



University of Tabriz-Iran  
*Philosophical Investigations*  
Vol. 11/ No. 21/ Fall & Winter 2017

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## A Reflection on Kristeva's Approach to the Structure of 'Language'\*

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### **Abstract**

*Reaching out to history and subject in terms of meaning variation, Kristeva could show that language cannot simply be a Saussurean sign system. Rather, she went on to delineate that language, beyond signs, is associated with a dynamic system of signification where the 'speaking subject' is constantly involved in processing. Julia Kristeva, a French critic, psychoanalyst, theoretician, a post-structuralist philosopher of Hungarian origin, dwells upon ideas from linguistics, psychoanalysis, sociology while representing text analysis, sign and subject from emotional and motivational perspectives. She believes that processing language structure and subject depend upon semiotic and symbolic domains that emerge in the scope of 'signifiante' process whereby the semiotic domain processes and primary structures against the symbolic realm. In Kristeva's view, the sign Chora, while being the milieu for energy, dynamism, and motility, shows the internal and signification drives of the language, and will involve changes in signification mutation of subjectivity.*

**Key words:** *Kristeva, language, semiotics, signifiante, subject*

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\* Received Date: 2017/ 09/19      Accepted date: 2017/12/04

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### **Introduction**

Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist and semiotician, examined the synchronic structure of language and distinguished *signifier* (form) and *signified* (meaning), and the gap between the two in the sign system of language. Also, meaning is arbitrary in his view, i.e., there is not an inherent relationship between signifier and signified and therefore meaning and object are unrelated. Saussure left a deep impression on many linguists who followed him including Kristeva though for post-structuralists, language systems and events take place over time or diachronically. Kristeva attempted to expand knowledge of psychoanalysis beyond its disciplinary borders and into the linguistic and literary realms in order to get rid of structuralist restrictions and account for the humans' mental and inferential crises. Upon arriving in France, she publicized her revolutionary, drastic, and deconstructionist tendencies in language and literary texts. Her first book entitled, '*Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*', translated in English in 1980, primarily focused on literary and poetic texts re-examining the linguistic structures in socio-historical domains (linguistic structures). In the 1970s, her views initiated dramatic changes in the linguistic and psychoanalytic theories focusing mainly on subject and language. She sought to address the kind of processes dynamism of signification signs can change themselves. In her view, poetic language complements the conventional language and contains organized codes and discourse since it is replete with signification processes.

Throughout most of her works, time awareness and drive are vividly addressed since it is one of our main concerns. It appears that her perspective of the language is heavily influenced by that of Saussure whereas for defining the notion of 'subject' she borrows concept from psychoanalysts such as Freud, Lacan, Klein though, of course, she never defines 'subject' in purely structuralist terms. Barthes believes that Kristeva changes the status of objects such that even her perception of intertextuality was an influence from linguists like Saussure and Bakhtin.

### **The concept of language as a phenomenon**

Conceptualizing language is the key to understanding human and social history. Examining the phenomenon of language along with its historical structure is indebted to phenomenological knowledge and Ferdinand de Saussure was the first to raise the issue of language in modern era. For Kristeva it is the semiotic structure of language which "analyzes external and internal, concrete and non-concrete realities into linguistic elements." (Kristeva, 1981: 222). From Piaget's perspective, "sensori-motor operations originate prior to language, and acquiring thought grows out of a language-free symbolic-conceptual operation" (Piaget, 1962: 46). Klein, the Austrian psychoanalyst, emphasized pre-oedipal stage where the subject seeks to notice castration and super-ego. These pre-oedipal processes, Kristeva states, are associated with maternal body:

*“The process of signification in language is two-fold: semiotic which comprises the subject's internal drives by means of which physical energy and emotions are expressed in language and symbolic that are governed by rules, grammar and transparency and are used for expressing the situation”.* (Kristeva, 1974: 22-23)

