

# The Maternal Gift of Language, Imagination, and Relationship. The Gift Economy with Genevieve Vaughan<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Throughout her writings Genevieve Vaughan addresses important issues in the theory of language and communication, to the ultimate end of affecting social praxis for radical social change. Her hypothesis is that mothering/being-mothered forms a non-essentialist but fundamental core process that has been neglected by the Western view of the world. Most important is that Vaughan thematizes the mothering/being-mothered paradigm in the framework of her gift logic, which is oriented by otherness logic. Restoring such a paradigm offers a new light on language, communication and human relationships, contributing to recovery of the properly human in terms of gift economy values.

## Keywords

Gifting, language, mothering/being mothered, otherness, verbal nurturing

It is just here, then, that the place and work of Significs is to be found, as the necessary link – rather, the medium of interpretative communication – between the constant “givings” of Mother sense and the constant “constructions” (in all senses) of the intellect. (Victoria Welby 1907, in Susan Petrilli 2009: 704)

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<sup>1</sup> My gratitude to Genevieve Vaughan for reading through this paper and gifting me her critical comments (in email exchanges on the 15 April 2016, Gen in Rome, myself in Adelaide). I have incorporated her input and evidenced any divergences. The main focus is on her most recent book of 2015, *The Gift in the Heart of Language*. The general aim is simply to convey a sense of the complexity of her research, without any claims to exhaustiveness, thereby signaling a universe of ideas for the interested reader to explore.

## 1. *Language and gift economy*

Genevieve Vaughan's writings present a series of books including *For-Giving. A Feminist Criticism of Exchange*, 1997 (translated into various languages – Italian, Spanish, German, Turkish and Albanian), two collective volumes, *The Gift. A Feminist Analysis*, 2004, and *Women and the Gift Economy, a Radically Different Worldview is Possible*, her ebook, *Homo Donans*, 2007, and her most recent book, *The Gift in the Heart of Language. The Maternal Source of Meaning*, 2015, which is the specific object of my reflections in what follows. All provide a critique of social behaviour and interpersonal relationships, through the perspective of Vaughan's studies on language and communication. To speak about "language" and "communication" is not to refer to isolated spheres of human behaviour, nor to objects of study exclusive to the sign specialist, whether verbal or nonverbal. To discuss language and communication is to discuss nothing less than human life in its globality insofar as it is perfused with signs, indeed is engendered in signs.

A pivotal concept in Vaughan's work is that of "gift logic" which she thematizes as the foundation of a paradigm that is altogether different from that based on the logic of "equal exchange", of giving for the sake of a return now dominant over the globe. Not only: gift logic is described as the very condition of possibility for the reproduction of the current social form of production.

But the relation between exchange economy and gift economy is one of exploitation and alienation, as Vaughan explains. What this means is that in order to subsist and flourish, the exchange economy exploits the gift economy, plunders it. In other words, the gift economy is the basis of the exchange economy, but the exchange economy is its distortion and in terms of social praxis the gift economy is relegated to the margins.

From the point of view of our own approach to studies in philosophy of language and semiotics, Vaughan's critique amounts to recognizing that otherness is inscribed in the sign, in the very body, ultimately in life, and this amounts to acknowledging that the other is inevitable, inescapable, that encounter with the other is unavoidable whether we like it or not. We could even go so far as to claim that the lack of awareness, of consideration of the human capacity for otherness (of the inexorable presence of the other), and consequently with Vaughan, for gifting as the main form of interaction, is largely the cause

of deviations in human behaviour throughout history as much as in contemporaneity, if not more so, in the world today.

In the face of impending global disaster throughout the biosphere, affecting human and nonhuman, nature and culture, the sign's vocation for the other should be recovered and replenished in consonance with what has been happily described as the "humanism of otherness" (Levinas 1972). The health of life globally requires nothing less. We have dwelt upon such issues in a series of books of which the most recent include *Sign Crossroads in Global Perspective*, 2010, *Expression and Interpretation in Language*, 2012, *The Self as a Sign, World, and the Other*, 2013, *Sign Studies and Semioethics*, 2014, *The Global World and Its Manifold Faces*, 2016. This work has its foundations in another book in English, coauthored with Augusto Ponzio, *Semiotics Unbounded*, 2005, and in many others by Ponzio in Italian (to cite just one title of approximately 120 books authored so far, *La differenza non indifferente. Comunicazione, migrazione, guerra* [Unindifference Difference. Communication, Migration, War, 1995, new ed. 2002]).

