FRANÇOISE DOLTO ON LANGUAGED LEARNING *IN UTERO*

Kathleen Saint-Onge

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This comprehensive study explores Françoise Dolto's revolutionary theory that language acquisition begins *in utero* through precocious audition, revealing how unconscious affect and invested sound patterns shape early mental-emotional development and lifelong associative thinking.

Kathleen Saint-Onge demonstrates how generative echoes facilitate self-regulation and scaffold infant development. The book provides psychoanalysts with new theoretical frameworks connecting Freudian concepts of unconscious processes, dreamwork and the transference to prenatal language acquisition. Readers will gain insights into how interrelational "common objects" of familiar soundscapes become unconsciously securing, as affect bootstraps human learning and collaboration. Saint-Onge offers practical applications for understanding the role of the mother tongue in identity formation and the risks inherent in artificial versus natural language environments.

An illuminating read for psychoanalysts, researchers and theorists seeking to expand their understanding of early infant development and unconscious processes alike, this book will particularly appeal to Freudians interested in new applications of classical psychoanalytic theory, specialists in French psychoanalysis, and clinicians working with those experiencing language-related trauma and identity issues.

Kathleen Saint-Onge is a researcher and educator based in Toronto, Canada. She is the author of *Rethinking Autism with Dolto: Syllable Soup* (2024) and *Discovering Françoise Dolto: Psychoanalysis, Identity and Child Development* (2019).

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DÉDIÉ À MATANTE ROLANDE

… and for all those suspended between languages yet true to none,
for whom silence is home.

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Preface

The 2024 kayaking season began so strangely.

My mother had just died. I witnessed her last breaths, then drove from Québec after a snowstorm. I couldn't wait to get back to Toronto, paddle, breathe. It was a mood of desperation. Or was it liberation? So, on 13 April 2024, I headed to my launch on the Humber River. I remember laughing because the water was wild! With more exuberance than sense, I headed upstream to my marker of home—"Mute Bridge."[1] But I failed against the current and rested by holding onto an overhanging branch. Ducks bobbed all around. Maybe I would go downstream a bit, then call it a day. I let go of that branch.

I cannot account for the next 150 metres. One minute, I was in control. The next, my kayak was taking on water. A surge somehow put a passing sucker in arm's reach. I grabbed it hard, almost flipping. As dead branches rushed by, the enormity of the danger finally hit me. I could see where the next wave would have thrown me—into a wide turn of reeds and rocks. I would have lost my boat and ended up in Lake Ontario like any other debris. Over the next hour, I managed to crawl ashore, empty my kayak, and hoist it pulley-style, tree to tree, up a cliff rising 25 metres to a cul-de-sac. I sloshed back along side streets to retrieve my car, loaded my kayak and left. It would be two months before I recovered from whiplash. In an unpredictable river, I had been rescued by a random root.

My takeaway from the day when I almost joined my mother is that a river is not a singular entity but two. There is a visible bodily contour—a familiar aspect recognized by a name. But the water is entirely other, a force all its own, both unknowable and uncontrollable. My autobiographical ramblings aside, I believe that the river proffers a useful metaphor. The reality is that human beings begin life in a state predating consciousness by many months, thanks to potent internal flows of all sorts. There are incalculable transfers from the environment to the mother, from mother to infant (and vice versa), and within the infant's body. And while there are relatively fixed physical components—world, mother, child—what transits between them is what determines survival. This condition of continuous circulation is captured by

a single word: development. Some transfers—nutrients, blood or toxins, for instance—have long been reported. Others are less amenable to inspection because we lack the right tools, or the right questions. In fact, the psychoanalytic project—like it or not—interrogates the transfer of unconscious affect.

Affect is central to our species. For among the most critical circulatory transfers are those leading to the development of what we love, from food to complex "objects," including ourselves and others; and what happiness feels like for each of us. Love expands and contracts relative to objects during our lifespan as our interactions evolve, enabled by interhuman communication. But how does affect—the root of emotional life—get transferred between objects? How does an infant, who is wholly dependent on a mother for survival, ever manage to love differently?

Affect is a determinative part of the intricate condition that is human life. But affect is not as locatable as an organ or arm. It involves intertwining capabilities, networks and transfers of a sort of energy (or quantity) from sites that are not easily identified, in exchanges that implicate multiple areas of the brain—often its oldest parts—and connect very distal bodily constituents, from our toes to our lips. Something flows unpredictably but with tremendous power. And in pondering affect, the notion of fluidity can aid our thinking because we must infer what we cannot see. There are channels of some kind. Circulatory flows can be relatively still—and they can surge or diminish. Flows can bypass obstacles, seeking any means (by finding or creating new paths) to maintain the continuous circulation on which life depends. And circulation is unavoidably modified by "climate." Affect is paramount among our specialized attributes because it enables us to reproduce and to live in complicated groupings that enhance our survival.

The present study is grounded in the work of Françoise Dolto (1908–1988), a psychoanalyst and physician who continually reflected on what it might be like for the infant to overhear while not directly addressed and/or half-asleep—i.e. to attend to incidental sonar streams while not (fully) conscious. Thinking with Dolto, I take infancy to be a psychobiological state when learning happens with, in and through language—as *languaged* learning, to use her term. This is because the fetus dreams in a long-established auditory world. On this view, precocious audition is experienced in a deep, permanent register that influences the ontogeny of associative thinking. The downriver consequences are enormous.

In the interest of reaching new audiences with my third text on Dolto, I endeavour to focus on a single argument—that *unconscious affect is the predominant factor in early language acquisition*. At issue is that "humanization" (as Dolto puts it) secures language *in utero* as an indispensable means of affective self-regulation. But the notion of "self" is soft, since all human beings begin affective regulation during gestation, while necessarily relying on an other. As it turns out, this primary dependency on another human for sharing the co-experience of beloved "phonemes" (as common objects)

persists lifelong unconsciously. That said, Dolto's phoneme is not that of linguists but rather an audible syllable, as will become clear. And her construct is indispensable in addressing why the transference in interhuman exchanges is vital for our affective health.

