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A Convulsive Encounter with Personified Noise

By *Lara Frisch*

Abstract

This essay will consider the phenomenon of stuttering on two levels: firstly on how this specific communication pathology breaks with language by means of speech, and secondly, how this phonic break opens up the potential of the static.

In the first part of the paper, language will be looked at from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theory that it is an abstract machine (Deleuze & Guattari, 2010) which is divided into systems. It will draw on the social implications in language for the individual as well as the disruptive qualities it embodies when a certain linearity is not respected. On one hand, language is about giving life orders, while life listens and waits (Deleuze & Guattari, 2010, p.84). On the other hand, it is about opening up our perception by means of change.

The second part will be about the disruption that is caused by the act of stuttering. The disruption will first be explored on the level of speech, categorizing it as an accident. On second level, stuttering will be explored as a language in itself, revealing its potential for language but also as a new type of language. The third level of this disruption will consider stuttering as a means of passage, which makes language accessible to variation by exposing it to the static. Throughout this essay, stuttering will be characterised as noise mainly because in linguistic terms it is considered as a pathology.

Examples will be drawn from Dieter Schnebel's *Maulwerke* (1970) and *Glossolalie* (1960-65).

Keywords

Stuttering; Social Self; Linguistic Rupture; Exposure of the Static.

Introduction

Three people are sitting on chairs, a couple of meters apart, not facing each other. They produce seemingly random sounds. They remain motionless from the shoulders down, expressing themselves by moving their head, through facial expressions and by using their voices. Occasionally they address each other in pairs, by directing their heads towards each other, responding to each other's sounds through mimicry and emotional enunciation. There are no real words being pronounced and yet they communicate with each other by means of endlessly varying cues. This is the content which Dieter Schnebel explored in *Maulwerke* and particularly in the part called *An-sätze* (1970). The term 'Ansatz' means an initiation, an impetus, and indeed this is the meaning engaged in this work. Accordingly, *An-sätze* evokes the idea that every attempt to communicate starts with the specific assumption that whatever is going to be expressed is in need of a response.

Particularly when confronted with stuttering, one cannot help but feel the urge to understand what the stuttering person wants to communicate. It is the overwhelming sensation of simultaneously waiting and hoping that somewhere amidst this mixture of verbal interjections, one will eventually encounter a single word to latch onto. Stuttering, therefore, is an intriguing phenomenon, because it challenges the communicative function of language by disrupting its continuity. Yet what does this suspension of language entail?

The psycholinguist Arnold Langenmayr referred to stuttering as *alalia syllabaris*, a speech pathology related to a coordination disfunction of the entire speech mechanism (A. Langenmayr cited in W. Aschmoneit, 1976). However, despite the speech-related flaws, the stutterer is able to function harmoniously in a community. According to linguist Wolfgang Aschmoneit, gestures, mimicry and some minor differentiated phonemes are enough to satisfy the basic requirements and comprehension of the close environment (1976, p.9). Hence communication operates on various levels. Yet, this paper will investigate how far the suspension of language affects the continuity of communication, as well as both roles within the speaker-listener relationship. Thus, if we look at the notion of *person*, which derives from the Latin *personare*, 'per' signifying "through" and 'sonare' meaning, "to make a noise, sound, resound", the ramifications of stuttering go beyond a mere speech-pathology. One could assume then that the event of stuttering changes our perception of the person who is stuttering, momentarily suspending the usual speaker-listener relationship. Hence, a part of this paper will explore the immediate repercussions of stuttering on the speaker-listener relationship.

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The following questions therefore arise: If every attempt of verbal communication starts with the intention of a subsequent response, does this entail a linearity within speech? How does this linearity relate to language? Moreover, what happens if language is disrupted? And what does this disruption incite within the stuttering individual and his/her listener? In order to investigate these questions, this paper first will examine the notion of language laid out by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (2000, 2010) and explore how language can be disrupted by speech pathologies, such as stuttering. Secondly, this disruption will be investigated by looking at the various stages stuttering goes through in being considered as noise: Noise as interruption, a language of noise and noise as a portal. Particularly, the last stage will allude to Michel Serres' concept of *interference* (1991), which exposes the act of stuttering as being part of a larger sonic fluency, described as 'background noise' by Serres (1991).

