

# (Im)material Language: Revealing the Body through Metaphor

Original Study

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**Abstract:** When Roman Jakobson, based on his exploration of the problem of aphasia, distinguishes two aspects that characterize language – metaphoricity and metonymy – he touches on an important issue that will become a central theme for some of his followers. This question is the materiality of language. From the point of view of the aphatic himself, metaphoricity and metonymy express two extreme ways of relating to the material of language. A productive elaboration of this thesis in the history of semiotics has been provided by Julia Kristeva, who radicalizes Jakobson's conclusions by working with the fundamental concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis. In the paper, I will compare Kristeva's approach to that of Jacques Lacan and attempt to reconstruct the theoretical assumptions that allow Kristeva to ascribe to metaphor a privileged role that consists of the constant opening of the sphere of the sign towards the body of the subject. To illustrate some important aspects, I will turn to Vítězslav Nezval's novella *Sexual Nocturne* (1931), where the connection between language and body plays a central role.

**Keywords:** metaphor, metonymy, Kristeva, Jakobson, Lacan, Nezval

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of metaphor has been a central topic of discussion throughout the history of semiology. Jakobson's theory of the two aspects of language (Jakobson, 1987[1956], 95-120) and its critical reflection, mainly in France, gave rise to such conception that metaphor (and metonymy) lose their ornamental function in language and become a powerful tool for the description of basic processes that constitute the capability of speaking. The contribution of Jacques Lacan is very significant: by reading Jakobson together with Freud, he connected metaphor and metonymy with the psychoanalytic notion of primary processes and demonstrated a process of mirroring between the structure of language and the unconscious (Lacan 1993; 2001[1957]). Through his seminars, he influenced a whole generation of French

theorists who, in their own work, often develop and simultaneously overturn his ideas. Julia Kristeva is a very fruitful case of this "bastard aufhebung" of Lacan. In her work, the equation of metaphor and metonymy with Freud's primary processes is maintained, but the fundamental question of adequacy between the unconscious and (any kind of) structure is rethought: Kristeva (1974, 209-263) rereads Jakobson's work and comes up with a theory of metaphoricity which goes beyond that of Lacan. She is often, and rightfully, perceived as a thinker who contributed to the great replacement of the notion of structure with that of text. This paper is focused on an issue which marks this shift from structuralism to textualism, and which also distinguishes Kristeva from Lacan: materiality of language. This issue was already addressed in Jakobson's work, especially in relation to

poetry. We will further demonstrate that evocation of this theme can also be found in his work on metaphor and metonymy, and also that the Jakobsonian understanding of materiality of language is later developed in Kristeva's own work. Given the fact that Kristeva is a proponent of a textualism which cannot do without the theme of body, a significant shift occurs. Kristeva systematically develops the thesis that *the material* in a language is *the bodily* and within this paradigm, she revives the discussion on the nature of metaphor. Based on this line of thinking, we will argue that an important aspect that characterizes metaphor (and distinguishes it from metonymy) is the word's relation to the subject's bodily dimension. In both Jakobson and Kristeva, avant-garde literature is a privileged site of the metaphorical mechanism. We will therefore demonstrate this issue in the literary material that could possibly be a meeting point of both authors. For these purposes, we have chosen the novella *Sexual Nocturne* written in 1931 by Czech writer Vítězslav Nezval, who was a great source of inspiration for Jakobson. There was a strong affinity between the two authors, both personal and theoretical (q.v. Winner, 1996). In Nezval's novella, the materiality of language is explicitly addressed against the background of a reflection on a crucial moment in the subject's sexual development, which forms a bridge to Kristeva's work. In this period, Nezval was also inspired by psychoanalysis and emphasized the parallel between poetry and dream (Nezval 1974). *Sexual Nocturne* exemplifies for us a literary work that combines the Jakobsonian (and Lacanian) notion of materiality with the element of affectivity, which is important to Kristeva, and thus demonstrates that metaphorical processes are those that bring body into discourse.