First language acquisition is generally assumed to have pre-conscious concomitants—i.e. to involve essential developmental events and/or processes prior to the established capacity for consciousness. Paradoxically, the unconscious is seldom a topic for discussion in linguistics or education. Yet the unconscious is real and *not* some theoretical fiction. For long before we can think rationally or make decisions to save ourselves—ensuring our survival—it is unconscious processes that keep us alive. In fact, the continuous circulation of unconscious affect is crucial to human self-regulation lifelong. As expected then, right from uterine life, the mechanism for ensuring continuous affective circulation is developing.

Unconscious affect begins somewhere, sometime, *in utero* as something shared (circulated) with another in whom our life is entrusted. Dolto is prescient in identifying the phoneme as the operational unit in this vital process. For repetitions of phonemes offer echoes that facilitate the recursive triangulation informing networks in associative thinking. This developmental link between audition, affect and associative thinking is why mental life and emotional life are indissociable unconsciously. Investigating, we will travel to the waterlogged basement of linguistics as we chase a question with formidable implications: *What is a word?*

Associative thinking becomes less evident as we develop the ability to be reliably conscious. But it remains as a permanent capacity, one that announces its sustained force unpredictably—such as in dreams, slips of the tongue, word associations, or random encounters that reveal feelings and thoughts that seem unrelated to our present space and time. Objects do this along persistent but convoluted pathways (sometimes at great associative distances) that elude conscious memory but evoke vivid affect nonetheless. In fact, human beings are complicated, layered organisms because our mental-emotional development begins long before consciousness. This start is crucial to our speciation, making us organic beings who bond with one another around significant objects. And the most valuable common objects we will share in our multivarious groupings are words—language.

While the youngest human slowly wakes, long prior to any sense of reality, phonemes heard in repetitions, permutations and combinations in the auditory stream—environmental input—become food for thought. Arguably, if we are so successful as a species, it is precisely because we commence our adaptation to our familial-social habitats so precociously. In turn, these processes trigger the onset of thinking as an associative mechanism that underwrites our later cognitive capacities, while investing our mother tongues with affect. So it is not just that language acquisition begins *in utero*. Rather, starting prenatally, all human learning is languaged.

Dolto offers unprecedented insights that show how our success as a species is enhanced by investments of unconscious affect in phonemes of our mother tongues. The detailed introduction to this volume, which should be read first, focuses on Dolto's thinking to uncover the essential impact of language on the mental-emotional development of the human infant, starting *in utero*. Following this foundational groundwork, which includes contemporary support for Dolto's notions, we will dig deeper through eight chapters that engage distinct issues in language acquisition pertaining to infants. Each chapter starts with the assumption that the notions expounded in the introduction are correct, and charts a fresh foray into a different subset of the pertinent literature.

At this juncture, it is worth noting that over 100 languages are referenced in the pages that follow, yet the number worldwide exceeds 7,100.[2] So any selection of what to include will necessarily be subjective and non-exhaustive. What matters—as we will learn with Dolto—is that the formative linguistic and developmental phenomena exemplified herein are generalizable to all humans as "languaged beings."

I was born in Québec City, Canada, in 1957, the year Chomsky published *Syntactic Structures*. We spoke French at home, but I attended an English-speaking school. Oddly enough, I recall parsing sentences in Grade 2 into NPs and VPs, thanks to an innovative teacher from the US—little upside-down trees neatly drawn in fountain pen on lined paper. Along the bent arc of life, now nearing the age of 70, I write from one of the most multilingual cities in the world, Toronto. I do so at the unsettling dawn of artificial intelligence as a new era in communications. I believe that my time and place are right to rethink, with Dolto, the lifelong impacts of the affective bootstrapping of phonemes that starts *in utero*. My objective is to assist Dolto in reaching English-speaking readers who can carry her into the future, to safeguard infant mental health and the treasury of the languaged species—genuine interhuman language.

In September 1983, Dolto was invited to Montréal by psychologists at l'Hôpital Maisonneuve-Rosemont. That very month, I was less than 10 kilometres away, working on my teacher certification at McGill, capping off seven years (two degrees) in biology and linguistics. I did not hear Dolto speak then—I had never even heard of her, to be honest. But I hear her now, and I hope to help others to hear her, too. What Dolto has to say about the infantile roots of language acquisition is incredibly consequential for human psychical development—and for our sustained mental and affective health. There are also grave implications of Dolto's work for how we regard (and respect) the infant from the third trimester of gestation (at least). And if the fetus at 28 weeks is a young human subject already engaged in languaged learning, then the second-term fetus is in the process of becoming one. Of course, it would be easier (and less controversial) to state that arriving at a better understanding of Dolto is enough, thereby placing beyond our

purview the fraught politics of uterine life and infant care. But that stance would not serve the future well.

What follows, then, is a quasi-inferential (but psychobiologically plausible) investigation into the mental-emotional development of the fetus and neonate, and its inextricability from language. It is a thought project of sorts—an experiment in what happens if we take the offer Dolto puts on the table and run with it. Its essays may seem too bold, bizarre or hypothetical for some palettes. Perhaps I will even be dismissed as *marginale* despite my credentials—an unwanted traveller carrying undesirable psychoanalytic and pedagogical baggage. But it is simply not possible to learn what Dolto teaches without opening up the borders between disciplines.

Dolto makes assumptions about the determinative role of the continuous circulation of unconscious affect in self-regulation that, *if we accept as true*, have predictive value in understanding primary human learning. Grounded in common sense, her formulations help to explicate the gestational beginnings of language acquisition, and our rooted identity in our mother tongues. They also elucidate our precocious linguistic investments in associative thinking, and why our health depends on interhuman communication. With Dolto, we can arrive at reasoned understandings about the inner life of the pre-conscious infant, whose survival hinges on a precocious adaptation to a particular familial habitat—an idiosyncratic early history.

As a species, we are animated by emotions that can be chaotic or calm, whose flows we barely control, even with great conscious effort. So, for the nascent human, the river is wild indeed. Reaching out to passing phonemes on the faint shoreline of reality, at the whim of maternal climate, the infant's affect circulates in a current of words—in dreams of being alive, with others, in language.