## 2. *The gift of speaking*

To focus now on the main topic of the present paper with special reference to Genevieve Vaughan's book, *The Gift in the Heart of Language: the Maternal Source of Meaning*<sup>2</sup>: obviously, the part I find especially interesting is where she deals with language. I could say that this is the gift offered by her book that I most enjoyed. This part is closely connected to the rest of the book given that the problem of language is completely embedded in its overall structure, as much as to my own research in the spheres of philosophy of language and semiotics.

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<sup>2</sup> The original draft of this paper was redacted as a presentation of this book, *The gift in the Heart of Language* (2015), which had only just appeared. It was delivered at the conference "The Maternal Roots of the Gift Economy", organized by the Centro Studi Femminista per l'Economia del Dono (Feminist Study Centre for a Gift Economy) and by International Feminists for a Gift Economy, which took place between 25-27 April 2015, at the Casa Internazionale delle Donne (International Women's House), Via della Lungara 19, 00165, Rome, Italy.

Language is clearly of central importance in human interactions. As much as these human interactions are based on exchange at a surface level – or, rather, only at a superficial glance – Vaughan’s claim is that they are structured as gifts, so that to speak of language as a gift is to go to the heart of social relationships, not only as they exist, but also in the processes of their becoming, as they form and take shape.

At the basis of all human interactions there is a form of interaction that is no less than fundamental, namely the relationship between mother (or motherer) and infant, the mother who nurtures the infant and the nourishment. In this context, nurturing will also eventually involve at a later stage what Vaughan calls “verbal nurturing”. An understanding of the infant’s needs, which are vital survival needs, is based on a mother’s capacity to listen to somebody who does not yet know how to speak, the infant, *in-fans* (non speaker), precisely. To this “material” gift, the gift of nurturing, of gifting nourishment, which is situated in an interactive communication relation, is gradually added the gift of speaking, verbal nurturing, vocal gifting.

Vaughan distinguishes between “language” (Fr. *langage*; It. *linguaggio*) and “mother tongue” (Fr. *langue*; It. *lingua*), in both cases reference is to the level of verbal language. What she understands by “language” here is a gift-giving device, that is to say a device modelled on the giving and receiving of gifts/nurture, and not just a device for conveying gifts. The different “mother tongues” (historical natural languages and the special and sectorial languages forming each mother-tongue) are different constructions based on this model in various ways. “Language” in Vaughan’s description may be associated to what an English scholar from the Victorian era, Victoria Welby,<sup>3</sup> calls “mother sense” – she in fact distinguishes between “mother sense” and “intellect,”

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<sup>3</sup> Victoria Welby (1837-1912) developed a theory of meaning which she denominated “Significs”. She dedicated her research to the relation between signs and values, language and sense, and evidenced how meaning is not constrained to any one type of sign, language, field of discourse or area of experience. “Mother sense” is a central concept in her research. She discusses it at depth in her correspondence with interesting figures of the time such as Mary Everest Boole, Ferdinand C. S. Schiller, and Charles S. Peirce. Welby’s two main theoretical books are *What Is Meaning?* (1903, new ed. 1983) and *Significs and Language* (1911, new ed. 1985). A substantial collection of her writings, some previously published others from the archives unpublished, is now available in the volume, *Signifying and Understanding*, 2009, edited by myself. This is followed by my monograph, *Victoria Welby and the Sciences of Signs*, 2015.

between what she specifies as the “givings” of mother sense and the “constructions” of the intellect (see the epigraph at the opening of this paper) (see Welby 1983, 1985; Petrilli 2009, 2015).

According to Vaughan the necessary giving and receiving of the material gifts of nurture is the a priori with respect to language and to the production of specific sign systems for communication generally. From this point of view, language is characterized by the actual practice and experience of gifting, and by the human capacity for creativity. Such a device is an integral part of the construction of the social and of all the sign systems we employ to express ourselves and produce sense.

