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Music as a Poetic Language

By Randi Rolvsjord [|Author bio & contact info|](#)

Introduction



In Music Therapy, music and musicking are often understood as a way of communicating, a language. Considering this way of conceiving the role of music in music therapy, I have been interested in what kind of status we give music as a language, and how does this contribute to an understanding of the potentials of music therapy. Quite often we can see that music is described in opposition to the verbal language. Obviously, music and verbal languages are different, but seen in this way music turns out to be some kind of negation to verbal language, given its identity in opposition to the characteristics of verbal language. This is in my view a poor understanding of both music and verbal language. As such an opposition to the verbal language, music has sometimes been given the status of a universal language, a language that does not depend upon cultural mediated learning. The interest in pre-verbal communication, in a phylogenetic and ontogenetic understanding, has contributed to such understanding of the musical communication in music therapy. This has been a very important contribution to our field, and I think it would be a misunderstanding not to recognize such biologically founded universal aspects defining an inborn human musical communicative capacity. But at the same time, it is extremely important to acknowledge the cultural aspects of music, the mediated learning of music, and the connections between the cultural context and the way we use music in our lives and in therapy.

In this article I will give an introduction to the theory of significance in language by Julia Kristeva. The most central text for this presentation is her major work, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984). In *Revolution in Poetic Language* she describes the processes by which language becomes significant for the subject. I have found Kristeva's psycho-linguistic theory interesting for music therapists because it grasps the interaction of the mediated and cultural dimensions of musical communication, as well as emphasizes the unmediated, bodily, psychological and physiological dimensions of the process in which any language becomes significant. Kristeva's thinking is rooted in postmodernism and deconstructionism. She has been embraced by Nordic feminists, although she does not like to be called a feminist herself. She has published books in linguistic theory, psychoanalyses, cultural politics and even novels.

In this article it is not my intention to make a critical review of her texts, rather to apply her theories on music, and discuss how these might contribute to an understanding of the potentials for music therapy.

The Symbolic and the Semiotic: the Signifying Process

A language becomes meaningful or significant according to Kristeva (1984) as a consequence of the dialectic between the semiotic and the symbolic. These two modalities are inseparable and interacting aspects of any language. It is through these two modalities and through the relationship between them, that the language becomes meaningful to the subject. The semiotic operates in two ways: First, the semiotic involves a process in which the subject fills the sign

with meaning. The semiotic process is an unconscious process in which the sign is jointed together with psychosomatic functioning or linked in sequences of metaphors and metonymies (Kristeva, 1984 p.22). Second, the semiotic modality is related to experiences of unmediated, direct meaning, and does not rely upon culturally mediated categories. The rhythm, timbre, intonation and dynamics of the language contribute to significance through bodily experiences. The semiotic modality in language is articulated through marks and through the flow of language, and is experienced as a pulsating stream of energy, the "semiotic chora" (Kristeva, 1984 p. 25). The dialogue between the primary caregiver and the infant, is one example of an almost exclusive semiotic dialogue. It is a dialogue in which the significance of words is subordinated to the experience of musical aspects, the semiotic. Kristeva describes this musicalization of the language in the following quote:

Language thus, tends to be drawn out of its symbolic function (sign-syntax) and is opened out within a semiotic articulation; with a material support such as the voice, this semiotic network gives "music to literature". But the interruption of the semiotic within the symbolic is only relative. Though permeable, the thetic continues to ensure the position of the subject put in process/on trial. As a consequence, music is not without signification; indeed it is deployed within in. (Kristeva, 1984 p.63)

The semiotic modality is also in the foreground in musical interplay and musical performances. In Kristeva's theory, musical elements turn out to be the characteristics of the semiotic modality in language expressions. Musical elements such as timbre, dynamics, rhythm and intonation articulate the semiotic. But of course as we shall see later, this does not imply that music is exclusively a semiotic language. There is more to music than musical elements, and in Kristeva's terminology, every human language and dialogue is to some degree symbolic.