Notes

1 As viewed from the water, the overpass carrying Bloor Street across the Humber bears the word "MUTE" graffitied in white 19 times across its northern arch.
2 See, for example, Ethnologue. 2025. https://www.ethnologue.com/insights/how-many-languages/,

Acknowledgements

For months, I fought against this book. I procrastinated by articulating the outline to 44 pages (in 8-pt font). I read more. I stared at Lake Ontario daily for hours. I crossed Canada. I started. I spent three weeks walking solo in southern France. I restarted. But even then, I kept resisting at countless junctures. What can infancy's silences say, when staying silent is so much easier—and safer—than talking?

Twice now, I have represented Françoise Dolto's stunning corpus to English-speaking readers. The first attempt was a psychobiography relating intersections between Dolto's life and theory.[1] The second was a consideration of autism as regression, in Dolto's view, with educational implications.[2] And while I have achieved some success as a published author, have I helped infants enough? That question torments me. So here I am, trying again.

The writing started in earnest in the fall of 2024. I was closer to the age of 70 than 60. It had been 13 years since I first "met" Dolto (through reading), and 10 since I spent two weeks in Paris retracing her steps. It had been 46 years since my first linguistics course, and 13 since my last. It had also been 14 years since my mother confirmed what she had denied for 53 years: that a powerful family elder was a known paedophile. Well-served by the "greater good" of avoiding scandal, he quietly dominated a circle of like-minded others in Catholic Québec at mid-century, in the heyday of Kodak 35mm cameras. I was completing my master's degree when she reluctantly divulged her "news." As the thin ice broke under the weight of my being, I produced a memoir of bilingualism[3]—my deep emotional tethers in French, versus my relative detachment in English. Even now, to save the living from the dead, the admonition not to name remains, for I have inherited my mother's secrets. But I believe that this early history of languaged wounds fastened me to Dolto.

Despite being born into a multi-generational, prestigious family, Dolto was, by her own admission, a misfit—a serious child who asked hard questions. She felt herself not to be of her own time, musing about whether she was "born too early in a century too old."[4] As an infant, she had dearly loved an Irish nanny, who was fired for theft. After months of muteness, well

into her second year, little Françoise spoke her first word—in English. And as a young girl, she believed herself betrothed to an uncle killed in battle, leaving her a widow. Family losses compounded with the death of her elder sister, her mother's unresolvable grief and the ravages of two world wars.

Yet even today, despite Dolto's decades-long success, her material does not easily fit into our times. In France she is a national treasure; beyond its borders she is barely known. She studied how psychical development can be skewed by misunderstandings, yet because she is seldom translated, her ideas are easily misunderstood. Meanwhile, the few translations of Dolto's work that do exist inevitably dissipate her potency because in her mother tongue her writings convey her early history of love and loss in curious word plays, as subtle disclosures of the autobiographical in the theoretical—a "transference in texts," as I have called it elsewhere.[5] In fact, homophonic play is a key therapeutic instrument for Dolto. But in translation, it is unhearable or seems ridiculous—and even some basic examples are lost. For instance, *nourrisson* (infant) = *nourris* (fed) + *son* (sound)—i.e. "the infant fed (by) sound." Yet it is typical of her work for "phonemes" to curiously suggest new pathways for thought, as if corroborating her findings.

In both her thinking and her work, Dolto closely followed Freud's project on the unconscious, for she was concerned about the effects on psychical structuration of what is lived long before we are conscious. Then again, I believe that anyone who has lived through trauma naturally grasps that the unconscious is an actual entity—however nebulous its definition (or location) may be. This is because we are invariably subject to unexpected intrusions throughout our lives from a sort of alternate reality—a powerful, permanent record. Dolto was convinced, and she honoured her convictions.

With this third text on Dolto, I continue to share what I absorbed during a protracted encounter with her through reading that is now in its second decade. The outside literature that could be referenced in support of the discussions herein is impossibly vast, and I make no claims to an exhaustive or representative selection. The field of linguistics, especially, suffers interminable debates, many originating in different beliefs regarding what is (or is not) innate about language acquisition. But I have gathered what I hope is sufficient for grasping and applying Dolto's most critical formulations.

Nearing the age of 80, and mere months before her death from pulmonary insufficiency, Dolto reflected: "There are people who try to do Dolto … I regret it … I don't think I have 'students.'"[6] In believing to her core that "imitation is simian and not human,"[7] she never wished for compliant adhesion among those who read (or heard) her: "If to live well we had to identify with our parents … we would still be Cro-Magnons."[8] So it is with the utmost respect for Dolto, but also with the precious freedom afforded to independent scholars, that I offer the present work to posterity. I am well aware that I am going against the grain here, in being the first Dolto scholar to give her notion of phonemes such theoretical importance.

Any errors, flaws or weaknesses herein are mine alone. There are thousands of citations, and surely some with unintentional slips. My error rate in past publications (about 4%, I think) is a steady source of self-disparagement. I also confess to (again) using "he/him" to refer to the infant/child for grammatical simplicity, in the context of Dolto and the mother (both "she/her"). All translations from French, of Dolto and others, are my own. At this time in the history of our species, it also seems essential to disclose that I did not use artificial intelligence in any form for any aspect of this project—from information gathering, to organization, to writing. The work is, for better or worse, a distinctly human endeavour. If I have failed (again?) to elaborate Dolto's phenomenal importance, I sincerely apologize to her and to the reader. She deserves better.

I wish to acknowledge those to whom my thanks are due. Foremost, I am indebted to my students and professional colleagues, from whom I have learned so much across four decades of teaching and learning in four Canadian provinces and in both official languages. I remain grateful for the amazing educators in the Department of Linguistics at McGill University (Montréal) in 1977–1981, especially Myrna Gopnik and Michel Paradis. I am also thankful for the wonderful professors and peers I worked with in the Faculty of Education at York University (Toronto) in 2008–2016—most notably, Heather Lotherington (a linguist), who guided my master's research, and Deborah Britzman (a psychoanalyst), who stewarded my doctoral research. I also recognize the encouragement I received from Dolto's entourage in 2014–2018. And I am grateful to my past editors and my anonymous reviewers (past and present) for their advocacy. This particular project was expertly guided by Zoë Meyer, my fine editor at Routledge, whose assistance was invaluable.

