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“The rules of the game let us play in our lives”

Françoise Dibotto Soppi

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Interview with Françoise Dibotto Soppi, conducted by Birgit Mennel and Stefan Nowotny

Françoise, we met during the Aubervilliers City Festival where you presented, along with other members of the association Actes de Parole*, materials on the history of slavery and the memory of slavery. We’ll certainly come back to these topics, but first we would like to ask you to speak about your work as a sociolinguist. What exactly is your work?*

I work on linguistic behavior and the relation in the interaction between adults and children. The children that I work with are not at the stage of language acquisition; they are, in general, either acquiring writing skills or acquiring a second language. What I look at is: where is the rupture? why isn’t this working? I come in, really, when adults complain. The child never complains, it’s always the adults who complain, who say that they are fed up, who swear the child is a failure. That’s where I come in.

I recreate, with the child’s parents, a situation similar to the one where this failure occurs, but that isn’t necessarily the interactive situation in the group-class. But the child choses, so that he or she

is comfortable with the interaction and doesn't feel controlled. And here, we start to analyze and identify the elements that lead to the rupture with the adult – who isn't his or her father or mother, but a teacher at school.

So it's the teacher who…

It's the teacher who complains, and it's the parents who call me. They call me because the teacher has called them in or has even already made a decision, which is to say that the scholastic institution makes a decision to exclude the child from the group-class and send him or her to another group. This is what they call care, but it isn't care at all. What they call therapy isn't therapy.

It's the creation of another environment in order to stimulate behavior – a behavior that can be similar or opposite. This is the moment when we analyze, when we ask why what is happening happens.

This is what I do, but at home, at the child's house, because I define a space that is familiar to the child: the parents represent an authority, then the child needs to have a friend in order to have a peer, and so we create an artificial group-class; I myself often play the role of the teacher's friend. That way, I position myself in the interaction: I'm the teacher's friend who complains. This is because the interaction goes both ways, which is to say both the authority, which is the parents (so that the parent doesn't blow up right away at the teacher who wants to destroy his or her child), and the child (so that they know that I am in a relationship with the person who constantly excludes them).

Could you explain the notion of linguistic behavior a little? How would you describe the relation between a "behavior" and what is often called "knowledge" or linguistic "capacity"?

Well, I suppose you would like to talk about the performance-competence relation? In respect to the child?

Yes, specifically in respect to the child, because all too often we limit ourselves to asking the question "Does that child know how to speak well?", for example…

… that's the norm, the standard social norm…

…in fact, and that's why we would like to focus a bit on this notion of behavior. During our first meeting, you spoke about the intervention of a norm, of great importance, and also about violence as being a part of linguistic relations. So we have three factors: norms that are socially established, violence and then such and such behavior.

What comes to mind right away is interpretation, which is to say that there are norms of interpretation. It is always difficult to talk about norms since they are also situational. Whenever we have a teacher who complains, for example, we ask "What are norms to her?", and then, "What are the child's norms in his own space?". Bourdieu has talked about the work of a student because, clearly, school has the culture of a school and children can more or less adapt themselves to this scholastic culture. This is where there are behavioral norms because there are things that are already codified at school and the child, when he or she arrives, must conform to these norms. In effect, it's a mold. But there are children who are quite free at home and they no longer have that freedom when they come to school – and they look for it. There are those who are discouraged and then those who say "no, I want my freedom" (those who do this at all costs) and who enter into full conflict with the teacher. This is precisely what we try to analyze.

I get an intruder; I put a child intruder in, while I am the adult intruder who has a relation with the teacher, as the teacher's friend. The child has his or her friend there, and I also have my friend, the teacher. The authority is his or her mother (in general, it's the mother who accepts being this kind of guinea pig). So, we set up some games, and these games have rules. Precisely, we recreate the system of rule, of norms. When it's a game, it's fun, and the child begins to play. There is no violence in the game but, nevertheless, one can be disqualified when the rules are not respected and we also include procedures for requalification.