Language and Order-words

Language is a process which is intrinsically social, because its ties go beyond the individual and form inter-human relations. Gilles Deleuze, in his essay *He stuttered*, argues that language is subjected to a dual process which needs to produce a succession, either via a disjunction or selection of similar terms, or a connection or line-up of combinatory terms (2000, p.149). For Deleuze, language is a system that seeks to continually produce conditions under which it can sustain itself.

He distinguishes between two types of systems: Firstly the homogeneous system, defined by its near-balance; and secondly, the continually unbalanced and branching system (2000, p.146). The first one is marked by its balanced and stable terms and conditions, in which variations or instabilities only affect speech (2000, p.146). Within this type of system, speech is being considered superfluous to the sustenance mechanisms of language. As a consequence, Deleuze argues that disjunctions within such a system remain exclusive and connections remain progressive (2000, p.149). This means that there are no disruptions within language and a certain ordered structure remains. The second system is characterized by a continuous imbalance and branching out (Germ. *Verästelungen*), in which each of its terms varies endlessly according to changing conditions (2000, p.149). For Deleuze, this means that the disjunctions are inclusive and the connections become reflexive (2000, p.149).

In order to better understand what the homogeneous system of language might look like, I will draw on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the 'order-word-phrase' or *mot d'ordre* (Deleuze & Guattari, 2010). It is derived from their assumption that language imposes statements upon life (2010, p.84). In that sense, language does not communicate information, meaning it does not operate between something seen (or felt) and something said (2010, p.85). One could argue that language, perceived as such, is somewhat detached from life, by imposing itself on it. Thus, it works from something heard that *was* said, to something that *is* said.

Deleuze and Guattari demonstrate this by referring to Emile Benveniste's example of the bee, in which he explains that bees have no language because they rely on first-hand information in order to communicate to each other. This means that "a bee which has seen a food source can communicate the message to bees that did not see it, but a bee that hasn't seen it, cannot transmit the message to others that did not see it" (Benveniste cited in Deleuze and Guattari 2010, p.85). Human language is different – it goes from someone to someone else, neither of whom have seen or experienced what they are communicating.

This is made possible by our use of 'redundancy'. This capacity comes with the learning of language and enables us to understand what is said to us and, if necessary, to correct the informational content transmitted to us if it seems unintelligible (Aschmoneit, 1976, p.11). In other words, it places everything that is said in a direct and adjusted social context. It is the social context which becomes ever present as it is being constantly reproduced through language.

According to Aschmoneit, redundancy is linked to our perception. He describes our perception as our ability to assimilate, to decode and interpret information, before associating it with already made experiences in order to initiate adequate actions (1976, p.69). There are various structures into which our perception is divided. Roughly speaking, these structures can all be accommodated in three main perceptions: The consciousness of the body, the visual and the auditory perception. For the purpose of the argument and because numerous studies¹ have shown that the hearing ability of a stutterer is crucial for his/her speech pathology, this paper will only draw upon the auditory perception. Aschmoneit explains that the auditory perception involves various abilities and functions, including aural and auditory discrimination, the memory of auditory sequence, the ability to hear phonemes in words and the localization of sounds in space (1976, p.72-73). As a result of our auditory perception we are able to recognize and assimilate what is being said and act accordingly.

This means that language as such is linked to our perception, which in this paper entails that both systems of language as described by Deleuze are related to perception. For unbalanced systems this engenders that we perceive and recognize previously unknown variations in language, such as stuttering. In terms of the homogeneous system, this means that before order-words can be transmitted, they need to be recognized and perceived. Moreover, Deleuze and Guattari argue that through the transmission and communication of order-words, language perpetually creates a state of possibility. This state of possibility is two-fold. On one hand, order-words carry with them social statements (Deleuze & Guattari 2010, p.90) which provide a ground for social action to take place. For Deleuze and Guattari, society and language are intrinsically related, since language reflects society. On the other hand, every order-word embodies a little death sentence, because it carries

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with it a judgement (Deleuze & Guattari 2010, p.85). The judgement is reflected within the social statement which order-words carry and implies a death sentence because it terminates/marks a termination for social action.