I thank my three adult children—Peter, Jacob and Sarah—and their partners, along with my grandson, H. Their love strengthens me and their lives enrich my own immeasurably. I am also thankful for my brother, Rick, for his constancy. My mother passed away just prior to writing, but I would like to thank her *in absentia*, principally because of what emerged in those final months, until I witnessed her last breaths. We held "conversations," even though she was nearly mute (yet somewhat gestural), progressively afflicted by vascular dementia and its unexpectedly lucid intervals. A strange softness seeped into the space between us. Channels opened, as if we were meeting for the first time on new ground.

But I owe my greatest thanks to Rolande P., my aunt by marriage, for her attempted interventions "back then," at substantial social risk to herself, as I have since learned. Like everything else about those early years, my record is blurry and incomplete. So I misremembered this compassionate female as a Russian or Polish neighbour. Only now do I realize that her "foreignness" stemmed from her speech register (as a nursing professional) being more formal than my maternal clan's joual. Long gone from Québec City, I had

seen her only once (at my father's funeral) over the course of more than 40 years until she came to my mother's funeral, seeking my attention, and we shared precious moments together. Years ago, in therapy, I believed that I had recovered the name of this woman—Ro*h*an—as if a patchy long-distance call distorted a precious transmission. But I remembered well enough. I never forgot. And what I learned, when my mother died, is that she never forgot either.

My most trusted witness just turned 100, outliving almost all my other elders. To me, that feels like a huge victory for hard-won truth. And one of the hardest battles to win, ever, is to convince adults that infants remember things indelibly—however improbable that may seem, and however messy that recall may be. They do not hold "memories" in the usual sense because infants are pre-rational, pre-cognitive and pre-conscious. But they *do* inscribe salient aspects of their world.

In a phrase resonating inside me for many years, Dolto relates the larger purpose of life:

> The very fact of writing is for leaving a witnessing. The one who has written or created, to witness his passage, does so for others. These are witnessings that we gather like blades of grass, everywhere! … That's what it means to be a human being! Our behaviour is always with rapport to a common oeuvre that, even if it is not in the same moment, is an oeuvre in time.[9]

Here, then, are a few more blades of grass in service of the common oeuvre of arriving at a better understanding of the foundationally human process by which we come to language, in earliest infancy—and language comes to serve us. A witnessing is all it is, and all it can ever be.

Notes

1 Saint-Onge, K. 2019. *Discovering Françoise Dolto: Psychoanalysis, Identity and Child Development*. Abingdon: Routledge.
2 Saint-Onge, K. 2024. *Rethinking Autism with Dolto: Syllable Soup.* Abingdon: Routledge.
3 Saint-Onge, K. 2013. *Bilingual Being: My Life as a Hyphen*. Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
4 Dolto, F. 1989. *Autoportrait d'une psychanalyste (1934–1988): Entretiens avec Alain et Colette Manier.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, p. 46.
5 See Saint-Onge, K. 2019. *Discovering Françoise Dolto: Psychoanalysis, Identity and Child Development*. Abingdon: Routledge.
6 Dolto, F. 1986/1988. "Des jalons pour une histoire: Entretien." In J. Aubrey et al., *Quelques pas sur le chemin de Françoise Dolto* (pp. 11–42). Paris: Éditions du Seuil, p. 33 [emphasis in the original].
7 Dolto, F. 1974/1994. "Réflexions sur le problèmes de l'enfance inadaptée." In C. Halmos (Ed.), *Françoise Dolto, Articles et conférences, II: Les Chemins de l'éducation* (pp. 327–334). Paris: Gallimard, p. 30.

8 Dolto, F. 1983. "Françoise Dolto parle (Dialogues québécois)" [Video]. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_–DXyKF5RU
9 Dolto, F. 1971/2003. "Pulsions de vie, images du corps, langage." In C. Manier & É. Kouki, *Françoise Dolto: La vague et l'océan, Séminaire sur les pulsions de mort (1970–1971)* (pp. 192–203). Paris: Gallimard, pp. 193–194.

Introduction

The Essential Dolto: "Archaic" Development and the Fetus as a Meaning-Making Being

On my inaugural visit to Paris in 2014, I bought a madeleine at the first bakery I found. It was delicious, but I did not pause to savour it or reminisce. It was not Proust's madeleine, after all—just *a* madeleine. In his poignant description of involuntary memory, Marcel Proust shares his joy at a single crumb—the inexplicable return of lost people, places and feelings. His madeleine is a fine manifestation that certain objects evoke affect, and they do so along enigmatic associations. Deep interconnections return everything from love (or fear) to forgotten things, others, locations and moments—including our own selves in distant times. This process operates in PTSD, as what is associated with trauma is affectively marked. But joy can return haphazardly too, as it did for Proust. It is as if affect were contagious along associations.

Associations are random and multisensory. We feel things to our core, triggered by a taste, touch or smell. It's as if "associative thinking" comes from another part of our brain altogether. In fact, it does. For it issues from structures formed early in gestation, wherein what is mental and emotional is interwoven. The affect associated with certain objects also has an aspect of permanence. Years go by yet our feelings are still fresh, as if the past were indelibly present. This is because every human is a layered being. There is a substratum in each of us that is unconscious beneath what is conscious. It may not be comfortable thinking of ourselves as organic entities indebted to primitive processes, but we are. And as we will uncover, the enduring potency of our unconscious capacities is a strength. Françoise Dolto's insights come from taking this strength seriously.

Dolto leverages three ordinary facts to extraordinary ends: first, the fetus has an unconscious life; second, the fetus can hear (normatively); and third, mother tongues (MTs) offer sound objects. She then infers the phenomenal implications: language acquisition and associative thinking begin *in utero*. But how Dolto analyses the "ordinary" will require a precarious dive into her work.