When we talk about behavior, this is precisely the question: when there is a game, there are predefined behaviors, there are the rules of the game that are prescribed. And school is like this. School has game rules, except here, this game is not recognized as such, but is understood as if it were real life. Now, school isn't life. School is, in fact, a place of passage where we have game rules; and we adapt to these game rules as they come, with a game coordinator who is the teacher and with many participants who, together, must memorize the rules of the game to then, each playing their role, demonstrate to the coordinator that they know the rules and that they know how to apply them.

But does knowing the rules only mean that we adapt to them? Or does it also mean that we master these rules so that we can participate in a specific game but, at the same time, we start to play not only "according to" but also "with" the rules that we find in life, because we understand that each time it is a specific game, tied to a specific situation?

All the rules of the game allow us to play in our lives. Bakthine talks a little bit about this. It's the capital we have; all the experiences we have that we later reproduce... Really, there are rules of the game at school that we reproduce in life, and then

others that we don't reproduce – but that are tied to that experience. Often, we hear parents say to their children: "You're not at school here, you're not with your friends, now, you're at home...". This means that there is an incompatibility between the game rules in the situation the child has interiorized and this new space – which isn't really new at all because it's the space he or she lives in – where the child becomes an adult in society, that is to say, where they are projected as adults in society. When parents come into the sanction, it means that they sanction the adults who are project in them; they don't sanction a child, but an adult.

Quite often, the situations we find are ruptures with these children who are acquiring either writing or bilingualism and where they are ill-adapted in class. It's these situations where the child has assimilated their parents' projections (as an adult) so quickly that they come into the group-class where they are asked to be a child, with the game rules of being a child: he or she finds them childish, and would rather build complicity with the adult teacher who is the group-class animator. Here, there is a rupture and great violence, sometimes for the adult who isn't close to the child (because he or she thinks "This must be a child who dominates the others, who thinks of themselves as a leader"), as well as for the child. In general, it's females, because it's as if she were the mother, and the children transpose her as a parent, as parental authority. And this isn't allowed at school: they must transpose authority, certainly, but not parental authority.

Quite often, we are dealing with immigrant children who grow up in groups of adults; and quite often either first children, or the first boy. This child is with adults – and even plays with adults – so much that he is almost an adult himself. When he comes to school, we don't see an adult, we see a small boy. The fact that he behaves like an adult annoys and irritates the teacher and he blazes

the trail a bit more than others; and the child perceives this very easily. Plus, these children quite often have a language that responds to the social group they belong to. If this is the middle class, they express themselves very correctly and, from the beginning, this means that the teacher is charmed that this immigrant child can express himself in correct, carefully chosen and refined French. But then, when it comes to behavior concerning mutual respect, it's as if the teacher had a friend. This is why, going into remediation workshops, we make ourselves the teacher's friend and not him, the child.

Let's go back to your work with the association Actes de Parole *when you launched debates regarding the history of slavery. What relationships do you see between current forms of violence, for example in the relationship to scholastic authority, and historical forms of violence, specifically regarding racism?*

I think that things are transported in our collective unconscious, just as much with Africans as with host countries like France. But it's not only the French who enter into relation with Africans; the whole world is in relation to Africans in Paris. It's interesting to know how we, *Actes de Parole*, came to speak about, or even *celebrate* the abolition of slavery. Above all it's because we came upon West Indian children who spoke to us about the *Code Noir*. We didn't know what the *Code Noir* was, and so we went online to search for it and we found out that it was also known as the Colbert Code. We knew that there was a Colbert Code but we had no idea that it was a code used to manage slaves and to define slave status: it was a code that was expressly created for these purposes. [1] So, this stuck in our throat, it was an insufferable code. I don't know if you've ever read it. But it took us a year to read it and work through our anger at history, and also to try to understand that it is still with us – even in our expressions.