When language is viewed as a homogeneous system, connected to a societal structure, every order-word enables only connections or disjunctions which fit this system. In that sense it can also be referred to as an enclosed system. This means that with the utterance of every order-word, a sequel of social statements is fabricated. Hence, the homogeneous system of language is made possible through dynamic functions like order-words. The order-words as such effectuate its condition of possibility, they fulfil in each instance this condition of possibility' (Deleuze & Guattari 2010, p.85). Otherwise it would remain a pure virtuality, completely detached from the actual, without a constant semiotic distribution, attribution and assignment (Deleuze & Guattari 2010, p.94). For Deleuze, the virtual and the actual need to be in a state of interaction, otherwise they remain in independent pure states (Deleuze & Parnet 1996). This also counts for the unbalanced system which has its own dynamics keeping the process of self-preservation going.

However, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the order-words are merely a coexisting function of language (2010, p.95). Language can exist independently of the order-words. Its existence affirms itself on many levels and with each human utterance, even a stuttering one. The reason for this is that language always presupposes itself (2010, p.95). This means that "language does not operate between something seen or felt, but always goes from saying to saying" (2010, p.95). Deleuze and Guattari describe language as an abstract machine – it is neither universal, nor general and does not even own invariable or obligatory rules. Instead, it is singular with optional rules (2010, p.110). Consequently, it embodies both the homogeneous and the unbalanced systems. Language described as an abstract machine, is a construct whose boundary is the *un-speakable*, namely that which cannot be described or expressed in words (Deleuze, 2000, p.9). Through the course of this essay we will continue to investigate the two systems which will then lead to the assumption that both systems continuously extend the boundaries of language, i.e. the *un-speakable*.

Break with Language

A spectator commented on one of the first times Dieter Schnebel's *Glossolalie 61* (1960-65) was presented on stage. The spectator said that it was easier for him to transform language into music with foreign languages, yet as soon as the languages became intelligible he switched off his musical hearing and immediately tried to understand and get the meaning of what was said (Schnebel cited in A. Riethmüller, 1999, p.23).

Up until this point in the paper, we have distinguished between two systems by which language can be viewed: The homogeneous system, described as enclosed and stable, and the unbalanced system, whose terms change according to the changing conditions. The event of stuttering can thus have different effects on the two systems.

For the homogeneous system stuttering only occurs on the level of speech, thus leaving its basic structure and balance intact. However, the initial mispronunciation or prolonged attempt for the correct pronunciation causes deep tension within this system. This is due to stuttering posing a potential threat, which can cause an imbalance, endangering the continuity of its structures. In reference to the model dealing with language at the level of order-words, the act of stuttering therefore seems to suspend the structural perpetuation of language by disrupting the order-words. Due to their embedded social expectations, the order-words are dependent upon a certain enunciation.

Oliver Bown explains that language is *a sound of society* (Bown cited in C. Lane, 2008, p.49). For Bown this means that with the perception of these sounds comes a conceptual model of how they are produced (2008, p.49). This means that the production, perception and structure of these sounds originated and evolved together. The event of stuttering thus literally interferes with this mechanism and the transmission gets interrupted. The stuttering pronunciation leaves our redundancy without cues to latch onto. In other words, we are not able to recognize what is being said. There is a momentary suspension within the connective tissue that the homogeneous system usually weaves with its order-words, threatening the exclusiveness of its structure.

Noise as Interruption

This momentary interruption causes a huge amount of stress on both the listener and the speaker. Time suddenly becomes oppressive, held in an endless loop. The sole aim becomes the re-establishment of the communicative function of language. The only way to do so is for the listener to wait until a sound comes his/her way in order for redundancy to step in. However, with the mounting pressure and a reckless intention, the speaker attempts to accomplish the correct enunciation, causing a culminating situation which can end two ways: Either the communication gets re-established through the final correct enunciation, or a furious exclamation of nonsense gets interjected.