Kristeva drawing on the distinction introduces a contrast between *semiotic language* on the one hand and *formal* or *symbolic language* (which is father-centered) on the other as noted by Lacan since the semiotic form suggests the first configuration in which mother and child interaction at pre-oedipal stage takes place. The sign language which precedes the codified language is spontaneous, free and motile. In her book *‘Polylogue’* which deals with symbolization, Kristeva sets out to elucidate signifier processes drawing upon Lacanian theory of psychoanalysis. Though ineffective in its pure form, the latter theory helped Kristeva illustrate subject metamorphosis against language in the form of a relationship because subject at the core of unity is able to express the logic of dynamic signifier through language. Moreover, for Kristeva ‘semiotic’ knowledge is not part of the meaning process but in fact it creates identity and ‘self’ for the subject because it can be seen as the representation of vocal, motor sensations of primary, pre-oedipal processes.

Therefore, one can claim that the drives are released into the core of language, and the meaning process develops only when the speech production and enunciation is realized in relation with other (i.e. other subject). In fact, it appears to the authors that Kristeva can have altered the status of objects, and may have even more dramatically revolutionized the latest hypotheses of the time. Many Kristevan concepts such as the structure of language, *Chora*, the other, etc. are conceptualized within the domain of the unconscious. Language for her is the realm of life and death. It also appears that she thinks of ‘*a need for belief*’ in humankind’s psyche as well as in the history of human societies. Therefore, a temporal creation and promotion of ‘*the need*’ can change our mental images and beliefs.

### **Kristeva and Lacan**

Publicizing the hypothesis that “unconscious is structured like language” and drawing on the views of Saussure and Freud, Lacan believed that the child upon entering the semiotic realm experiences language domain and is separated from others (maternal body). It is the domain of language in which the child gets to know the rules and structure of language, whereas Kristeva believes that separation from the other (object) happens prior to self-identity (or Lacan’s mirror stage). As for Lacan, language structure shapes unconscious desires, cultural structures and human mentalities (Lacan, 1966: 220). Kristeva, however, assigns the origin of language to an indefinite space that cannot come into existence independent of maternal body. Subject, too, has an identity of which s/he is the least aware since awareness necessitates a dominance over the unconscious. Lacan believes that two ingenious trends are involved in processing language structure: *metaphor* and *metonymy*. The

former indicates summarizing while the latter suggests shifting both of which embrace effects, realizations and manifestations at the unconscious level (Lacan, 1966: 322). Following Lacan, phallus is signifier-oriented and therefore we seek the inner desire; therefore, subject language develops along the same lines so that inner, psychological needs can be met. In fact, *phallus* is what we are constantly after in order to obviate our needs. On the other hand, Kristeva maintained that women and men could go beyond paternalistic thought and language were they to access the semiotic dimension of language. It must be noted that the semiotic aspects of language must not be held synonymous with semiotics as a field of study the central concern of which is to analyze the system of signs through the lens of culture. One may, therefore, say that the semiotic dimension refers to the way we speak or instance the emotions that are expressed through the quality of our voice or the body language. Bearing this in mind, Kristeva's ideas must not come as a surprise that "for instance the scientific discourse tends to minimize the elements of the semiotic dimensions of language as far as possible" (Kristeva, 1980: 134). Consequently, we can conclude that language carrying emotional and sense-perceptual undertone can dissociate itself from syntactic and formal rules and emerges as an energy-laden potentiality. This view, by virtue of emphasizing *Chora*, drifted away from basic Freudian and Lacanian ideas and ascribed language development to *Chora* even during the early childhood years. The authors believe that Kristeva's Post-Nietzschean world works its way well into the depths of mind and nature to represent 'subject' and 'the other' within the realm of consciousness and *signifiance*.

### **Subject and culture**

For Kristeva, biological drives are understandable merely through language and culture though the subjectivity structure is of quite dynamic but vague forms. Subject develops at the core of subjectivity to which language processing imparts a realization form. It must be added that for Kristeva, significance process operates based on combining mental and social dimensions. Semiotic systems, thus, in and through subject, society, and art is able to alter signifier systems and symbolic rules are reversed because:

*"This very heterogeneous procès de signifiance is a practical form of structuration and destructuration. A transition from mental and social realm and eventually jouissance and revolution"* (Kristeva, 1975: 15).