This is where we question ourselves, and we examine ourselves, because there are expressions that we Africans have amongst ourselves that come from that period. For example, in our homes, the expressions “I’m not your slave, why are you talking to me like that?” and “I’m not your slave, why are you addressing me without formulating what you want?” that are quite recurrent. That’s it – there are often these expressions that come back. Then there are other expressions that come up and that are more violent, because “I’m not your slave” is a defense of your rights, but there are also insults, like “That’s not human, that’s animal”. This too comes from a historical period in Africa when Africans were captured and were treated as cattle, just like animals. There’s a recently published book, *La France noire*[2] – it’s here, in the Aubervilliers library – that tells this history in images, from the period of slavery to *Négritude* with Césaire, Senghor. Basically, we understood that there is a latent suffering that was often read in the gaze of the other.

So, we said to ourselves that we needed to work on this. Above all because when we went to study it (because it’s a history that we didn’t know any better than the French do…), we discovered things that were very, very difficult but also things that were very, very enheartening: we discovered that both French and Africans, Black Africans, fought for the abolition of slavery. And they obtained it in 1794, or even before in 1791 in Haiti and Santo Domingo, but in 1794 a convention was signed in Paris. These are things that should be taught and this is the reason that we opted to host a festival on May 10th and to work more on this later – like the Americans have done – to work on everything regarding this period both in Africa and in the West (specifically in France, since we are French). We sponsor theses on these questions. Anyway, that’s why we started hosting events, in order to finance studies in

Africa about this period, because nobody knows about it: I myself grew up without knowing about it.

The examples you gave show a reproduction and, at the same time, a sort of commemoration of this violence in language practices. History is, in a manner of speaking, inscribed in these practices and therefore it's not only about looking at "language" as a system of rules, a system of vocabulary, etc. – that we can master or utilize well or not – but specifically to look at these inscriptions, these historical traces in linguistic practices. In this context, we would like to ask you a personal question: how would you describe your personal and biographical relation with "the French", how do you see the relation between French and African languages?

This is a question that we often pose when we are adolescents. The answer depends on age. Today, I'm 55 years old, so the relation is much clearer. But it's a very complex relationship – it depends on the way we acquired the French language.

I myself have spoken French since pre-school and I had French in school, the French that is also the official language in Cameron where I lived, in the Francophone zone. But at home we didn't speak French. At home, we spoke Douala, my native language, the language my mother taught me. So it's both my native language and a language my mother taught me; we weren't supposed to speak French with her because she would reply: "I sent you to school so that you would learn French to speak abroad. But I'm not a foreigner. I'm Douala, so speak to me in Douala". This is also because her generation learned Douala at pre-school and learned to read and write it – only after did they go to a French school. On the contrary, we had little opportunity to learn our native language at pre-school and get into writing it, to then learn French as a second language. We learned writing directly with French, so there

was a double difficulty. But, with our parents' help, we came out on top. In the end, we were all educated in French and our diplomas are in French.

But when I was a young adult the problem really came up. When I was an adolescent and a young adult, it was also the period for civil rights and the Black Movement in the United States. I'm talking about '68 to '76: that was throughout middle- and high-school for me. Then, that was difficult. We asked ourselves: "Does African literature exist?" – and we didn't have the languages to express our literature. This issue came up, but when I was an adolescent and a young adult. After, when I studied linguistics, I came into my language, and then I did sociolinguistics on bilingual acquisition. For me, there were other issues. Even today, I am still dealing with these same issues. In France, I know that I speak my native language very well, both written and orally, because I had teachers who were my parents. For French, I also mastered it quite well, and then other languages were added, like German, English, Spanish... So, I think that my relation is totally different.

On the other hand, there is one thing that is very difficult to live with: all those who, in French, recall slavery in language and in idiomatic expressions. One expression, for example, Guerlain said on television and it caused an outcry:[3] "work like a nigger". This is an expression that comes from slavery.

By the way, is the expression that you mentioned before, "I'm not your slave", said in French or in Douala?

No, it's said in Douala, I translated it. But the parallel in French is "working like a nigger". Because, in any case, "nigger", is "slave". It's a tautology.