On this account Vaughan speaks of an “altercentric capacity”. This finds full expression in the condition and in the practices of *mothering* – from the verb *to mother*, whatever the sexual gender. Given that like myself, Gen lives both her everyday life and professional life in two worlds at least, in two languages (English and Italian) in constant confrontation with each other, let me point out that this English verb with all its implications is difficult to translate appropriately into Italian: to mother – to act as a mother, to care as a mother, to love as a mother would, beyond gender boundaries, beyond cultural boundaries, beyond linguistic boundaries (*fare da madre, curare, amare come farebbe una madre*).

### 3. Language and the “mother work schema”

Linguists and scholars of verbal language generally, semioticians included (with Vaughan too, as anticipated, when we speak of “language” the reference is to verbal language), postulate a faculty of speaking, a faculty of (verbal) language, understood as an innate mechanism. Among the distinctions posited by Ferdinand de Saussure between *langage* and *langue*, fundamentally there is that whereby *langage* stands for the faculty of language: so that the *langue*, or multiple *langues* are possible, because all human beings are endowed, at the level of species, with *langage*, a specific, special faculty. And with Vaughan we might add that all human beings are born vulnerable and survive because they are nurtured freely to some extent, that is, they are mothered.

In Thomas Sebeok's global semiotics as well (see, for example, his book of 2001) a fundamental distinction is that between *language* and *speech*, where *language* however is not simply the faculty of speaking, but rather an innate species-specific device and a priori. This device appears much before the appearance of *homo loquens*, that is, of *homo sapiens*. From an evolutionary perspective it is antecedent with respect to verbal language, speech, which indeed is based on this device and arises thanks to it, just like the languages of nonverbal communication before the appearance of the verbal as much as after.

The maximum degree in hypostatization of the dichotomous vision between the faculty of speaking, interpreted for the occasion as "innate universal grammar" and (speaker) linguistic competence, accompanied by relative linguistic usage (utterance), can be traced in Noam Chomsky's linguistic theory. With Chomsky it is no longer just a question of an innate linguistic faculty, but even of innate grammatical rules.

Vaughan disputes the concept of "innate" in light of recent findings in the neurosciences with special reference to interpersonal neurobiology. She argues that the so-called innate faculty of language is not at all innate, but rather is acquired in the first year of the child's life through maternal care. She presents her position very clearly on this point in *The Gift in the Heart of Language*, and develops it in subsequent writings.

On Vaughan's account, recent research in infant psychology with such figures as Colwyn Trevarthen (1979), Stein Bråten (1991, 1998), Andrew Meltzoff (2013) has revolutionized our understanding of childhood. This new vision considers the infant as highly social from birth and no longer as passive and solipsistic, and this leaves space for a new vision of mothering. On Vaughan's account the innate mechanism is replaced by what we could call the "mother work schema" or the "nurture work schema," the interiorization of primordial unilateral gifting interaction between "motherer" and infant. In her own words: "This new understanding makes the care-giving mother a partner in altercentric interaction, with an alert and intelligent other, who is already able to represent her supramodally as 'Like Me'. In her interchanges with the mother the child is not only a receiver but also a unilateral giver: of signs, gestures, vocalizations and bodily products" (Vaughan, Personal communication 16 April 2016).

The centrality of giving and receiving in material nurturing interaction is validated by recent studies (see, e.g., Rizzolati and Arbib 1998) on the child's mirror neurons, which communicate "the extremely important idea that each partner in the maternal dyad at least subconsciously knows what the other is feeling when giving or when receiving (and vice versa) and perhaps also knows *that* the other knows. Emotionally, at least to some extent, receiving is giving and giving is receiving" (Vaughan, Personal communication 16 April 2016). All the same Vaughan points out that thematization of "material giving and receiving," of "mother work," "nurture work" is mostly lacking from the new infant psychology, just as an adequate understanding of the maternal, of mothering is lacking in conceptualizations of the gift economy.

Research in interpersonal neurobiology (see, e.g., Schore, Siegel) integrates attachment theory and neurobiology and operates an important shift in perspective placing a more central focus on the mother, showing how *nurture (gifting) becomes nature*, so that the motherer's care is incorporated into the physiology of the child's brain.