This situational suspension comes from a deeply felt hesitation which stuttering embodies. Joseph G. Sheehan, who was one of the world's foremost authorities on speech pathologies, described stuttering as an "approach-avoidance" conflict (Sheehan, 1978). It is a struggle between the urge to express oneself and the anxiety to withhold that self-expression. Through this conflict, all sorts of emotions are mixed together, like shame, guilt and fear, which surface with each enunciative attempt. It basically reflects the struggle of the 'personal' attempting to find its accurate mode of expression in the 'social'. This is why even the emotional reading involved within the redundancy

mechanism does not work. Due to its conflicting origin, stuttering refuses to allow its utterances to be interpreted based on their emotional content, leaving aside pace, pitch inflections, dynamics and relative amplitude.

Within the context of the homogeneous structural language, stuttering utterances are not categorized as sounds but as *noises*; a set of noises which are characterized by their emotional intensity, ambiguity in meaning and disruptive, uncontrolled nature. Noise in this sense is marked by violent disorder and obscurity.

Although stuttering is largely seen as an involuntary act, Deleuze and Guattari differentiate between the stuttering of speech and the stuttering of language (2010, p.109). The stuttering of speech is in their terms not enough to make language stutter, it only represents a physical malfunction. Thus in case of a re-establishment of communication, stuttering is merely a speech-related pathology, divorced from language. This is why Deleuze insists that all imbalance and variation, can thus only affect speech (Deleuze, 2000, p.146). As soon as the communication between speaker and listener resumes, it means that the homogeneous system of language remains intact: order-words and their statements do not get broken up or challenged. The only threat they face is their momentary suspension. As a consequence, stuttering becomes a mere interruption, an accident.

A Language of Noise

In case of the nonsensical exclamation, both the listener and the speaker are left without orientation, pending in hesitation. It is the moment that stuttering has interfered with the balance of the homogeneous structure, threatening to make language itself stutter. Stuttering then becomes a call for change.

Within the continuous branching-out process of language, where each term continuously runs through a zone of variation (Deleuze, 2000, p.146), and speech is not separated from language, stuttering is an operator of potential change. It is a system that is open for change by being as inclusive as possible. For Deleuze and Guattari, the expression *to make language stutter* (2010, p.109) intrinsically stresses the importance of breaking with the linguistic structures in order to re-evaluate them. The act of stuttering then becomes an integral part of language itself. The means and ways by which it is expressed remain ever expanding and always incompatible (2010, p.153). The reason for this is in order to become a stranger in one's own tongue, one has to reach the boundaries of that which can be verbally expressed (2010, p.152).

Dieter Schnebel supposes that for language to become another language – a foreign language² – it needs to become independent of its enunciation or the ways it is said. This specifically deals with the tonalities or intonations of words and expressions. Schnebel, for example, uses stuttering in sets, aligning them, thus prolonging their disturbing effect in order to explore the different emotional and tonal qualities they bear. In this way, he attempts to dissolve their previous communicative functions, by creating a type of language that the spectator is unfamiliar with. In *Maulwerke* (1970), words lose their meaning because of the way in which Schnebel arranged their tonality.

This manner of using stuttering still characterizes it as noise because our redundancy is still unable to work with it; however it liberates it from being just an accident or a mere interruption. This is because Schnebel gives it a purpose. By actively working with stuttering, exploring its tonal qualities and organizing its temporal dimension, Schnebel assigns stuttering a new potential. The stuttering noise is given a deliberate space to unfold and create its own system and its own language.

Maulwerke and *Glossolalie 61* can be viewed as works that deal with the creation of a new type of language; a language of noise. In this sense, Schnebel managed to create a new language based on the previous one's faulty, accidental and disruptive elements. This is why for Schnebel, the meaning of words comes in the way of listening (Schnebel cited in G. Nauk 2001, p.103), he wants to get away from the usual linguistic functions and mechanisms. Hence, this language has its own qualities, its own structure by which it works. In Schnebel's case, for example, the spectator is asked to listen and not to understand. Our redundancy therefore may not be able to recognize this language of noise but it assimilates it, making future connections possible.