As the volatility of text semiotics is very much highlighted and is thereby visible in the poetic language, for Kristeva subject gives rise to the system of signifiers. The system which has the semiotic and symbolic functions, according to Kristeva:

*The game starts at the meeting point of nature (essence) and culture, and this very game accounts for all objects, and people including the mother and the child. The game theory is associated with art both in explaining the importance of symbols and signs and when showing the*

*'how' of material experiences in providing ingredients for it. Both aspects deal with the question of which of them is at the margins of language. Furthermore, examining the newborn's pre-linguistic stage indicates the importance of these margins for subsequent uses in language. Therefore, something like a game begins before 'self' emerges before the own self is shown, nature culminates as an outpouring of disorganized volatilities of desires in child's body and at Chora stage goes on, which is a container free of any orientation or space before the child enters the semiotic system. (Kristeva, 1980: 281-6).*

Therefore, the semiotic act that is the result of the first voices, behaviors, gestures, releasing energy and expression of feelings meets with symbolic act in the context of signification that involves rule-based and rule-governed language. On the other hand, the child's semiotic *Chora* is the psycho-physical space where energy or internal drives are organized and expressed. In her view, the subject and the system which creates signifiers (such as conventional, literary, mythical language, etc.) are shaped within a bi-directional dialectics: semiotic and symbolic. Kristeva distinguishes the first stage of signification as semiotic which she calls *Chora* (as a preverbal phase) and along which drives develop. Kristeva, drawing upon subject's discontinuity could show that *Chora* lacks order and stability. If seen from Freudian point of view, *Chora* encapsulates the subject's relationships with the outside world, behaviors, colors, and reactions. It must, however, be noted that *Chora* is not specifically a Freudian *id* because in Kristeva's opinion it embraces ego and the individual as opposed to society. This very process leads us to the next stage, i.e. symbolic and social: the system in which signification develops and within the process there is a sweeping semiotic flood in the form of signifier that in depicts itself association with signified. In this way, it can be argued that social rules can determine the semiotic and symbolic systems. In sum, for meaning creation to take place we are dealing with the development of semiotic *Chora* which is meaningless by themselves. At the later stage, comes the symbolic stage within which signifier and signified are shaped. However, in the *Chora* space, a flowing subconscious territory exists:

*"It is beyond the reproduction of signifier (vocal, motor and verbal) where subject passes from the symbolic dimension and accesses the semiotic Chora – which is another side of the social border."*  
(Kristeva, 1974:77).

The signification process, therefore, incorporates the semiotic act and can show the subject in different processing forms while in the signification context, the subject loses its unity. In other words, the agent for producing *significance* is a mixture of semiotic and symbolic dimensions. Along these lines, she consolidated Althusser's theoretical application of reality though, of course, authorities like Waldstein deemed it an intellectual frivolity (Waldstein, 2008: 100). On the other hand, even for Kristeva, myths come

into play in the symbolic dimension since it is a system that follows social rules. Accordingly, myths are of semiotic origin and are associated with logos process which plays a role in satisfying the drives. Therefore, it is within the context of the signification system that subject is formed or destroys itself. (Kristeva, 1989: 272).

### **Structure and mechanism of ‘Language’**

After her well-known work *‘Revolution in Poetic Language’* (1974), Kristeva took interest in psychoanalysis. Employing the theory *‘Sémanalyse’*, she sought to make a connection between semiotic knowledge and psychoanalysis and believed that a written text is a dynamic object which calls for specific semantic-linguistic analyses. Heavily influenced by Bakhtinian ideas in dialogism (or the dialogic nature of text), she states that “literary text realization involves texts. These very texts require a theory which is dominant like an analytic-linguistic idea in the realm of the developed signifiers” (Kristeva, 1969: 217). Her theory which moves away from structural semantics and is looking for significations that emerge in a literary text. Actually, all concepts employed by her are associated with the social and biological environment in one way or other. Poetic language, too, is an emotional and implicit language whereby meaning perception would not actualize merely by recourse to structure, and it is the *Chora* domain that shapes the psychological pre-language and our being on account of motility. In her opinion, a ‘sign’ is a reflective element that contributes to the presence and existence of signification within the text. Of course, as Kristeva maintains intertextuality that concerns the collective awareness on the part of humans in the realm of literature and writing facilitates understanding culture and raises text interaction for discovering meaning. Kristeva talking of two crucial elements sets out to analyze texts:

*“At the first step, the realm of sign-semiotics of the written work is examined. The way the géno-text is produced is associated with drive dimension of the individual, the linguistic uses at childhood or with schizophrenia and in Kristeva’s language is usually regarded maternal or feminine. This form of the text contains semiotic processes that contribute to the emergence of symbolic forms. This form of text includes a set of non-linguistic phenomena which is far from rule orientation and conventionalization because it shows motility of words. Another element is the symbolic stage which is linked with language rules such as signs, syntax or semantics. This dimension constitutes the same discourse which creates the physical and concrete form of the text or phenol-text with paternal or masculine overtones. This concrete form follows communication principles; thus, phenol-text is a structure governed by interactions involving competence and performance that requires an enunciating subject and receives messages. The géno-text with its signifiante process comprises semiotic (drives and oedipal) forms because the*

*subject is born committed to the biological and social constructs.”*  
(Kristeva, 1974: 83-84).

From this point of view, writing indicates a *signifiance* process which divides into networks such as speech. In fact, the same attitude is expressed by Lacan the bipolar distinction that characterizes western philosophy: mother-material-nature as opposed to father-language-culture. The subject that has been trapped between semiotic and symbolic stage, and between drive-oriented and rational subjects proves itself through textual propositions. Kristeva, who was influenced by dialectic materialism, set history and production conditions as the requisites for language. In other words, philosophical understanding of language became politically motivated losing sight of its inherent analytic perspective. The only individual liberty is against the signs of presence. Kristeva believes that psychoanalysis must pay a close attention to the meaning crises of the poets and writers and those of subject and structure. We make use of signification in order to express situation that are in turn overshadowed by drives and psychic tendencies. Therefore, assuming the conditions for signification, it can be said that “language as a social attitude necessarily contains both semiotic and symbolic tendencies *a priori* though they have been combined in different ways in order to create various discourses and various signification attitudes” (Kristeva, 1980: 134). It is through the semiotic aspect of the language that we, though subconsciously, constantly stay in touch with non-verbal, precognitive experience, with instinctive acts, and with the most basic relations with our mothers. Despite the fact that Kristeva introduced ‘subject’s tendency’ in linguistics and semiotics, one cannot assign the linguistic identity to the individual’s inner tendencies since language development in Kristeva’s terms is largely feminine which originates from the inner, pre- and post-natal challenges present in the milieu of languages and is, therefore, free from racial or gendered labels.

### **Language and Significance**

In her book, *Language: An Entity Unknown*, Kristeva examines linguistic explorations across civilizations. In fact, the linguistic analysis envisioned by Kristeva is intertwined with philosophy and society. Semiotic forms stretch out of the borderlines of signification form and basis to embrace the depths of unconscious stimulated by internal drives. To define the concept of semiosis, she draws on the concept of *Chora*, a term she has borrowed from Plato. In the this sense, *Chora* is the focal point of coming into existence, motility, feelings, instincts and the generating force behind signification. More specifically, it is “within the mother-child relational space” or the uterine that the infant’s physical and embryonic status is established prior to language. Therefore, *Chora* is the space for the development of ‘ego’, and in this way, significance and structure can have unstable images. Since *signifiance* is developed within the same space, subject can experience it at the narcissistic stage and is constantly trying to achieve becoming or mutation. Another realm that is remarkable is the one in which the child