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Unconscious Affect

The first concept to consider is *unconscious affect*. Dolto's view (like Freud's) is that it is best conceived by a hydraulic model, as a "libidinal force, a blind force that, like a sea, must find a way to flow."[1] As such, she evokes notions of blockages and bypasses, and she stresses that pathways are unique and unpredictable: "Unconscious force, emanating from the libidinal energy of the subject, has a tendency to manifest in a repeated manner according to a rhythm that varies with each individual."[2] Put another way, "unconscious libidinal organization differs for each person."[3] Dolto assigns this unconscious force to the service of survival driving all organic life: "Every instinct, as a primitive manifestation of biological life, [is] a pressure that drives to action."[4] And unconscious affect has a formative impact on human mental and emotional development simply because "the unconscious is not an obscure, mute receptacle of useless psychical representations."[5]

Dolto maintains that the human infant *in utero* commences psychical life in a "place-time of existential security."[6] She infers that unconscious affect circulates between the mother and fetus as "quantities of synchronous external and internal meetings take on the value of languaged[7] signs that, for them [fetuses] alone, have the meaning of speech."[8] At stake are "rhythmic exchanges"[9]—a "specific rhythm for each baby"[10]—that is effectively a "preverbal language between the mother and her child."[11]

This precocious communication circulates unconscious affect along what Dolto calls "archaic plans."[12] Thus, months before consciousness, interhuman communication roots a "biological, affective truth."[13] This unconscious exchange contributes to development *in utero* by forming a "unitary structure in the interior"[14] that symbolizes unconscious affective security. From here, unconscious affect remains in motion lifelong, driving our emotional lives. This is because vascular circulation signifies survival in organic lifeforms. The system regulating unconscious affect is no exception.

Working devotedly with patients across five decades, Dolto asked herself what, exactly, might "take on the value of languaged signs" for each.[15] She concluded that precocious hearing in infancy—beginning *in utero*—contributes most prominently. The mechanism involves the transfer of unconscious affect from mother to infant, whereby sound objects serve as languaged signs in that circulation. But our notion of "object" will need to be soft to follow Dolto's thinking about "the communication of words, that is to say of subtle things, more subtle than liquid."[16]

The transference of unconscious affect depends on the intimate relationship of the fetus with the other on whom survival depends, who is experienced as if being the "self." At issue is a primitive, unconscious identification "through the dependence for survival in which the infant finds himself with respect to … his other himself."[17] After all, during gestation, the circulation of blood and nutrients requires this bond of dependency. So it is, too, that we

learn to self-regulate the flow of unconscious affect in response to objects by sharing it during a period of gestational co-existence. And we—as the pre-eminently languaged species—begin this learning using languaged signs from the environment, as our first affective valuations are co-constructed.

The trusted "other" is at first the mother. But through maturation, it can be any other with whom we feel unconsciously identified as "the other similar enough to oneself to be in security."[18] This need for an unconsciously similar-enough other will remain crucial to the transference of affect lifelong. Why would it not? Why would a process so integral to our survival—onboarded so early—be dispensed with during development? Instead, like all indispensable functions, it is permanently installed. But unlike blood or nutrients—which are confined to each member of the dyad following parturition—unconscious affect keeps circulating, maintaining continuity between the womb and our "aerial life."[19] As such, it is an indispensable source of existential security serving our affective self-regulation. Language underwrites this vital mechanism.

Each one of us is formed in an archaic history with an indissociable other with whom objects must be affectively co-experienced. Dolto describes it inimitably: "Everything happens as if gestation then infancy were periods of affective as much as somatic incarnation, as if the fetus constructs himself according to an organo-emotional register induced by his mother."[20]

In all bodily systems, continuous circulation is essential to health, whereas constriction or cessation threaten survival. Likewise, affect needs to circulate continuously. As we mature, we will gradually shift our unconscious affective investments from prior to new objects—substituting objects along associations that maintain affective continuity—while pathways naturally lengthen between archaic and contemporary investments: "The psychical pleasure of communicating with another psyche … via the symbolic function, which is specific to human beings, permits the substitution of pleasure from a short circuit of desire … to a longer circuit that mediatizes pulses."[21]

At stake is the pivotal role of language in our developmental capacity for expanding fields of objects for unconscious affective investment, at progressively greater associative distance—i.e. the transformation of "a 'short circuit' of desire to … a long circuit of communication."[22] Successful transfers (substitutions) are crucial because, as Dolto explains, "pleasure can never be renounced without an exchange for another [pleasure]."[23] But this is not always easy or possible given the objects on offer—especially when environmental changes risk object losses. Dolto uses the term "snailing"[24] to explain how affect may then wind around, circulating in smaller and smaller pathways, reinvesting old objects, in a "dynamic involution"[25] that limits the outward diffusion of affect onto new objects. Reserves of affect may become inaccessible (trapped) as a result. Thus, Dolto qualifies the challenge of object relations in childhood in terms of "the sacrifice that reality imposes."[26]

Conversely, Dolto proved in countless interventions that even the most deeply regressed individual could be healed by locating (i.e. refinding) lost reserves of affect along associative pathways to put it back into circulation, enabling the progression of emotional life. However, the task is not easy, and regression is seldom spontaneously reversible;[27] so emerging from this state will require a "call beyond,"[28] as she puts it. The process is akin to tapping a source of water. She explains: "The human being has his roots in his relation to the other, his first other, in unconscious communication."[29] This "archaic subbasement"[30] of relations of dependence provides a crucial "system of affective relays."[31] And by (re)circulating unconscious affect, "words, just like other objects, can bring a child to reconnect with the epoch when he was not weaned … [as] a reparative relation of the epoch of primary narcissism."[32]At issue is that language is a means for maintaining the continuity of unconscious affect during maturation—a lifesaving link with that archaic place-time of existential security.