The symbolic is the modality of the signifying process that relates the signs to categories which organises and structures our perception of the world. The world is structured as we recognise and define objects as representations of a category. Language is the articulation of such categories which are semantic, logic and possible to communicate. These categories are created through social and cultural practises, and are as such stable but not historically unchangeable (Kristeva, 1984 p. 52).

The Symbolic order (Kristeva, 1986 p.196) is representative for the organisation of objects and concepts that is given in a cultural community. (Kristeva consequently use the capital S in Symbolic order when referring to this political constitution of language, to depart this from other more subordinated symbolic orders). The Symbolic order constitutes the way we categorise and conceptualize objects in the world. It is in this way representative to the political order in society which is manifested in language, but it is also a language construction that conserves the status quo in society. The political dimensions are also discussed by Kristeva in *Womans Time* (Kristeva, 1986), as by other French feminists such as Luce Irigaray (1985) and Helene Cixois, this political organization is understood as fundamentally patriarchal. The Symbolic order is conservative to the traditional oppositions between sexes and conserves a patriarchal power-structure. Language is constituted on this oppositional relationship between the feminine and the masculine, and posits the masculine in the symbolic order, whereas the feminine is posited in the symbolic only as a negation of the masculine. As a result, the feminine subject can only place herself related to the Symbolic, but not posit herself in the Symbolic order (Kristeva, 1986). This constitution, on oppositions, makes the language well suited to express oppositions, but makes it impossible to express differences in language. There is meaning that cannot be expressed in language, because it transgresses the oppositions that constitute language.

Subjectivity and Positionality in Language

As with language, Kristeva's subject is also both semiotic and symbolic. The subject develops and exists, like the language, in the dialectic between the semiotic and the symbolic, between body and culture. This inseparable relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic binds the subject and the language together. The subject constructs the language and the culture, but at the same time the language creates the subject. The subject cannot however be reduced to language. Kristeva understands the subject as a "subject in process" (Kristeva, 1980 p. 135; Fornäs, 1995 p. 226). This subject in process develops through language, through symbolic expressions, which Kristeva names texts. These texts are at the same time the only way we can understand the subject. Fornäs describes Kristeva's "subject in process" as a subject

dependent upon interpretation of the subject's texts and discourses. This means that it is impossible to know a person without her texts, her communication. It is only through the symbolic form, through language that we can show who we are, and who we want to be. At the same time, it is through the symbolic expressions that the subject can develop. This is explained by Fornäs in the following quote:

These "subjects-in-process" develop through their texts, and these texts are the only channel to understand them. One can only reflect upon oneself and upon others by interpreting textual and symbolic discourses of various kinds, and these texts express subjects as heterogeneous and split into necessarily unconscious fragments. (Fornäs, 1995 p. 22)

It is interesting for music therapy that music will not have any meaning without a listening or musicking subject. But at the same time music is a language that makes it possible for the subject to express himself, and the subject develops through the language. Thus, to express oneself in language and in music is more than enjoyment and entertainment, it is crucial to the development of our identity (Fornäs, 1995; Ruud, 1997; 1998).

The source of semiotic meaning is the pre-verbal relation between mother and child. Kristeva describes the semiotic related to the symbiotic experience, an experience she describes as "a space of need prior to desire" (Oliver, 1993 p. 35). Kristeva's theory at this point relates to psychoanalytical theory (Freud, Mahler and Lacan) that is not informed by the research upon infants and the relationship between the care-giver and infant that has been taking place during the last decades. This is one problematic aspect of Kristeva's theory. Kristeva's point however is to describe the necessary conditions for the subject to participate in symbolic interaction, and I think it is possible to agree with her notions of this conditions, but still regret her understanding of the child's development. The process in which the subjects develop those necessary pre-conditions Kristeva called the "thetic phase" (Kristeva, 1984 p.43). The thetic phase is a process that involves the child's development of self-perception and sexual identity; this is by Kristeva described as the mirror-phase and the castration phase.