#### WORD AS A MATERIAL IN NEZVAL'S NOVELLA

*Sexual Nocturne* opens with a story about how the narrator exchanges notes with a girl of the same age in his childhood. He quickly arouses the girl's curiosity, for he proves himself sufficiently initiated in a topic that is a source of great mystery. The girl, therefore, asks the narrator in a letter for an answer to the central question concerning sexuality: How are babies made? The narrator soon replies, as he writes, "with a genuine pleasure": "First you fuck and then after nine months a baby is born." (Nezval 2004 [1931], 18). The episode does not remain without explanatory commentary. "This is not a superfluous episode, as it sheds some light on the relationship we have with words relating to the erotic." (ibid.). This relationship is, of course, accentuated in the following pages of the novella. Nevertheless, perhaps more importantly, the episode elucidates a more fundamental question. It invites us to ask what relationship we have to words in the most general sense. As demonstrated by Nezval's writing, the relationship in question is by no means straightforward and unproblematic. On

the contrary: the novella emphasizes that what is erotic are not the words uttered by a transparent, whole, and proper speaking subject. The relationship itself takes on an erotic or sexual character and takes place not in the abstract signifying structures, but on the border between the body and the unconscious. The kernel of the bodily relationship with language is a word that, according to the narrator, has "magical power": the word *fuck*. It appears not only in the episode of the letter but emerges throughout the narrative in several other situations and contexts. A reader will not miss that the word figures here almost as a material object. Later in the novella, the narrator clarifies that there is a kind of weight, density, and toughness intrinsic to the word: "FUCK is diamond-hard, translucent, a classic. As if taking on the appearance of a jewel from graceful Alexandrine [...]" (Nezval 2004 [1931], 33) This word later forms a strange couple with another word: *bordello*. However, an important aspect that brings the origin of this coupling closer remains hidden in the English translation. In the Czech original, the two words share a combination of the letters /RD<sup>1</sup>: they share a "violent sound", a shape, and are thus linked by an affinity not only semantic but also material. The narrator's affectivity is concentrated around this sound. It seems as if it provoked desire and excitement in the subject: "I said FUCK [MRDAT] to myself over and over as I shambled along the footpaths with a constant erection. The whole of my desire fixated on two words: FUCK [MRDAT] and BORDELLO." (idem, 37). However, there are situations where these words have the opposite effect. Significantly, it is a situation where the words are spoken by someone else: "But now FUCK had the exact opposite effect than at any other time: it deadened all my sensuality" (idem, 51). It turns out that the two words, important for their sound, are strongly intertwined with affect, its presence or absence, and are given the ability to "control" its intensity. One of the most critical aspects of Nezval's novella thus emerges. It can be said that the text creates a fictional arrangement, in which the narrator's body is in close contact with the material aspect of language – the word's shape, sound, rhythm, or appearance. At the same time, the text makes the materiality of the word foreign to the communicative aspect of language. Under the pressure of materiality, a word's meaning suddenly seems irrelevant; the materiality of the word and its weight overshadow it, because affect takes the leading role in the narrator's arrangement of utterances. In short, Nezval's novella evokes a kind of "inexplicable bond" that ties the body to the materiality of language.

#### MATERIALITY OF LANGUAGE IN JAKOBSON: "EMPTY WORD" AND "WORD HEAP"

In Jakobson's text *What is poetry?* (1987), what we called materiality of language is thematized explicitly in relation to Nezval's work: Jakobson highlights the importance of the material presence of words in avant-garde poetry and lauds Nezval for redefining the boundaries between

1 In the Czech language, Nezval used the word „mrdat“, which was translated as „fuck“.

poetic and non-poetic language. Jakobson posits that poeticity is not contingent upon theme or style, but rather upon a distinctive attitude towards language. This attitude, as he terms it, is one of “autonomy of the word” [*svézákonnost slova*] (Jakobson 1987[1933-1934], 377). In the works of the poets, particularly Nezval, there can be observed a process of emancipation of the word from the constraints of communicative structures. Rather than being perceived as a mere component of a system of signs or a mere “shadow” of an object, words are seen as autonomous entities with laws that are irreducible to those of communicative structure. This approach consequently imbues language with poetic qualities: “Poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named, [...] when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form, acquire a *weight* [emphasis ours] and value of their own [...]” (idem, 378). In his later texts, Jakobson revisits this motif and maintains that the materialization of the word is a process that characterizes poetic language. He states that poetry promotes “the *palpability* [our emphasis] of signs” (Jakobson 1987[1960], 70) and that “[...] conversion of a message into an enduring thing [...] represents an inherent and effective property of poetry.” (idem, 86). In Jakobson’s work, the thematization of the materiality of language manifests as a theoretical gesture rather than a systematic examination of the phenomenon. In his well-known study on metaphoric and metonymic aspects of language, a similar principle emerges. In *Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances* (1987[1956]), Jakobson illustrates that the structure of “normal” language is bipolar; its function relies on the cooperation, oscillation, and competition between metaphorical and metonymic processes. This theory is grounded in studies of aphasia, a condition that impairs an individual’s ability to communicate due to damage in specific regions of the brain. Through these studies, Jakobson demonstrates that impairments in language manifest particularly within metaphorical and metonymic processes. Consequently, he delineates two primary, extreme types of aphasia, in which one process is suppressed while the other predominates. Jakobson’s characterization of these two types of aphasia can be interpreted as distinct ways in which an aphasic speaker engages with the materiality of language. In the first type of aphasia, described as one in which “metaphor is alien” (Jakobson 1987[1956], 109), Jakobson addresses the materiality of language in a quotation of a patient’s statement. When the patient is confronted with an isolated word and is not provided with sufficient context, he responds as follows: “I can hear you dead plain but I cannot get what you say... I can hear your voice but not the words... It does not pronounce itself” (Jakobson, 1987 [1956], 104). In another instance, Jakobson notes: “[...] an isolated word means actually