Our last question seems to be directly tied to what you are talking about here: while we were preparing our workshop in Aubervilliers in September, in June we had a long conversation with a young French teacher who came from a Senegalese family and who lives in the south of Paris. At a certain point, he asked us what languages we spoke and then told us the languages he himself spoke: French, English, a few expressions in Italian, etc.. We found this list a bit surprising and so we asked him: "But you told us you grew up in Senegal. Don't you speak African languages too?" Only then did he answer: "Sure, I speak Wolof and my first language is Fulani". His initial silence regarding these African languages seemed quite symptomatic to us. – You work on bilingualism, but that risks being a bit abstract as a concept, since there are also systems of valorization so all languages don't have the same statute… So, we wanted to ask you as a sociolinguist: what role do African languages play in France?

That depends on the group. I myself am in a group, *Actes de Parole*, where we speak Soninke and Bambara, i.e. Mandingo languages. There are families from Mauretania, Mali and Senegal who speak Soninke (even if when someone from Senegal speaks Soninke that means that their families immigrated from Mali to Senegal). But these two languages are used quite often in the group. More generally, Mandingo languages are extremely well-integrated in Paris. If you go to *Quatre Chemins*,[4] here just around the corner, if you stop an African and speak to him in Bambara, he'll understand you. Concerning Bambara, there is a large group that speaks it: all Fulani speak Bambara, people from the Ivory Coast speak Bambara... basically, Bambara is a vehicle, a vehicular language. It's used for commerce in Africa – it's spoken all the way up to Cameron. And that function is then exported here.

But there are other languages that are not spoken much at all because they aren't used much in parent-child relationships, like languages from Cameron, for example. Regarding children born here, especially boys, we can observe a phenomenon that constitutes a kind of anomie in their discourse: they understand their parents' language but they don't speak it because the statue they give this language is not the same one they give to French. But this is also changing, because with cable television, for example, we can see programs shown in Africa. This concerns above all Arabic and Arabic channels that make it so that children are speaking Arabic more and more. There was a time when Arabic was in decline. You had to study it in order to learn to speak and write in Arabic. But today, there is also the phenomenon of people enrolling in Arabic courses to learn the Koran, and then there is a lot of Arabic on television. So, they have a linguistic practice, and parents are also much more at east in their own practice of Arabic, with Arabic television.

But, in general, languages keep the function that they have in Africa. If, in the first place, they are spoken in families, which can happen in France too, in second or third generations this is lost. If, on the other hand, we are talking about vehicular languages, they stay alive. Here, too, we can observe specific repercussions from colonial history, because, in Cameron for example, French and English are vehicular languages. And that explains the fact that – after the Germans installed Douala as the language to teach the Bible in and the protestant language at that time – with French colonization and the introduction of Catholicism, language and religion became Latin and French. In fact, religions are often what make such or such a language valuable and impose it as a vehicular language. So, until today, there are households in Cameron where French has maintained its value, as an elite language, a language of

civilization or even as a secular language. We speak French as a native language and, progressively, we learn a local language as a second language.

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[1] The *Code Noir* [Black Code] was a decree originally passed by France's King Louis XIV in 1685. The Code Noir defined the conditions of slavery in the French colonial empire, restricted the activities of free Negroes, forbade the exercise of any religion other than Roman Catholicism (it included a provision that all slaves must be baptized and instructed in the Roman Catholic religion), and ordered all Jews out of France's colonies. The *Code Noir* also gave plantation owners extreme disciplinary power over their slaves, including legitimizing corporal punishment as a method of maintaining control [translator's note].

[2] Pascal Blanchard, *La France noire ; trois siècles de présences*, Paris: La Decouverte, 2011.

[3] Jean-Paul Guerlain, a perfume maker, used the expression "to work like a nigger" during a televised interview on France 2 in October 2010 [note by B.M. and S.N.].

[4] *Quatre Chemins* is a lively neighborhood in Paris' "close *banlieue*", situated between Aubervilliers and Pantin. It is also the name of a metro station on line 7, which connects a few northeastern districts in the Paris region to the center of Paris and the "close *banlieue*" in the southeast of the capital [note by B.M. and S.N.].