But we pause Dolto to seek corroboration. The respected researcher, Alicia Lieberman, attests to the pivotal role of affect in infant development—both physiological and psychical: "Relationships become embodied in the child's biology because parental responsiveness shapes the development of the neurological systems involved in the child's responses to stress and social behavior."[33] The adaptive value is clear: "Babies … remember overwhelmingly frightening events because it is in the evolutionary interest of their survival."[34]

In turn, other researchers help to elucidate the critical difference between affect and emotion: "Full-blown conscious emotions are re-representations or constructions of affectively significant situations … Emotion is an elaborated, conscious state that is memorable and hence useful for self-instruction … drawing a sharp distinction between affect and emotion."[35] Affect precedes emotion and differs by not implicating conscious cognition: "Emotions … [are] interpreted affect or affect with a cognitive-perceptual frame … Feeling is undifferentiated positive or negative affect … Specific emotions are transformations of feeling by appraisal … Emotions … are cognitively elaborated states of affective feeling."[36]

As a result, "investigators of emotion have become increasingly interested in the role of subcortical processes in emotion,"[37] because "behavior is controlled in a bottom-up way by unconscious affect"[38]—and it is impacted by "unconscious priming."[39] They elaborate:

> To the extent that the amygdala is involved in fear and other emotions, this low route appeared capable of generating emotional responses before the organism could know what it was responding to or have any experience of fear. This finding was taken to imply that cognitive appraisal is not required for emotion. *It would be difficult to overstate the impact of this discovery on thinking about emotion*.[40]

Walking along a low neurological route, so to speak, the fetus has unconscious affective responses prior to conscious experience. There is a gradual elaboration of affect from its source(s) in primitive brain functions designed to detect patterns geared to enhancing viability: "The amygdala is sensitive to novelty and violations of expectation."[41] Simply put, the fetus can deploy "low-level, nonconscious automatic processes"[42] in the service of his survival.

Another respected voice on infancy, Lise Eliot, surveys new findings on brain development in the fetus: "After three full months in the womb … [the fetus] has fairly well developed mid-and hindbrain structures."[43] And from the second trimester, subcortical processes are active because "neurogenesis begins as soon as the neural tube forms (at three weeks of development) … and is largely completed by eighteen weeks."[44] Moreover, this prenatal reliance on early structures endures even beyond parturition, so that "in newborns, brain activity is largely confined to subcortical structures such as the brain stem, part of the cerebellum, and the thalamus."[45]

Eliot considers the infant to be an emotional being: "Emotions dominate our early lives more than they ever will again."[46] As she says, "our emotional and social lives are governed by the large set of neural structures known as the *limbic system*"[47]—and "the hub of the limbic system … the amygdala … [is] derived from an evolutionarily older part of the brain, has a more primitive structure, and accordingly develops earlier than the many-layered cerebral cortex."[48] Other researchers also trace the roots of emotion to the pre-cortical brain: "The limbic area that has been consistently implicated in emotional processes in a variety of situations is the amygdala."[49] As a result, "babies really can sense the mood of those who are caring for them even if it is at a subconscious level."[50] Therefore, "early life can be very stressful."[51]

In sum, unconscious affect is generated by pre-cortical brain structures and processes that form *in utero*, and it is operational from the second trimester (at least). Unconscious priming attests to lower-level neurological capacities being sufficient for non-conscious, non-cognitive, emotional responses. Unconscious affect impacts self-regulation and has clear adaptive value.

Precocious Audition

The second concept of particular interest is *precocious audition*. Dolto insists that "the infant hears *in utero* … through amniotic fluid … [so] the fetus already has an extraordinary social life, right from the fourth month of life."[52] Her time frame is unambiguous: "Seven months, that is nonetheless 9 and 7: sixteen months of life."[53] To be clear, Dolto is concerned with the sequelae of the gestational onset of audition on the infant's mental and emotional development.

The fetus is alternately asleep and awake, with longer wake times and more established rhythms (somewhat independent of the mother's) closer to due

dates. But postnatally, irregular sleep-wake rhythms continue for months, as carers know well. In short, parturition itself does not suddenly confer the capacity for reliable consciousness. As Dolto explains it, "the child is in a state that is between the unconscious and the conscious, all the time, and there are things that he registers."[54] He remains passive vis-à-vis the world as weeks go by, while his mental-emotional life is "seeded"—nourished and enriched—through the "unconscious activity that is the dream."[55] In turn, what he hears becomes his "sonar heritage"[56]—one that the infant will carry forward into his affective relationships with proximal others. It is a primary adaptation that starts *in utero* in the service of viability—survival—and it is an idiosyncratic experience: "Sounds … interweave with the perception of his body in tension due to needs, or in phantasms of desire, [and] become signifiers that are impossible to decode. These sonar signifiers … [are] valid for him alone."[57]

As a result, Dolto says, "for a child, everything is meaningful language, all that happens around him"[58]—all is language.[59] Not just words, or even their constituents, but potentially any sound can have affective value for the (m)other on which the infant's life depends. Dolto further believes that fetal listening to the sonar signifiers making up our sonar heritage is a critically influential factor in the development of our affective life: "Language … is the most germinating, the most inseminating."[60] And since this passive listening is experienced, by definition, prior to the onset of reliable consciousness, she assumes and considers the unconscious concomitants matter of factly: "Knowledge of the unconscious is simply reality approached from a new point of view, with a little anteriority."[61]

The most valuable signifier experienced through precocious audition is the mother's heart. Dolto stresses that it is loud for the fetus, perceived as "a two-time (double) rhythm, the basic sign of vegetative life."[62] This rhythm is languaged, a signifier, because it unconsciously conveys an assurance of survival. In other words, it installs unconscious affective continuity as existential security:

> The cradle is a two-time rhythm corresponding to the tic-tac the child heard *in utero* of the heart of his mother, of his own heart that he hears … if he is hearing. And if he is not hearing … nonetheless, he had the perception of his umbilical cord that beat under his hand when he touched it.[63]

For Dolto, "audition of the maternal heart is already languaged for the human fetus [as] a signifying element for the symbolic function [and] proof of an interhuman relation."[64] Other sounds from the mother's body (or her environment) can also serve as "auditory supports that are rhythmed … that are non-verbalized … [and] non-verbalizable."[65] All these serve as "phantasmatic archaic languaged landmarks, articulated with digestive perceptions,

associated with the souvenir of the tutelary presence of his mother … [as] signifying resonances."[66]