nothing but ‘blab.’” (Jakobson 1987[1956], 102). This suggests the notion of an empty sound, as an aphasic speaker experiences the isolated word. To the patient, it appears as a crude, physical material devoid of meaning, or, expressed in the language of Jakobson’s work on poetry, a word without a weight or value on its own. In contrast, the second type of aphasia, characterized by the dominance of metaphor, is evocatively termed the “word heap” (ibid, 106). Jakobson argues that what remains intact in this form of language is the isolated word, while the grammatical structure and syntactical rules that provide stability of meaning are compromised. The speech of the aphasic individual resembles a heap of isolated words, with all weight and value shifting from syntactic and grammatical structures to the words themselves. This tendency in language resonates with many practices in modern poetry that Jakobson highlights in his other writings (ibid, 106-107).

### **METAPHOR AND METONYMY IN PSYCHOANALYSIS**

At the end of his text on metonymy and metaphor, Jakobson mentions a possible connection between his theory and psychoanalysis. According to him, Freud is one of the thinkers who recognized the bipolarity of every symbolic activity, especially the dream, which is based on both metonymical and metaphorical processes (Jakobson 1987[1956], 113). The fundamental processes taking place in the dream and in the unconscious – displacement and condensation (q.v. Freud 2010[1900], 296-336) – are considered metonymic; and higher processes (Jakobson mentions “symbolization” and “identification”) are described as metaphorical. Jakobson thus postulates that the metaphor and metonymy are, at least in part, present in the unconscious. Jacques Lacan carries this suggestion further and argues that not only are they present there, but they are the sole governing principle of the unconscious activity. Primarily, Lacan uses Jakobson’s theory as support for his own argument regarding the character of the unconscious (Lacan (2001[1957], 111-136). In the beginning of a pivotal text where he deals with Jakobson, Lacan writes that “the notion that the unconscious is merely the seat of the instincts will have to be rethought” (ibid, 112). By means of Jakobson’s theory, he further demonstrates that the unconscious has a linguistic, not somatic character. Here is an important difference between Lacan and Kristeva, whose notion of unconscious does not neglect the importance of “Freudian energetics” (q.v. Kristeva 2000[1996], 32-38). In Kristeva, the notion of the drive<sup>2</sup> is added to the whole symbolic dynamics as a valid part of language. She emphasizes one of its characteristics in particular: according to her, Freud assumes not only a dichotomy of drives (life drives/death drives, ego drives/sexual drives)

2 The notion of affect, mentioned in the context of Nezval’s work, is closely related to the notion of the drive. Kristeva does not discuss this connection theoretically in her early work, but accepts it as a given. She later clarifies her position, for example, in the text “Affect, that Intense Depth of Words” (Kristeva 2018[2013], 125-141)

but, above all, a heteronomy, i.e. the ability of the drive to pass through irreducible orders<sup>3</sup> (Kristeva 1984[1974], 167). She thus refers to Freud's primary definition of the drive as a border concept between the psychic and the somatic (Freud, 1981[1915], 109–140). As we will demonstrate later, this emphasis on soma and drive is further reflected in Kristeva's reception of Jakobson and informs her interpretation of the difference between metonymy and metaphor, which is in contrast to that of Lacan. Although Lacan rejects the notion that language can be partially somatic, the materiality of language is nevertheless emphasized in his work. Lacan comes closest to Kristeva when he refers to language as a "subtle body" (Lacan 2001[1953], 65) and describes how words can become material objects that (de)form psychic reality, or may themselves be (de)formed by its effects:

[...] they may make the hysteric 'pregnant' [...] What is more, words themselves can undergo symbolic lesions and accomplish imaginary acts of which the patient is the subject. You will remember the *Wespe* (wasp), castrated of its initial W to become the S.P. of the Wolf Man's initials at the moment when he realizes the symbolic punishment whose object he was on the part of Grusha, the wasp. (Lacan 2001[1953], 65)

In the text on metonymy and metaphor, Lacan accentuates the issue of materiality, especially with regard to his term of *lettre* (Lacan 2001[1957], 111-136). However, the concept implies that the only materiality Lacan speaks of is "borrowed from language": it is exclusively the materiality of the signifier, i.e. its proper phonemic character. Lacan is thus closer to Jakobson than to Kristeva; for her, the word is not "like" the body and the body "like" the word, but somatic functions are directly manifested in language (ibid, 112).

### WHAT DISTINGUISHES THE "EMPTY WORD" FROM THE "WORD HEAP"? KRISTEVAN PERSPECTIVE

One of the early concepts in Kristeva's work that can be viewed through the lens of Jakobson's two poles of language is her "four signifying practices": a provisional classification of modes of sign production, which was created in response to Lacan's four discourses. Kristeva distinguishes narrative – metalanguage – contemplation – text (Kristeva 1984[1974], 88). It can be said that a certain differentiation of Jakobson's terminology is present, where the two poles of language correspond to the outermost points of Kristeva's continuum: the *narrative* can be considered as corresponding to the metonymic

axis, the text as corresponding to the metaphorical axis. If one recalls Jakobson's characterization of metonymy as an "empty word" and metaphor as a "word heap", the following quotations will be instructive. Kristeva (1984[1974], 91) describes the narrative in the following manner: "Strictly linguistic structures [...] remain normative in narrative. They obey grammatical rules, which remain intact, since drive charges barely cross the thetic that imposes language." (idem, 91). The other side of the continuum (text) is described this way: "Drives pass through the body as well as the surrounding natural and social configuration. [...] The linguistic structures [...] are radically transformed by it. These rhythmic, lexical, and even syntactic changes disturb the transparency of the signifying chain [...]" (idem, 101). It can be observed that Kristeva's classification is comparable to Jakobson's observation of the two poles of language but is reworked and extended from a psychoanalytical perspective; it is the question of the drive in Kristeva that fundamentally distinguishes the two forms of language introduced by Jakobson. In line with the emphasis on the heteronomy of drive mentioned earlier, Kristeva focuses on the capacity of a drive (with its somatic basis) to traverse language and its structures. To summarize Kristeva's position, the drive is missing from the "empty word". According to Kristeva, the drive is blocked or released before even entering the language, with the result that the isolated word is experienced as empty by the subject (Kristeva 1984[1974], 91). On the other hand, the "word heap" appears when there is an excess of drive in the language, so that the drive's intensity impinges on and even disrupts the very functioning of linguistic structures. In such a case, syntactic, grammatical, or rhythmic deviations occur in the language. As Kristeva writes, language reveals its semiotic<sup>4</sup> disposition in defense against the eruption of drives (Kristeva 1974, 235). She explicitly thematizes the role of the materiality of language: she speaks of the accumulation or increased frequency of given phonemes, which form a junction point of language and the body (Kristeva 1974, 221). She also refers to these junction points as "savage sounds" [*sons sauvages*] (idem, 231), which is how the /RD/, central to Nezval's novella, can be described. Insofar as this "savage sound" connects two domains, it is always itself double: it belongs both to the body and to signification, and it passes constantly between these two domains. In this movement, a given phoneme in the process of being pronounced does not simply remain a sound in its physical presence but becomes part of the linguistic system. In Kristeva's perspective, however, this conversion from the "material" to the "linguistic" is not complete: there is always a kind of remainder, a bodily trace irreducible to signification. This remainder then ensures the possibility

<sup>3</sup> More precisely, it is a passage through order and non-order. For the latter, Kristeva reserves the term *ordonnement* to emphasize that, within the drive domain of language (which she calls the semiotic), a specific type of ordering is already present but not yet an order. (Kristeva 1984[1974], 26).

