

Julia Kristeva's Language Politics and Inclusive Education

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Introduction

One recurring issue in inclusion policies is the problem of transferring policy into action. On educational and ideological grounds alike, calls are being made to ensure the inclusion of disabled children in ordinary schools. In practice, however, schools, and the social systems in which they are embedded, have proved something of an inert mass which, by and large, have tended to uphold their segregating practices (Thomas & Loxley, 2007; Slee, 2011). One of the factors preventing inclusion is language and the categorisation practices arising from our way of talking about disability (Slee, 2011). One contribution to gaining a more sophisticated understanding of the importance of language to inclusion is Julia Kristeva's thinking and theories regarding language, politics and vulnerability (Johnsen, 2012). In this article we attempt to say something about what Kristeva's perspectives might have to offer with a view to establishing a clearer understanding of the linguistic-political aspects of inclusion. We initially explore Kristeva's concept of vulnerability before showing how her theories of the vulnerable subject facilitate political activism. We move on from there to discuss Kristeva's theories in light of recent international research in the field of disability studies and highlighting Kristeva's psychoanalytical contribution in the area.

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38. This chapter is an expanded and rewritten version of our introductory contribution to the Norwegian anthology *Annerledeshet. Sårbarhetens språk og politikk* (Engebretsen & Solvang, 2010).

The concept of vulnerability

Vulnerability is often used in a generic sense to describe various groups at risk of social marginalisation. Minorities, people with disabilities and unemployed youth are examples of such groups. A large body of knowledge has accumulated over the years on the processes of marginalisation to which these groups are vulnerable, though less has been done on factors promoting inclusion (Lundblad & Hedlund, 2010). At the same time, the concept of vulnerability has been criticised in analyses of disabling processes. By accentuating the vulnerability of disabled people, their status as rights-holders and chances of leading an autonomous life could be jeopardised (Roulstone, Thomas & Balderston, 2011: 352). But vulnerability is not an attribute reserved exclusively for marginalised groups. Vulnerability can also be a matter of common concern for everyone.

For Julia Kristeva, vulnerability is not a deviant or specific social category; on the contrary, vulnerability is an existential condition of life. It is not what divides us, but what binds us together. This conception draws on psychoanalytical theory, especially Lacan's thinking on the speaking subject. Inspired by Lacan, Kristeva sees the speaking subject as essentially divided: on the one hand language is the site at which the intentional subject is constituted insofar as language defines, categorises and gives direction and coherence to experience. On the other hand, language informs a sentient and physical subject driven by a need for social contact and intimacy as well as by feelings of aggression and revulsion. For Kristeva, our bodily relationship to language (the semiotic) is as fundamental as the ordering and informing side of language (the symbolic) (Kristeva, 1974). The symbolic, that is, meaning *per se*, would not be possible without the semiotic which compels us to use language and motivates us to create meaning at all.

In being both rational and sentient, the speaking subject is constantly confronted by its own inadequacy as user of language and the limitations of linguistic conventions. Kristeva wants us to contemplate "*the vulnerability of the speaking subject* at the boundary between the biological and signification, in a persistent state of disequilibrium, as a source of both anxiety and creativity" (Kristeva, 2010: 52, our translation). Language is a fragile relationship where meaninglessness, dissolution and collapse lie menacingly in waiting behind the façade of meaning and order. All language users recognise the sense of trepidation from knowing that communication or interaction can misfire, because conversation is a thin line, as Anders Johansen (2003) puts it. Communicating is a risky business and can fail. We have all felt how our desire to express ourselves

butts against the constraints imposed by words, or how our sentences grind to a halt or break apart into incoherent stutter. The point is that in language and as language users, we are all confronted by difficulties in adapting to conventions, and by our frailty and vulnerability as rational, percipient actors. We come face to face with “our own innermost anxiety and vulnerability”, with the “peculiar”, “illogical” and “disturbing” dreams all of us carry around but which we “can’t tell anyone about” because linguistic conventions can’t contain them, but which all find the same expression as rebellion or collapse in our speech (Kristeva, 2008). As language users or producers of meaning, we are *all* different: we are confronted continually with our own vulnerability and strangeness. According to Kristeva, it is by becoming conscious of and exploring the constraints facing us on a daily basis as language users that we can better identify with disabled subjects and the barriers facing them. The path to greater tolerance and diversity goes through a renewed attitude to language and to us as language users. By virtue of our being users of language, we can become aware of our own vulnerabilities.

Language philosophy as activism

Through her language politics Kristeva removes language philosophy from its ivory tower, as it is as a *language philosopher* that she occupies the political stage. In her research, she never assumes a position as neutral researcher or hides behind standards of scientific objectivity. She pursues the philosophy of language in the spirit of an activist. Her philosophical activism was evident as early as her 1973 doctoral thesis where she situated the poet at the centre of politics and declared the revolutionary potential of poetical language (Kristeva, 1974). The poet, says Kristeva, especially the modernist poet, challenges the most conservative elements in our society; language and its categories. Their proclivity is to defend their hegemony even when systems and institutions change.

In this philosophical activism she finds a social mandate for humanities, not least the tradition to which she herself belongs, so-called “French Theory”. “Theory”, Kristeva maintains, is a misguided concept for the humanities, at least the French version.