Audition, which begins so precociously in gestation, is relatively unaltered by parturition. It is a vastly different story for vision, touch, taste or smell—these are experienced very differently in the pre- versus post-natal environment. So audition will normatively have the dominant role in delivering unconscious affective security postpartum as "auditory replacement objects for the maternal presence."[67] The implications for the MT are staggering. And Dolto is compelling: "Interpsychical communication is happening … in fetal life,"[68] while the "voices they hear right from the age of four months [gestation] … draw them to be born to be in relations with them."[69]

So what happens if a fetus cannot hear (well)? Palping the rhythms of the umbilical cord, hands are instruments for affective self-securitization for all infants, starting *in utero*. This uncontested fact is sufficient to account for how even profoundly deaf infants elaborate a rich psychical life. Dolto had an acknowledged interest in the Deaf, and she stressed the imperative of teaching sign language to infants: "The hands, which are important for all humans, are particularly to be educated in deaf children,"[70] for "the child who does not have phonemes expresses himself … by his manual address."[71] Right from their receptivity to rhythm *in utero*, an infant's hands manipulate objects that his significant others invest, delivering a return of affect: "The hands are supports of the presentification of the other in space and time, the other momentarily absent of which these objects have a co-existential sense of security."[72]

As Dolto narrates, the hands secure self-provision: "Automaterning begins very early for a child … by putting in his mouth that which he needs, either because he is hungry, or to get acquainted with this object."[73] Thus, "momentary absences of the mother … are overcome by games of hands, [these] grabbing mouths."[74] In sum, hands have a crucial role in affective self-securitization: "All partial objects are for him [the infant] representations of co-opted breast-mouths when he can take them in his hands … [to] play at total interpsychic communication with the mother, by the mediation of these partial objects."[75] Dolto even refers to the functioning of "manual zones … [as] 'mouth of hands,'"[76] because securing needed objects for oneself is fundamentally a form of self-feeding.

We learn that what makes us most human—language—is, ironically, underwritten by what makes us most like every other living thing—the drive to survive. And we survive because of language: "[The baby is] in the emotional impact of his parents, at the discretion of sonar syllables, modulations and affects he perceives intuitively … It is as if all affects accompanied by phonemes incarnated a primary narcissistic mode of being."[77] That said, Dolto admits that the notion of languaged learning in the fetus "is so shocking that parents and adults prefer to ignore it."[78]

But we pause Dolto to seek corroboration for precocious audition *in utero*. The renowned specialist in early auditory competence, Rita Eisenberg, writes

that "cochlear function is demonstrable as early as the fifth fetal month, by which time both middle and inner ear structures have reached full adult size."[79] She states clearly that "the precocious development of the human auditory system is documented by anatomic and physiologic studies."[80] The verdict is unequivocal: "The fetus has been shown [to be] responsive to pure tones and other sounds."[81]

Eisenberg shares that the conveyance of affect is the most salient aspect of sound to which the fetus responds: "Almost any index of newborn auditory behavior shows range-dependent frequency effects … [and] these range-dependent frequency differences found in infants have correlates that, later in life, relate to what commonly is termed *affect*."[82] Infant audition is especially sensitive as "the auditory system is enormously complex … [and] marvellously well-organized for analyzing patterns that vary in the time domain."[83] In turn, this critical prenatal ability to detect patterns through listening *in utero* impacts language acquisition: "Pattern-bound behavior may bear directly upon the development of communicative functions."[84]

Eliot agrees: "Human babies, in particular, hear much better at birth than most young mammals."[85] The reason for this is that "the auditory cortex matures earlier than any other part of the cerebral cortex, with the exception of areas involved in touch perception"[86]—while her mention of touch highlights the use of hands in feeling rhythms. Eliot shares studies showing that "most fetuses begin hearing by early in the sixth month of gestation."[87] Therefore, "fetuses are capable of hearing in the womb, at least throughout the last trimester of gestation."[88] And the womb is acoustically favourable: "Sounds are transmitted remarkably well from the outside world,"[89] while "the mother's own voice … is actually louder to the fetus's ears than to outside listeners."[90]

Eliot also believes that "a baby's early experience with language profoundly and permanently influences the range of speech sounds he will later be able to perceive and speak."[91] The implication is that "all the listening children do, from the third trimester on, importantly shapes the way their brains become wired to process and understand different sounds."[92] It is, essentially, an early adaptation to the environment through the MT:

> If any type of prenatal stimulation is going to make a difference to a baby's mental development, it is auditory input. Because hearing begins so early, and because sounds penetrate the womb so well, they are probably the best tool for stimulating a fetus's rapidly developing nervous system.[93]

In effect, language and the nervous system mature in tandem. Eliot also emphasizes how "prenatal hearing actually begins shaping the development of language areas of the brain."[94] At issue is that "every fetus is naturally immersed in a rich auditory environment, much of which will remain

familiar after birth."[95] Notably, the continuity of audition between the pre- and post-natal environment is significant. Eliot attributes this ability to the enhancement of individual viability: "A young child's environment directly and permanently influences the structure and eventual function of his or her brain … tipping the balance for long-term survival in their favor."[96]

In turn, fetal audition makes prosody the indicator of the MT:

> [The neonate] can't yet distinguish individual words but is quite sensitive to the overall melody or intonation of spoken language. It is these differences in "prosody" that newborns primarily use to distinguish different voices. Very young babies can even use prosody to distinguish different spoken languages.[97]

Eliot concludes that "hearing is arguably a baby's most important sense … [and] hearing is also vital to emotional development."[98] And she invokes the infant's sonar heritage: "By birth, babies already have about twelve weeks' worth of actual listening experience, and they have even become somewhat discriminating in what they like to hear."[99] She further insists that "newborns apparently have a keen memory for their prenatal auditory experiences."[100] For example, one study showed that newborns "remembered and preferred a story they'd heard only in the womb."[101] Another demonstrated that neonates "recognize many stimuli that they were exposed to extensively before birth."[102] She adds that fetal learning, which enhances human viability postpartum, means that "our appreciation of different speech sounds is essentially instinctive."[103]

Other researchers concur that "acoustic features are reliably associated with affect-related arousal."[104] The mechanism is influential *in utero* because the neural organization of the fetus is sufficient: "Vocal signals 'work' because they have an impact on listeners at comparatively low levels of neural organization by eliciting emotional responses."[105] As such, the fetus is naturally subject to the "effects that sounds have on listener affect."[106] Individual infants will be affected differently by the same sounds, because "speech acoustics are imbued with 'indexical' or 'personal' cues,"[107] and "affective responses to highly similar sounds may be quite variable."[108] Even identical twins do not have identical wake-sleep profiles, positions, proprioception, perception or audition. As a result, they will not be receptive to particular words in precisely the same way.