In an interview with Trevor Wishart, Cathy Lane found a similar approach to the meaning of words:

...what I tend to do is not work with meaningful texts, because I find that the meaning gets in the way. So, even when I am working with pieces where performers use words, I invent the words because I want them to have particular sounds. (...) I'd rather invent the language so that it has the qualities that I want it to have. (Lane, 2008, p.71-72)

Of course, creating new types of languages also engenders playing with the structures of the usual one: In Schnebel's case, the emotional expectations of certain expressions which he interferes with and in Wishart's case using sounds that initially seem recognisable, but end up unidentifiable.

What is interesting to note at this point is that the creation of a new language exposes the endless potential variation within language itself. Even if language seems to be the homogeneous rigid structure that Deleuze and Guattari describe, there is still a possibility for change. The concept 'generalised chromaticism' (2010) that Deleuze and Guattari use, pictures this state of variation that language is immersed in, yet is disguised by the construction of a homogeneous system. What Wishart and Schnebel do is see this potential and expose it by creating new languages.

Deleuze and Guattari also speak of 'chromaticism as style' (2010) and claim that in reference to various authors and poets: "(e)ach ... has his own procedure of variation, his own widened

chromaticism, his own mad production of speeds and intervals" (2010, p.108). Chromaticism in this sense, represents the various new languages poets, authors and philosophers create. Although Deleuze laments the ineptitude of the means by which these new languages are created (2000, p.153), he also argues that they provide the opportunity to rummage around in stories, to shatter opinions and to explore territories which own no memory yet (2000, p.153). The lamenting comes from the frustration of the constant reliance of the homogeneous system, which in essence is the main system in use. From a bigger perspective however, creating subsystems is a play on language itself, exposing it to change. In many ways, the constantly unbalanced and branching system is one of these potential subsystems, in that it always looks for new connections. Hence, it is a tense game with language and its outer boundaries through which new forms of stories and geographies can emerge (2000, p.9).

The chromaticism of Deleuze and Guattari, is an opportunity, a loophole which presupposes an attentive listening and awareness to language. It is an awareness which is based on the ability to estrange spoken words, to distance oneself from the immediate meaning they try to convey. The act of stuttering therefore engenders this awareness by producing immediate estrangement, exposing language at its most vulnerable state – the *un-speakable*. It is the miscommunication, the mis-enunciation which momentarily suspends language, because it gets in the way of passively propagating social statements. However, by becoming aware of this we learn to listen to words as ways of passage (2010, p.122), always circulating beneath the orders.

Noise as Passage-words

Michel Serres refers to stuttering as a 'communication pathology' that is initially part of background noise but essentially causes an impromptu disruption (Serres, 1991, p.49). Communication for Serres is similar to a game in which two players fight against the phenomena of interpolation and confusion (1991, p.50). While this thought goes hand in hand with the one expressed by Deleuze and Guattari on language, Serres takes this a step further by exclaiming that the basic dialectical problem of language is "the third person", or *demon* as he calls it (1991, p.50). This *demon* represents the constant background noise or static which inherently creates communicative malfunctions, such as stuttering. Yet Serres' *demon* is very close to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the boundary of language, which is the *un-speakable*. Although Serres describes his theory of communication in terms of a network, expanding in complexity and variation, it is different from Deleuze and Guattari's concept of language systems. However, both cases have the common potential threat of the discontinued process. The reason for this is that if there is a breach within the boundary of language or a demonic interference in communication, both processes become endangered by being discontinued.

Like Deleuze and Guattari, Serres infers that the communication of a society is designated by being highly noise-free (1991, p.53). This is with regard to the transmission itself and not to its content. Yet by suggesting the term 'background noise', Serres deduces that noise is nonetheless always present. As such, it can be viewed as the plane onto which the communication network is drawn. To mark the distinction between the two, Serres depicts the situation of interference as the moment of separation between noise and meaning (1991, p.204). One can imagine such a situation as various layers interacting with each other. It seems impossible to disconnect one from the other because both are indeterminately interwoven. Thus interference becomes a dynamic state, perpetuating the movement of communication.