However, Vaughan goes a step further to maintain that the core patterns of neuron connections across cultures are necessarily the patterns of giving and receiving, and that this is not sufficiently evidenced, not even in neurobiology. The fact is that the psychological continues to be privileged over "material interactions" when, instead, material interactions provide the very "substrata for the psychological interactions" (Vaughan, Personal communication, 16 April 2016). The growth of the brain, the neuron activations and emotional responses all arise in relation to free unilateral gifts and giving, in the context of what for the child is free gift economy. The gift perspective is common to the maternal, while at once allowing for culturally specific interactions between motherers and their children.

With specific reference to the symbolic order, Vaughan rejects the idea that language learning comes about through innate mechanisms: "Not an innate grammar but the learned patterns of giving and receiving form the communicative mechanism that is actualized in languages and reposed verbally in syntax and "merging" (Vaughan, Personal communication, 16 April 2016). In this sense rather than innate, she describes

such mechanisms as “circumstantial”. From this point view, Vaughan too marks her distance from Chomsky’s linguistic theory.

#### 4. *Material gifting and verbal nurturing*

In *The Gift in the Heart of Language*, conceptions of language learning that not only belittle, but even deny the paramount importance of material gifting by the mother, and of verbal nurturing (which semiotically speaking is also “material,” see Petrilli 2010: Ch. 5 and 2014b: Ch. V), are called to question extensively, carefully and very closely. We could maintain that the motherer does not simply gift language (*langue*) in the sense of the mother tongue, but rather she gifts language (*langage*) itself, the very faculty of speaking, and *langage* is gifting, so that the motherer in fact actually gifts gifting.

On this account Vaughan speaks of *virtualization*: the *schema*, we could say in the Kantian sense, is the *schema of gift-giving*. It follows that it is not correct to say that the sign is that which stands for something that it replaces. The relation is not one of substitution.

There are two levels that run parallel to each other: the level of material things and the level of words. Thanks to the maternal gift, these two levels enter into a relationship that is not static, but rather dynamical and continuously renewed – because it is based on gifting interaction, precisely.

In verbal gift-giving as it gradually emerges in the mother-child relationship, the mother’s gifting finds a correspondence in the child’s gifting, in a relationship that is completely outside the exchange paradigm, given that each time the child makes a request, an observation, expresses something, underlines one of its needs, or plays with words, it “gifts” an expansion of the mother’s visual, experiential, imaginative space. The mother satisfies the child’s cognitive and communicative needs. And as part of the same interactive, I would say here “dialogic” process (where the allusion to dialogism is understood as described by Mikhail Bakhtin 1981), from the very beginning the child’s cries and gestures help the mother to know what the child needs, so she can give her child the appropriate gift.

Moreover, without interpreting language as gift-giving the human imagination is not explained, if not partially, and in this case too only by resorting to innate faculties. The imaginary rises from the fact that language is not based on equal exchange relations: rather than evolving out of equal exchange relations, language always involves a sort of excess. Such excess can only be explained if we abandon the semiotic “standing for” schema. This “standing for” paradigm contradicts and obstacles any explanation of the imaginative use of language. In verbal language there is always a presence-absence relationship, and it is also in this capacity of rendering the absent present, of bringing absence into presence that the gift mechanism functions.

To explain that if it is possible to converse with words this is only thanks to the gift mechanism that subtends them, beginning from the mother’s original gifting to the child – so that linguistic education, education in language is education in the gift, in gifting –, Vaughan refers to Marx’s concept of “the commodity form of value”. The materiality of exchange is not sufficient to explain exchange itself. In this sense, Vaughan speaks of the virtualization of language and its devirtualization into commodity exchange.

Through the gift schema and the virtualization of the shared through language (see Vaughan 2013), we can at last adequately explain linguistic situations like dialogue: if it is effectively a dialogue – where each partner “grows,” so to say, in the relationship – obviously what occurs is not a mere exchange, equal exchange, giving to receive, reciprocal exchange, for the sake of receiving: in this case too we are in the gifting turntaking mode.

The same principle applies when we wish to understand how the relationship between writing and reading functions. The gift mechanism is at work here too. The writer is a giver and reading is not mere reproduction, repetition, it is not the mere sonorization of the text, recitation of the text. Instead, we could claim that reading is “responsive understanding,” to the extent that the reader puts the maternal gift of speaking, understanding, welcoming and listening back into circulation.

