a primordial expression of the living beings sociality and a thought vehicle.

Therefore, it's not surprising that in the autistic states, in which it is absent the inseparable theme of the predisposition to the communication and to the symbolization that are part of the normal development, emotional and significant expressiveness, of the vocal production and rhythmicity of interpersonal exchange with another other than himself, could disappear simultaneously. Therefore a particular attention to the voice and the rhythm is essential in the psychotherapeutic work with autistic children, but not only with them. At work with all patients, children, adolescents or adults, the primordial, the proto-symbolic, the unformulated and not formulable are implicit within the explicit material. The

unspeakable, the unrepresentable go by in depth like an underground river and often finds its expression in the vocal or rhythmic aspects of verbalization.

Therefore, it's important that the psychoanalyst and the psychotherapist listening develop a "resonance body" function ready to receive the sound elements, which are at risk of being neglected if the attention is focused only on the semantic content of the discourse. Di Benedetto speaks of a "musically oriented listening towards the sounding precursors of a verbal discourse"(2000, 1978). This type of listening isn't sophisticated and doesn't need to be related to a musical culture, on the contrary. It's about *floating attention* in its broadest sense, it's about a global listening including sound and rhythm that comes from the patient, it's about a care that would allow to pick up the unsaid transmitted through the shadows of vocalism. What is the reverie (Bion, 1962 ) without the ability to recognize the needs of the other thanks to the deeper resonance with our own primordial experiences? The term "vocal oneirism" ( Di Benedetto, 2000, 178) proposes a deeper conscious floating attention to reach the most archaic dimensions expressed in the rhythmic and vocal aspects of the preverbal and verbal communication.

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