The act of stuttering, voluntarily or not, disrupts language and communication. It represents the instant at which the usual background noise steps forth, breaking the structures of transmission and producing a momentary stagnation. The moment language is fractured is the indefinite interval of time in which we begin to sense a kind of ubiquitous static. It is a situation in which this static seems to absorb time and space like a rising mire. The sudden consciousness of this particular instant correlates with the awareness of time standing still and urgently becomes laden with emotions. This is the direct consequence of reducing language to the point where the social self gets disturbingly close to being completely blurred. The abrupt sonic exclamation, full of panic, is a desperate attempt to establish the social self again within a given context. Yet the intention does not correlate with the actual meaning of the vociferation which remains purely abstract to any pre-established redundancy. The stuttering self remains blurred as long as it is not recognised.

And yet, it represents an essential moment in communication. Due to its hesitant nature, stuttering becomes an agent for the background noise to step forth, offering an opportunity for change which not only involves a re-evaluation but also a variation of language. This stems from the assumption (2010, p.108) that language inhibits change. For Schnebel, this change becomes recognizable by exposing the in-between signification that is hidden in every sound (Schnebel cited in Nauck 2001, p.218). The stuttering noise is given a new purpose, that of becoming a portal, a way of passage. Stuttering becomes a passage to the static, the infinite variation that the homogeneous system so dreads. Noise becomes the embodiment of the in-between significance that Schnebel talked about. It is through these passage-words, these portals, that systems and subsystems can connect and new redundancies can be formed.

Conclusion

The paper started with an investigation of the speaker-listener relationship, and questioned why the confrontation with stuttering provokes so much stress within that relationship. In order to do so, language was viewed from Deleuze and Guattari's system theory, which distinguished between the homogeneous system and the unbalanced system. Both systems rely on conditions for self-

preservation: the homogeneous system on stable terms and the unbalanced system on inclusive conditions. This also explains why both the listener and the speaker feel this urge to re-establish the communication before the occurrence of stuttering, for example. Both systems have an inherent linearity dictated by their structure to keep the process running.

However, while the homogeneous system deals with stuttering as an interruptive noise that accidentally suspends communication, the unbalanced system treats it as a means of passage or an initiator for a different language. This is because the homogeneous system is a closed mechanism, relying on its own stable terms and conditions leaving out speech as one of its reproducing features. For the unbalanced system, however, speech is not separated from its generating mechanisms. On the contrary, speech pathologies like stuttering generate the conditions for new types of language, exposing the state of chromaticism that language is embedded in.

There are two ways in which Deleuze and Guattari mention chromaticism in relation to language. The first one is chromaticism as a state of variation, the second one is chromaticism as style. Throughout this essay, stuttering has been referred to as noise. The reason for that is because in terms of language and redundancy, stuttering remains categorized as such. However, in the course of my arguments, stuttering evolved from a mere disruptive noise, to a language of its own, and finally to a means of passage. Stuttering thus becomes a part of the background noise, exposing it to the systems in order to open them up; leading to the formation of new redundancies and perceptions.

Noise in this sense is more than a doubtful utterance. It is a reminder of the static, which too often gets disregarded or adjusted. Its presence is the ghostly gaze of the un-speakable unto language. Each listening demands the suspension of the social self and the strenuous effort this bears.

Footnotes

1. Including Raymond Daniloff, Wolfgang Aschmoneit and Manfred Grohnfeldt. [“]
2. Reference to G. Deleuze and F. Guattari’s quote by Proust: “To be a foreigner in one’s own tongue”. [“]

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Links

Dieter Schnebel *Maulwerke* & early recordings 1988-1999:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=voicNOQDjt8>

Maulwerker:
<http://www.maulwerker.de/aktuelles.html>

Bio

Lara Frisch is a Berlin-based researcher in verbal communication and musical improvisation, currently completing a PhD at the Bauhaus University, Weimar. Her research explores the dialogic processes, which lead to creative collaboration, within musical improvisation. Born in Luxembourg, she graduated from the University of Kent, Canterbury, and the Goldsmiths College, University of London. She has worked on various projects including project management of the TEDxHamburg and TEDxBerlin in 2011. Her research interests are: linguistic ideation, creative collaborations and their dynamics, the role of creative processes such as musical improvisation. The outcome of her PhD is to facilitate and promote the use of effective creative collaborations in academia and culture.

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