To posit herself in order to participate in language, the child must separate herself from the world, in order to define the status of the objects. Today, we know that there is a good reason to believe that the child has this ability from birth (Trevarthen, 1988, Stern, 1985). The second point by Kristeva is the development of sexual identity. Kristeva claims that the Symbolic order is constituted upon the oppositions between the feminine and the masculine. To posit ourselves according to these most basic categories of the Symbolic order is important for our ability to categorize other objects in the world.

The Dialectic between the Semiotic and the Symbolic

According to Kristeva, a language that is either exclusively semiotic or exclusively symbolic is impossible. The semiotic is however sometimes explained as a precondition of the symbolic, but still the total absence of the symbolic would be chaos or psychoses. Every human interaction then is always both semiotic and symbolic:

These two modalities are inseparable within the signifying process, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry, etc.) involved; in other words, so-called "natural" language allows for different modes of articulation of the semiotic and the symbolic. On the other hand, there are non-verbal signifying systems that are constructed exclusively on the basis of the semiotic (music, for example). But, as we shall see, this exclusivity is relative, precisely because of the necessary dialectic between the two modalities of the signifying process, which is constitutive of the subject. Because the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either "exclusively" semiotic or "exclusively" symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both. (Kristeva, 1984 p. 24)

Different types of languages are characterized by different relationships between the semiotic and the symbolic modality. The academic discourse for example is a language that is very dominated by the symbolic. The semiotic is more dominant in the daily conversations, in poems and in music. But even in music, the symbolic and the semiotic modality can be more or less dominating. I will also suggest that pre-composed music is often more symbolic than

improvised music due to the emphasis of the performance in improvisations. In music therapy, improvisations without structuring musical or verbal givens will perhaps be more semiotic than improvisations structured by such givens. But the semiotic modality will always be distinctive in music.

I suggest that the difference between verbal language and music is not that the one is a symbolic language, and the other a semiotic language, but rather that the dialectic between the symbolic and the semiotic is different. In music the semiotic is a more dominating aspect of the signifying process. Kristeva is even using musical metaphors to describe the experience of the semiotic, the pulsating flow of energy, that makes you become occupied with the properties and the sound of the language, more than the categories that the language is representing. The symbolic is however still a precondition for meaningfulness in any language.

The bodily and dynamic aspects of the semiotic can be compared to Daniel Stern's concept of vitality affects (Stern, 1985, Rolvsjord, 1998; Rolvsjord, 2002). If we include this concept in our understanding of the semiotic, I think it clarifies how this modality is related to the experience of meaning. The semiotic creates meaning through the expression or the performance. The semiotic gives vitality to language, and creates differences from oppositions and nuances in the language that is necessary for the denotative or semantic function of language, just like when the vitality affects are not there, the language becomes poor. The language of people suffering from depression is an example of the monotonic language lacking vitality (Monsen, 1990, Kristeva, 1989).

Music and the Verbal Language

Verbal languages and music are often described as opposite poles, with very few common features and limited possibilities for translations. Such descriptions might relate to concepts like discursive - presenting, conventional - universal or mediated - unmediated. But I claim that music and verbal language are both different and alike. Even as they are fundamentally different, they have some common features as a language; Verbal language and Music are human ways of expressions that are constructed in historic and cultural contexts. Secondly, they coexist and are often woven together. When music is part of verbal language and verbal language is part of music, this is called transposition according to Kristeva (1984 p.59-60). Texts in verbal languages related to music contribute to connect the music to the Symbolic order. But I will emphasize that the verbal language is not the symbolic of music, and the music itself is not only semiotic. Music has its own codes, rules for musical structures and a musical praxis that must be related to a specific musical symbolic order. Kristeva uses the term "transposition" to describe the inter-textuality that verbal language and music represent. Transpositions occur whenever one symbolic order communicates with other symbolic orders. Such transpositions are essential to the development of languages.