Vaughan reflects on such issues explaining, researching and re-elaborating. In addition to dialogue and reading, another linguistic practice that necessarily involves gift-giving is translation. This is a problematic I address regularly and directly in the classroom given

that I teach courses in semiotics of translation. The translator as well is a giver. As such, to translate is not merely to represent a text in another language; translation is not mere reproduction. I could make the claim that translation is a feminine practice. This is not because translators are mostly women, as Jacques Derrida once pointed out in an essay entitled *Qu'est-ce que c'est une traduction rélevante?*, but rather because in the practice of translation the gift of language which was originally received in the relationship with the mother is recovered and put back into circulation.

These are only some areas of the gift, but the central idea in Vaughan's conception of language as gift-giving is that *all of life is based on the gift, on gifting*, on the motherer's material and verbal nurturing, on vocal gift-giving, on verbal gift-giving. This is because giftgiving and language which is based upon it, organize life, distinguish among relationships, establish orientations, orient responses, decide on behaviors, modify situations, indicate ways out, etc.

##### 5. *More reflections on language, gift-giving and imagination*

Vaughan in fact dedicates a part of *The Gift in the Heart of Language* to clarifying that the function of language is not only that of naming. In a sense Saussure also maintained that language is not a nomenclature. But in Vaughan's book, we are not talking about this or that other language, we are not talking about *mother tongues*, so that as Saussure rightly claimed, learning a language does not mean only learning a nomenclature. Instead, we are talking about language as a gift, about language as gift-giving, the gift of the faculty of language itself.

In my own interpretation I would claim that the primary function of language is not that of naming things, but of constructing a world, a human world prone to transformation and growth, a world in becoming, where the role of the imagination is of central importance. So that the fundamental function of language is neither to nominate nor to interpret, but to imagine and create as we search for the other, in response to the other, thereby nominating, signifying, interpreting.

However, on this point Vaughan dissents (personal email exchanges of 16 April 2016, see asterisked note to the title of this paper), and clarifies as follows: “I don’t agree. I think we have to learn the word gifts to which diverse world gifts are related. I also think that projecting the giving and receiving relation on to the world is the way we know it and this is a kind of primordial interpretation of which we are not usually conscious”. According to Vaughan, words are connected to the world on the basis of gifting, so that gifting is the structure of language.

To this I believe I can respond that to underline the role of the imagination in language and interpretation does not mean to undermine the role of nomination. Once we are born into a so-called “natural language,” there is no doubt that we must engage in learning how words relate to the world in that given, specific language. And here Vaughan further suggests that nomination in the usual sense of naming is like claiming – sort of modelled on private property – while a gift concept would be more like accompaniment as the mother does with the child in “joint attention” (personal email communication, 24 April 2016), which again I believe is a perspective worthy of attention.

Moreover, all this is possible thanks to a primordial form of semiosis before the appearance of verbal language for communication. Our allusion here is to a form of semiosis which by definition is a modeling mechanism specific to the human species, a modeling device that Sebeok has proposed we also call “language” thanks to its syntactical structure (Sebeok 1994) – what we could now also call a “gifting device” translating Vaughan – that only subsequently on the scale of human evolutionary development finds expression in different communication systems (on the concepts of modeling, communication and semiosis, see Petrilli and Ponzio 2003, 2013; and with specific reference to learning processes, see also Petrilli 2016b).

Interpretation is possible thanks to the human capacity for imagination: interpretation and imagination are closely interconnected and interdependent. From this perspective, the main function of language *is* the imagination and thanks to this mechanism we are able to proceed as speakers to nomination. The imagination is other oriented and highly creative. In terms of inference it proceeds according to abductive

associative procedure. In terms of Peirce's most renowned sign triad it is regulated by iconicity.