To recap, audition develops early in gestation. From the third trimester, the fetus is responsive to sounds and patterns, demonstrating emotional responses to listening. Precocious audition *in utero* impacts neurological development, enhancing the neonate's receptivity to his MT. There are instinctive and adaptive aspects of early language acquisition.

Invested Phonemes

The third concept we need to examine is *phonemes*. I believe it is here that Dolto's propositions are truly unprecedented. For Dolto, the phoneme is the operational unit during the precocious human education that begins *in utero*. She infers the value of phonemes from common facts about early development. Uncontestably, the fetus (normatively) experiences auditory input for months, and language offers continuous input from pre- to post-natal life. Additionally, all languages are comprised of repetitive sound "objects," and neonates can detect something of the emotional charge of voices.

That said, Dolto considers the phoneme from the naïve (non-linguistic) point of view. For Dolto, the phoneme is an audible, pronounceable chunk of sound that can form a word on its own or when combined with other phonemes. It is what the non-specialist hears as a syllable. In a nutshell, Dolto believes that "phonemes are the elements of articulated language."[109] And the key to her analysis is that phonemes recur in various permutations and combinations—repeated, recombined and/or transposed within (and between) words. In short, phonemes are sound units that are subject to patterning. Languages obviously differ in their potential phonemes. But what matters is *not* understanding what is heard. Rather, it is about detecting occurrences in a sound stream.

Linguistically, phonemes are described as the smallest units of sound in a language. Over 800 phonemes have been identified in the world's languages, although each uses only a limited subset. But what concerns Dolto, instead, is the sound unit of greatest value to the youngest human learner as a non-technician. For example, in English, the sound /s/ on its own is insufficiently significant as a patternable unit: it is non-discrete by virtue of appearing overly frequently and non-remarkably (onomatopoeia aside). On the other hand, for example, in my Canadian dialect, the phoneme /si/ (e.g. *see, sea, ce*dar, Nan*cy*, re*ce*de, etc.) would be significant and highly patternable. What matters to the typical listener is not the acoustic properties of a sound (as it does for linguists), but rather the distinctiveness of a group of sounds that routinely coincide in the auditory stream. So accents and even idiolects will impact the possibilities. Case in point: *aunt* rhymes with *slant*, and *route* rhymes with *shoot* for me—but not for all English speakers.

It is not a long stretch to predict that homophones will sound like identical echoes. Dolto is astute in remarking that homophones are indistinguishable for the fetus and neonate, who both lack co-ordinates in reality—i.e. the capacity to confirm what is what. How is *dough* not *doe*? Or *bare* not *bear*? Homophones collapse onto the same phoneme during precocious audition, even in multisyllabic words (e.g. *din*ner = sud*den*, din*ner* = mi*nor*, etc.), and in proper names (e.g. *Jo*anne = *jo*king, Jo*anne* = *an*swer, etc.). Long before puns, this is the first form of homophonic play. And play it is, because the infant who detects familiar phonemes enjoys greater affective diffusion.

Multilingualism also impacts the prevalence of phonemes in the auditory stream. For example, *mitaine* (mitten) in French is phonetically /mi/ /tɛn/, but in English, these phonemes say "me ten." Until the infant has a greater sense of reality, the language games are wild, because odd suggestions are embedded too: is "mitten" a disclosure to the bilingual child that the speaker is 10 (years old)? As absurd as this might seem, nothing prevents such misinterpretations in infancy. Languages replete with (near-)homophones of the mother's tongue will more easily facilitate the return of invested phonemes, making learning less anxiogenic because unconscious affect will circulate freely; whereas a language associated with trauma (even the MT) can become powerfully anxiogenic, yielding a feeling of being "trapped through language."[110] On the other hand, what makes languages most difficult to learn, as it turns out, is the anxiety generated when affective circulation is impeded—i.e. the "risks [of] breaking links of filiation."[111]

Dolto notes how "each child develops his autonomy as a function of words—from phonemes, their sonority, the timbre of a voice … [as] interiorized audition puts the child in security or insecurity."[112] She stresses the "potency of the most archaic phonemes"[113]—our oldest affective investments—describing these inimitably: "Verbal pre-language transitional phonemes have something paranormal … [as] language of the relation child-mother or child-father … unconsciously conjugated with a sensoriness that seems to answer from being in a passive state."[114]

As a result, without anyone noticing, children are constantly living out "archaic object relations."[115] Archaic investments endure, transferring to new objects—always in continuity. This is the essence of our layeredness—our living consciously atop a permanent unconscious record:

> At the same time as we live our relation to the other, logic, referring us to the meaning of words, we also live on *another register* a relation to which we do not pay attention, from (in) the domain of the unconscious … Clear language carries, when it is spontaneous, at the same time as what is manifest of its speech, a *latent speech*, the language of the unconscious.[116]

Even after parturition, "the first name will be the phoneme(s) accompanying the sensorium of the child … from birth to death."[117] And when babbling begins, the phoneme will remain operational in unconscious continuity: "The newborn babbles and, for his own ear, emits sounds that, in echoing the maternal voice, restituting for him the illusion … of her presence."[118] That is why Dolto insists that "the roots of a human being are in language"[119]—i.e. our "affective roots."[120]

As the portmanteaus of phonemes, "vocabulary words are a very good example of a transitional object that the child acquires to never be separated from it."[121] At stake is the experience of unconscious security which they