Verbal language occurs in music as lyrics in songs, instructions in the score, or as a title or a program. Music occurs in verbal language when the text is referring to or describing music, or as the text takes musical features, such as rhythm, dynamics and timbre in poetic language (Fornäs, 1995). Theories suggesting a common musical origin of music and verbal languages relate to ontogenetic development (Trevarthen and Malloch, 2000; Christensen, 2000) as well as the phylogenetic evolution (Grinde, 2000; Dissanayake, 2001). In music therapy these transpositions of music and verbal language seem to be very important, although the use and the role of both music and verbal language differ a lot among different music therapeutic methods and traditions (Rolvsjord 2002). Verbal language occurs in musictherapy as verbal givens (instructions, titles etc) or as lyrics. Further, we communicate and reflect upon the music verbally, or reflect musically from a verbally defined theme (Baur-Morlok, 1996; Hannibal, 1999).

So far, I have described the differences between music and verbal languages in terms of a different dialectic between the symbolic and the semiotic. I have stated that the symbolic modality of the signifying process is more important in verbal language, and that music is more semiotic. But even in the music therapeutic interaction, the semiotic and the symbolic as inseparable modalities will be dominant in a varying degree. I assume that different musical genres and different musical styles have a different dialectic of the semiotic and the symbolic. The Symbolic order is the most fundamental organisation of all languages. But beside it, there are several subordinated symbolic orders which define the rules, structure and logics of different languages. These musical symbolic orders can be related to language codes, but will always be connected and subordinated to the Symbolic order. In this way we can assume that music is a language that is not only significant through verbal language, but as a system of musical

The Symbolic Order of Music

As I have already argued, music must be understood as part of our culture, history and subjectivity, and therefore it has to be related to the Symbolic order. But the symbolic aspects in music must first of all be related to a specific musical symbolic order, or possibly to several symbolic orders that constitute different genres and cultural forms of music. When the child acquires knowledge of the musical codes, she learns to decide what is music and what is not music. She learns to put together musical elements correctly, to sing in tune, and play with a basic beat. Such musical codes, and their development are described by Even Ruud (1998). Musical codes related to a particular musical genre involve syntactic or form-relational codes organizing the musical vocabulary such as scales and harmonic and rhythmic patterns. It involves further codes concerning the musical performances, such as participatory discrepancies described by Charles Keil (1994). There are also codes concerning the more pragmatic aspects of music, which involve conventions regarding the use of the music as emphasized in new musicology (DeNora, 2000). To understand the significance of the musical language, we must however also consider the inter-textuality and transpositions of different musics.

These symbolic orders of music are however also related to the Symbolic order. This is manifested in the oppositions that constitute our experiences and thoughts about music such as: minor - major, harmony - dissonance, crescendo - decrescendo, tension - solution, etc.

This connection is made perfectly clear by Susan McClary (1991). She discusses the way sexual metaphors are used in descriptions of music, and she reveals a connection between gendered concepts and music. She finds that through the verbal descriptions of music, the masculine is related to the strong, the dominant, the normal and the heroic, whereas the feminine is used as a description of the romantic, the weak and the sensitive or gentle. She claims that such verbal descriptions of music contribute to create our understanding of the music, as well as of our understanding of gender. Through her examples, she takes away the neutrality and innocent maidenhood of music, but at the same time, to use Kristeva's terminology, she posits the music in the Symbolic which means that music is given significance and power. The gendered meanings of music, imply also the codes and rules regulating the roles of female and male actors in musicking. There seems to be a lot of conventions, according to different musical genres, that comprises gender specific rules regulating which instruments to choose, what music to play or how to dance (Bayton, 1997; Coates, 1997).

To acknowledge the symbolic aspects of music, and the relationship between the musical symbolic orders and the Symbolic order, we must declare a semantic and denotative function of music. In Kristeva's theory, the signifying process which implies a dialectic between the semiotic and the symbolic modality in language imposes a function of representation, as well as a more unmediated, direct form of communication. But when this is said, I must emphasize that in Kristeva's theory we also learn that the semiotic modality dominates the musical language. The symbolic function of music will always be transgressed from the semiotic in such a way that the representative significance of music is always ambiguous. And I would like to suggest that it is this possibility for denotation combined with the almost infinite ambiguity that makes music potentially therapeutic.