The mother imagines what the infant's needs are. When we speak, in giving and responding to the other each partner in the interaction imagines what the others' communicative and cognitive needs are. In everyday life we each imagine a better life. What we have is a flow of gifts in which the gift is never a question of symmetrical exchange, but rather an extensive process of responding to and anticipating what we imagine are the needs and desires of the other, beyond the limits of equal exchange logic, beyond the boundaries of symmetrical exchange. What we experience is a succession of gifts, a gift-giving process in which gift-giving is never a conditional giving of this for that: "I give you this, only if you give me that," but rather a unilateral gifting mechanism where the bids are always higher in openended turntaking interactional processes.

However, in the economic order of things mothering has been displaced by the market. Instead, Vaughan foregrounds the centrality of mothering/gifting acknowledging that before sentimentality, before love, before subjectivization, before personalization of the mothererchild relationship, before morality, mothering/gifting is structural to the social and as such it is first of all "material." This materiality is endowed with a value of its own, namely gift value, the value of "unilateral giving," of "free gifting," and this is in net contrast with the *do ut des* logic of the market.

From a biosemiotic perspective (where the "life sciences" and the "sign sciences dialogue with each other), Thomas Sebeok showed how we all over the planet are interrelated by a bacterial network which converges with the sign network and renders us all, indeed all life-forms interdependent and coparticipative. Before Sebeok, Peirce and Welby had already shown how we are all interconnected as actors in the great semio-signifying universe, and with respect to this state of affairs, Sebeok posited the axiom that where there are signs there is life, and where there is life there are signs, indeed signs are the criterial attribute of life (Sebeok 1979, 1986, 1994, 2001; see also Petrilli and Ponzio 2001, 2002). All this underlines the sign nature of life, on the one hand, and the vital nature of signs, on the other.

## 6. The “materiality” of words and human values

With her gift economy Vaughan shows that we are all interconnected as “mothered beings”. Mothering/gifting (that is, free gifting) is the original interface between the child and the world, just as it is at the basis of the connection between words and the world. On this account, she finds validation for her thesis in Alan Schore’s interpersonal neurobiology which she relates to research by Valentin N. Voloshinov, author of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1928).

We know that Voloshinov analyses the complex problem of the interrelationship between basis and superstructure indicating the close link with questions of philosophy of language and how the former could benefit from a solution to the latter. He illustrates how the problem of the relation between basis and superstructure can be explained in terms of the “material of the word” (p. 19). The essence of the problem concerns how actual existence, the basis, determines the sign and how (far from a relation of mechanical causality with the basis) the sign reflects and refracts existence in the very process of its becoming.

The word is endowed with ideological materiality to the highest degree and this is what renders it most suitable to register social change, not simply as something that has already occurred, already fixed in ideological terms, but in the dynamical process of becoming, even in its most subtle expressions. Social interactions take place in sign material and are conditioned by social organization, Voloshinov speaks of the “social life” of the sign. Furthermore, all social signs are endowed with value and in the face of the complexity of the basis are accentuated by different values. Signs are everywhere, they are ubiquitous and may even communicate contradictory values. In this sense social signs are “multiaccentuated”. Moreover, the actual process of verbal communication and interaction (semiotic communication and interaction) provides the transitional link between the sociopolitical order and ideology with reference to science, art, etc.

To the question as to which signs enter society’s attention and what determines their value, Voloshinov responds in terms of Marxist dialectics and thus points to the link with the material conditions of a given society, the vital socioeconomic conditions.

With respect to this position Vaughan offers a further response in light of the findings of recent research, and precisely through the neurobiologist Allan Schore (1998, 2003, 2012, 2015) who in his studies on the relationship between external stimuli and the brain emphasizes the “valence-tagging” function in which perceptions of the world are perceived as pleasurable or unpleasurable. With reference to mother-child interaction and how it affects the brain, the mother and her perception of the world acts as a model for the child. This amounts to validating the idea that the self develops in the sharing processes of mother-child emotional-affective interactions.

Keeping account of all this, Vaughan makes the further observation that much of the emphasis of valences “takes place within the framework of the mother-child interaction, as motherers emotionally process the shared environment in resonance with the child”. Motherers satisfy children’s needs unilaterally, thereby investing them with value, emphasizing their importance and creating in them feelings of well being and self esteem. Vaughan describes “gift value” as a positive valence that the mother attributes to the child, which she communicates in her nurturing interaction with the child, and which the child in turn perceives, such that it may even feel a commonality with other positively valenced things.