<sup>4</sup> In Kristeva (1984[1974], 19-106), "the semiotic" is a modality of language which disrupts the coherence of the (symbolic) order through rhythm, intonation, etc.

of the reverse movement: the phoneme, which is already part of the signification, to be reconnected to its bodily base (through the articulatory apparatus) (idem, 222).

Kristeva calls this mechanism a “metaphorical transposition” (Kristeva 1974, 232). Her understanding of metaphoricity is fundamentally based on Jakobson’s: it is a passage between two codes. Kristeva, however, primarily underlines the irreducibility of the two codes involved in the process: the body on the one hand and the linguistic system on the other. Metaphor is not only privileged in its potential effect on the speaking subject, but also attributed to an initial role. Metonymy, then, according to Kristeva, is a derivative of metaphor and denotes “only the sliding from one sign to another according to their relation of contiguity, and would designate in each case a relation of logical and/or syntactic subordination.” (ibid.). Metonymy operates within signification as such (it is internal to a judgment), in contrast to metaphor characterized by a constant passage between body [*non encore signe*] and signification.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Kristeva ascribes to metaphor a privileged role, not only in the synchronic standpoint – for she considers metaphor a productive site for social change – but also in the development of the speaking subject. Her understanding of metaphor implies that it is a primary mechanism of the first utterances of a child. In this primordial communication (between a mother and a child), materiality of language and materiality of the body are not clearly distinguished, thus every utterance is the constant passage between them. The distinction is just in the process of being developed, as is also metonymy, which “supposes a forclusion of the subject absorbed by a thetic (phallic) unity.” (Kristeva 1974, 232). It means that the metonymy is proper to the speaking subject just after the two big separations in his life: the mirror stage and the castration (Kristeva 1984[1974], 48-51). From the point of view of Lacan, the situation is opposite; what is primary for the speaking subject is metonymy: “metonymy exists from the beginning and makes metaphor possible” (Lacan, 1993, 227). He even concludes his discussion on metonymy with a derisive remark that is very relevant in the context of the present paper:

We are told that children understand surrealist and abstract poetry, which would be a return to childhood. This is stupid – children detest surrealist poetry and find repugnant certain stages of Picasso’s painting. Why? Because they’re not yet up to metaphor, but only metonymy. And when they do appreciate certain things in Picasso’s paintings it’s because metonymy is involved. (Lacan, 1993, 228)

The reason why Kristeva’s and Lacan’s views on metonymy and metaphor differ so much is again derivable from the fundamental difference in their systems of thinking: Kristeva pays great attention to the somatic, affective elements of the unconscious, whereas for Lacan

these are rather “outdated” components of Freud’s theory. In Kristeva, this somatic element then enters the whole system of concepts and overturns it. The next distinction between these two thinkers emerges in their respective conceptions of the materiality itself. As we have seen, the materiality of the signifier is primary for Lacan, and if there is any concept of bodily materiality, it is always created retroactively from the material of language. In Kristeva, the “original” materiality is not in the signifier, but in the body, which is nevertheless always already submerged in language. The difference regarding the materiality is well described in Judith Butler’s work: she criticizes Kristeva for this attitude, yet she captures the core of her thinking very accurately:

[In Kristeva] language might be understood to emerge from the materiality of bodily life. [...] Here the materiality of bodily relations, prior to any individuation into a separable body, or, rather, simultaneous with it, is displaced onto the materiality of linguistic relations. [...] Here, then, it is the materiality of that (other) body which is phantasmatically reinvented in the materiality of signifying sounds. (Butler 1993, 69-70)

We have tried to demonstrate how the question of materiality (sometimes rather implicitly) raised by Jakobson was reworked and gave rise to Kristeva’s concept of metaphoricity. As we have attempted to illustrate here, Kristeva’s metaphor consistently points to the drives, affect, body, and its materiality. However, this represents merely the foundation for how Kristeva would subsequently develop the theory of metaphor in her later work. The body would remain an integral component, but metaphor would become primarily an access point to the broader domain of intimacy that extends beyond the body and encompasses sensations, reminiscences, phantasies or traumatic experiences (Kristeva 1987[1983], 268; 2018[2007], 116). Importantly, this intimate space is not overlooked in Nezval’s work (2004[1931], 31): when the narrator is asked by an authority, “Where did you learn that word?” he replies, “Before my eyes there rose several delicious scenes from my childhood.” Thus, through both Kristeva and Nezval, we can see that metaphor is a process that reveals not only the body but also a wider “other scene”.

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