The Inexpressible Avoiding the Symbolic: the Feminine

The symbolic constitution of the language, the thetic, implies that something escapes the denotation. A lot of people feel like strangers in relation to language because they experience that aspects of themselves like emotions and experiences are not expressible in language (Kristeva, 1986; Kristeva, 1991). As the language was constituted on the Symbolic order, this compels the heterogeneous subject to express himself in terms of oppositions. Stern (1985) describes a similar conflict when he claims that acquiring verbal language makes possible the communication of some experiences, but at the same time implies that some nuances connected to the pre-verbal experiences are lost when the experiences are expressed in a verbal narrative.

Several music therapists emphasize the potential and the importance of expressing the inexpressible in music (Kenny, 1989; Bruscia, 1994; Hesser, 1995). It might be tempting to suggest then, that musical significance is concerned with such experiences that are

inexpressible in verbal language. But this would also imply that translations from the music language to a verbal language would be impossible. And again we tend to see music as a negation of the verbal language, in opposition to the verbal. In Kristeva's terminology, music as a negation of the verbal language is posited in the symbolic as the castrated, the female. If we follow this argumentation, the meaning of music is a language construction that cannot be expressed in language. And further, such understanding cannot even be representative for the verbal language, because it will not consider the semiotic aspects of the verbal language. In other words, it is an understanding that is based upon an un-nuanced understanding of the verbal language and of music. The necessary dialectic between the semiotic and the symbolic implies that music has some symbolic aspects, and verbal languages have some semiotic aspects.

The unspeakable, which is not posited in the Symbolic, can be expressed only when the language becomes poetic. The language becomes poetic when the semiotic transgresses the symbolic in such a way that the rhythms, the music and the sound of the language threaten the denotative function of the language. The notion of poetic language blurs the insurmountable line of demarcation of what meaning can be expressed in different languages. This might contribute to the understanding of the function of music in music therapy, and imply that music can also enrich verbal language. When the inexpressible and unspeakable is expressed in music, the subject is posited in the symbolic, and this might change her relation to verbal language (Kristeva, 1984).

Music as a Poetic Praxis

When language becomes poetic, dominated by musicality, this implies a possibility for expression of the unspeakable, the meaning for whatever reason is not posited in the Symbolic order. The poetic praxis is a revolutionary praxis, because it threatens the conventional comprehension of the world, through a transgression of the conventional significance of the language. This happens not when a new language is created, but by the semiotic pressure upon the symbolic function.

Poetic mimesis maintains and transgresses thetic unicity by making it undergo a kind of anamnesis, by introducing into the thetic position a stream of semiotic drives and making it signify. This telescoping of the symbolic and the semiotic pluralizes signification or denotation: it pluralizes the thetic doxy. Mimesis and poetic language do not therefore disavow the thetic, instead they go through its truth (signification, denotation) to tell the "truth" about it. (Kristeva, 1984 p. 60)

Through such a transgression of the thetic, the semiotic aspects are in the foreground of our perception of the language, in such a way that the usually fixated denotative meanings of the words becomes subordinated and even unimportant.

As I have already described, the semiotic aspects are always in the foreground when we listen to music or create music. Thus we can suggest that music is per se a poetic language. But alternatively we might suggest that the poetic transgression is connected to transgressions of rules and codes connected to a specific musical genre or style. Lechte (1990) exemplifies this through a parallel between the avant-garde poetry, and the second Viennaschools focus on "die klangfarbenmelodie". The diatonic scale is seen here by Lechte as the symbolic order of music, and the Viennaschools use of timbre and sound as a new organizing principle, he regards as a transgression of the symbolic. A transgression that is possible only through the status of the diatonic scale, as a structuring element, a symbolic order:

In other words, the familiar and entrenched musical form based on the diatonic scale had become, for Schoenberg and his school, a limit, that Klangfarbenmelodie would transcend by pluralizing tonal values, thereby producing rhythms of sound differences in a timbre melody. And, just as language is shown by Kristeva to be irreducible to a symbolic system of communication, so music is shown by Schoenberg and his students, Berg and Webern, to be irreducible to the diatonic scale (Lechte, 1990 p. 143)