distinguishes between 'self' and the other. In other words, the distinction between subject and object proceeds to the *thetic* stage that is the onset of making signification and subjectivity growth. At this stage, the 'other' becomes distinct and outstanding as a prerequisite for establishing signification system. *Chora* space is the same as semiotic space and prior to enunciation. In the signification process, our internal drives are released through the use of language. Therefore, in Kristeva's terms, subject is actualized when language is used. In the depths of writing lies a potentiality for describing a phallic situation in which men and women are distinguished and the subject identifies with the speech producer's desire and the search for the discursive concept. The feminine situation of the speech, on the other hand, challenges the same search for and dominance over speech beyond language distinction, signifiers and *jouissance*. As a semiotician, Kristeva in '*The Revolution in Poetic Language*' devotes much of her attention to the mechanisms which she calls '*le process de signifiante*'. This process account for the development of meaning in the communicative framework among subject, other and the society. As she argues, *signifiante* means unlimited and unrestricted birth, continuous operation of internal drives at the core of language the subject's interaction with institutions." (Kristeva, 1974: 15). Thanks to the notion of 'sign' and signification system, she claimed that she could create a kind of macro-physical world of culture in the structure of subject and language in the light of which semiotic systems at the core of history and culture could be shown. Nevertheless, drawing upon the humanities in an eclectic fashion has rendered her views a superficial and formalistic quality. This suggests that the Freudian system acknowledged by Lacan and Kristeva would be a hasty, unthinking rationalism (and therefore abstract) which run against Freud. Very conspicuously, Kristeva in analyzing the subject's language and text drifts away from diachronic and synchronic approaches and employs a meta-temporal approach in order to establish a system based on the semiotic discontinuity of the language since in her view, language and subjectivity interact.

### **Kristeva and intertextuality**

Influenced by the Bakhtinian dialogism, Kristeva believed that the comprehensibility come become possible only through intertextuality. Todorov states that "*Poetica* addressed special or literary discourse"; on the contrary, literary genres ever since the classical times up to the present can reflect the modern concept of '*intertextuality*'. The concept and the structure presented by Kristeva dramatically expanded the domain of intersubjectivity already touched upon by Bakhtin. She believed that "a text develops as a combination of quotations" (Kristeva, 1969: 85). For her, the poetic text can find meaning within the historical and social contexts. In fact, every text is fashioned by an already existing text. Intertextuality, in Kristeva's terms, is a transfer process from one semiotic and signification system to another. In such a process, the subject releases feelings, internal drives in the form of symbols and signification. Therefore, every text is "an amalgamation of

quotes, and transformation of a text.” (Kristeva, 1969: 85). In texts which remarkably show the semiotic form and structure, we would encounter a géno-text, and if we see the dominance of the symbolic form we would face an emerging or a phéno-text. However, in Kristeva’s view, meaning development does not consist in formal and superficial signification, rather the emotional materials and ingredients within the text also contribute to the meaning. Accordingly, language structures presents itself in two distinct ways in the text: the structured and rule-governed form or the symbolic realm (this realm accounts for the child’s language development and identity), and the semiotic form of the language that embraces emotional and drive-based form of the language and enables the subject to release the internal drives.

### **Conclusion**

Freud, Lacan and Kristeva believe that subject grows out of language attitudes. Specifically, for Kristeva, language is of two dimensions: *symbolic and semiotic*. The former deals with the realm in which words function and meaning is associated with them. The latter, however, is the aspect of language inclusive of tone (suprasegmental features of language such as voice, pitch, volume, harmony) and rhythm. Other things which come in the latter category are body language during language production that reveals our feelings (for instance the bodily kinetic orientations which are for sex, survival, etc.). As we experience the language, both the instinctive reactions and basic ties with our mothers move to the margin; language is a paternalistic territory which dominates the symbolic and meaning developing domain. Following Kristeva, the first stage of meaning development process is semiotic stage which she names *Chora*. This stage is a semiotic preverbal one and is prior to language processing of any motile subject. In fact, the semiotic dimension in Kristeva’s terms, is a form of maternal images and the symbolic dimension represents the paternal one. This is because the semiotic realm mixes the syntactic structure and social territories. Thus, it can be argued that we use signification process to talk about the situations which are overshadowed by our internal and psychic drives. Eventually, considering the nature of language as a social attitude, it embodies the semiotic and symbolic features *a priori*. Fundamentally, Kristeva in analyzing the subject’s language, moved away from diachronic and synchronic analyses in order to give rise to a system based on semiotic discontinuity since in her view, subjectivity and language are constantly involved in interaction.

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