These processes are semiotic processes, which means to say that they take place through signs, multimodally, initially nonverbal signs, later verbal signs, signaling to the child how the perception is to be perceived. And let me recall here how all this occurs during the initial years of life at least, when human survival is completely dependent upon the other, when the single individual is exposed to the other, presenting itself to the attention in its total vulnerability and “absolute otherness” (Levinas 1961; Ponzio 1996 and 2006; Petrilli 2013). Gifting signs is part of the material nurturing process, which it continues at a more abstract level, in the symbolic mode, especially when a question of communication through verbal signs which as social signs, as hinted above, are totally impregnated with values, intonated, multiaccentuated. Moreover, unilateral giving and receiving processes create relations of mutuality among the participants in communicative interaction, as receivers of the same verbal and perceptual/conceptual gifts. Vaughan explains that

Word gifts are gifts of verbal “valence tags” which are given both to the child and to the things, which are world gifts. By giving and receiving them we create joint attention with others to the words and to the world. In the practice of “joint attention” we receive together with others specific perceptual and conceptual gifts that are available for us in our cultural and ecological niches. By this attention things are “positively valenced,” that is they are revealed as gifts. Even if the perception or experience in question is negative, the attention to it has a gift aspect in that it satisfies our need to know that we should avoid it. (Vaughan, Personal communication, 16 April 2016)

### *7. Maternal gift-giving, a new perspective for language and communication studies*

In Vaughan’s studies of human relationships, of the formation of self and society, “gifting” emerges as the basic unit of analysis in both verbal and nonverbal communication. From this point of view, her work offers an original contribution to our understanding of language and its formation, even at the level of the relation among what she calls “wordgifts,” therefore at the level of syntax. And in the context of what we might call “linguistic mother work,” interpersonal relations are further developed. However, in the face of “civilization and its discontents,” to say it with Freud, of widespread distortion in human relationships to echo Welby, Vaughan invites us to reflect on the relationship between the gift economy schema and our conscious use of language, between gifting and the physiology of the brain, between the gift and consciousness. In this framework there would seem to be no doubt that knowledge of the gift economy has been eliminated and that together with the emphasis on the exchange paradigm our concept of the self has been altered (on the self with special reference to the “semiotic self”, see Sebeok, Petrilli, Ponzio 2000).

In Vaughan’s view, to the economic structure of gifting there corresponds a superstructure of values and ideas. The values of care are the superstructure of the gift economy. Care and gifting are pivotal in meaning making processes, irrespective of gender. Moreover, to evidence the centrality of gift-giving not only in material nurturing but also in verbal nurturing, in language, and to underline the social nature of the gifting mechanism is politically significant beyond the psychological, beyond the neurobiological, beyond the cognitive, beyond the gnoseological.

*The Gift in the Heart of Language* as much as the research leading up to this book and continuing after it, is not only an important contribution to a reconsideration of the role of the maternal for life, whether in the private sphere or the public sphere, the social: it is also a fundamentally important contribution to linguistics (consider the space dedicated to scholars in the sector), to philosophy of language (an analogous space is dedicated to scholars in this area as well), and to the language sciences in general, socio-linguistics and psycho-linguistics included (in addition to the scholars mentioned in this paper so far, studies on the relationship between thought and language by Lev Vygotsky, for example, are also taken into account). If we wish to synthesize what this book aims to communicate, we could even say that it is a critique of political economy in a Marxian sense, but a critique founded on the gift economy and in the last analysis on the maternal gift of language. Through her detailed analysis of the relation between gift economy and language Vaughan shows us how gifting is the fundamental structure of our humanity. But the claim is that the exchange paradigm has eliminated our awareness of the gift economy and that such a shift has altered our self-awareness as a species to *homo economicus* instead of *homo donans*. On the contrary, in Vaughan's vision not only are we *homo sapiens*, but also, if not primarily *homo donans*. Evoking the expression as formulated by Charles K. Ogden and Ivor A. Richards, "word magic" (1923), and to conclude once again interpreting and translating Vaughan's own words, the "gift magic" characteristic of humanity, that which renders human gifting truly human is also the capacity for "meta gifting": "The gift of a gift is a gift, a meta gift" (Vaughan, Personal communication, 16 April 2016).

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