In the musical interplay in music therapy, we quite often experience such transgressions of the symbolic. This happens when the participants have different experiences with music, and different cultural backgrounds, but create new music and new meaning through the transgression of musical genres in the mutual music making. For our concern, it will probably

be best to emphasize the subjective experiences of transgression. We might also suggest that the musical therapeutic interplay per se transgresses the symbolic. The musical therapeutic interplay transgresses the conventional understanding of aesthetic value, and the conventions regarding musicality and instrumental skills for participating in musical interplay (Ruud, 1996; Stige, 2002; Stige 2003).

The transgression of the symbolic creates a semiotic flow in the language (Kristeva, 1984). This implies that the subjectivity position in the text is blurred. In such interplay, we do not really know who is responsible for the energy, who creates the new sounds, who is matching and who is making changes. This is similar to what is described as the field of play (Kenny, 1989) or *communitas* (Ruud, 1998).

Revolutions in Poetic Language - Revolutions in Music Therapy:

The poetic language is revolutionary (Kristeva, 1984). The poetic language represents potentials for development, change and even revolution. We might interpret the possibilities for change and revolution on three levels: changes in language, changes in the subject and changes in society. These levels of change must however not be understood as separated areas of activity, but must be understood as inseparable and interacting in the process of language. Thus, these three levels represent areas of change in music therapy practices.

Through the poetic transgressions of the symbolic, the language changes from the inside. The signs become less static and more flexible and ambiguous. In music therapy, this area of change must be related to verbal language as well as the music. Further, we must consider the subjective experiences of what music is, what music means, and how music might be used. In music therapy we often suggest that changes in the music imply that the subject/the client has changed. We relate the changes in the music to development of musical skills, or to the general psychological or physiological development. But Kristeva's theory impels us to see also the changes in the music, and to consider these changes as important per se. In the musical interplay the clients develop their musical competence and their musical skills in such a way that the musical expression is changed. This implies that there are new possibilities for the client to express himself in music. But even the verbal language changes through the transpositions of music and verbal language, and this implies a potential for self-expressions in verbal language as well.

To express himself in the poetic language implies that the subject posits himself in the symbolic. This is the most revolutionary function of the poetic language on this subjective level. The poetic language makes it possible to express the differences and not only the oppositions, which make it possible to create a position in the Symbolic (Rolvsjord, 1998). Further, there is, as we have seen, a possibility to express the unspeakable in poetic language. This means that the subject, or the client, is given a voice. A voice to make herself heard, a voice that implies a potential for communicating and work on her thoughts, feelings and problems.

The third level is the changes in society. Poetic language confronts the very constitution of the society, in that it changes these basic oppositions. And in this way poetic language is the way to political changes, and to empowerment of marginalized people in society. Furthermore, when the subject posits himself in the symbolic, it changes not only the subject, but the language and the way the subject is perceived in society. These areas of changes that are currently discussed are related to the concept Community Music Therapy (Stige, 2003; Ansdell, 2002). But Kristeva's poetic revolution on this level might even involve more than the Community Music Therapy as a specific field of practise. Kristeva's revolution begins in the language itself, and when the language changes, inevitably the society changes. Ruud (1996) has discussed music therapy as a reforming practice, suggesting that the practice of music therapy has contributed to changes of the music-cultural politics in Norway.

In conclusion

Reading Kristeva's texts is a challenge. Her texts refer to a comprehensive philosophical, psychoanalytical and linguistic academic discourse, and as a music therapist I am obviously a stranger in her multinational and multidisciplinary academic world. The feeling of joy and pleasure, *joissance*, (Kristeva 1984 p.47), evoked by her texts, has allured me to continue by demonstrating her very basic idea of the signifying process. Her texts, I think, might not revolutionize music therapy, but might contribute to shed light on a revolutionary practice.

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