This is that, as I see it from my own experience, our research cannot be reduced to the production of “theory”; it is more than this, and it is something else besides. I would say that it is a process of “thinking through” or “working through” in the sense that Freud used to speak of the dreamwork. It is thinking as “disclosure”, in a way which Heidegger,

and in another way Arendt, expressed it, opposing it to thought-as-calculation. It involves a replenishing of thought in fiction, and for this reason in the sensitive body, which evokes Spinoza's "third kind of knowledge", but also the sort of rationality which belongs to "free association" and "transference" as they are manifested in the psycho-analytic experience. (Kristeva, 2004:33).

While theory is a concept which describes a sort of self-contained entity, Kristeva represents a scientific tradition which privileges the thinking and not merely the thought, emphasizing the process rather than the outcome. "It is thinking as disclosure." For Kristeva, humanities are essentially a questioning, an uneasiness, an evocation of memories and languages lingering behind calcified values and identities. They are sciences of questioning, not answering. In this way, the prime purpose of the sciences is not to create theories, but preliminary theoretical conceptualisations, not categories but metaphors, which disrupt or dislocate the deposited sediment of norms and preconceptions in our language. This is also why she believes criticism of herself and French thinking is misplaced. The critics are fighting a fabricated opponent.

That "excommunication" now seems to me to be the tragic precursor of a more recent event, more comic than tragic, in which two ambitious academics set out to unmask French "impostors" (this was the name they gave to French Theorists), by rejecting our "pseudo-scientific models", when in fact, we never tried to create scientific models, only metaphorical transfers. (Kristeva, 2004:28)

The problem with the critique is that it ignores the type of epistemological project French Theory aspires to be. The term 'French Theory' was coined to frame the productive transfer of a group of French post-structuralist philosophers into North-American intellectual context (Cosset, 2008). In the development of French Theory, one has never sought to establish scientific models. The object of French Theory is the metaphorical transfer, Kristeva maintains, which are themselves linguistic innovations. It means to hunt for new ways of expressing the familiar and customary, thereby paving the way for other modes of understanding. Here lies the 'scientific' contribution of both Kristeva herself and French Theory in general.

Revolt against normality

In 2002, Julia Kristeva was appointed by then president Jacques Chirac to head a government commission to investigate the living conditions of people with

disabilities and suggest ways to improve them. Kristeva concluded her work by writing and publishing a *Letter to the President Concerning Persons with Disabilities* (Kristeva, 2008). Kristeva's purpose was to highlight the potential inherent in people with disability. She sees herself in this project as an heir to Enlightenment philosophy, though without explicitly writing herself into the study of disability. One international contribution of key importance to which she refers is the study of the history of disability by her compatriot Henri-Jacques Stiker (1999). There are certain similarities in their approach to disability as a theme. Stiker's history deals with conceptions of disability in five separate epochs, with biblical history as the first, and the years after WWI as the fifth and final epoch. Humanity, he declares, has an innate capacity to react with violence to radical difference and to eliminate by purging. However, civilisation and society have combined to restrain these impulses. Society is a social system which shapes and curbs mankind's destructive proclivities; Stiker's book is a study of these social systems (1999).

The study of the emergence of rehabilitation, the fifth and final phase in the history of the disabled, lies at the heart of Stiker's book. In the years following the First World War, disability becomes a condition in need of repair to enable the reinstitution of the disabled person into normality. Disability as deficiency, Stiker points out, is the foil against which society defines normality, goodness and decency. Stiker takes issue with this assumption. Difference, he suggests, should be nurtured. It should be part and parcel of an educational project which begins at school. Difference, not normality and its norm, is what we need to value, Stiker maintains, as the natural and as intrinsic to humanity (1999). Nor is disability in Kristeva's thinking primarily a problem in need of accommodation, or a defect in the way the body works. Disability is about different ways of living in society. The autistic, epileptic and blind are not medical cases; rather, they are citizen-subjects. They challenge established rationalities. Rather than being in need of repair, they can act in their distinctiveness, and even remain essentially unfathomable (Kristeva, 2008).

This accentuation of the importance of otherness can be seen in connection with Kristeva's gender analyses. Women, she says, are seen as "the other" in relation to men, who occupy a privileged position as "the same". By idealising womanhood and the feminine, society shows itself incapable of comprehending difference without creating hierarchies. Woman as the other plays the role of the consolidator, cementing relations between those defined as the same (the male in a male-dominated society). In this way, the delineation of otherness

(in this case, women) can enhance society's resistance to the establishment of a non-hierarchical approach to differences (Kristeva, 1980).

In her *Letter to the President* (2008), she circles in three historical phases without employing a strictly historical analytical procedure. Her title paraphrases the title of philosopher Denis Diderot's (1749) *Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who Can See*. Diderot's letter represents the first of the three phases of the history of conceptions of disability which Kristeva outlines. In accordance with French Enlightenment philosophy, Diderot rejected the notion of disability as an act of divine retribution on a wayward humanity. It is simply, he says, a limited deficiency in a person. Diderot makes note in his letter of the impressive resources developed by the blind to compensate for a physical deficiency (Eliassen, 2002). Diderot's letter marked the emergence of social rehabilitation of disability. The disabled person was no longer seen as a repulsive monstrosity, but as an individual lacking certain abilities. It was therefore an essential task to develop technologies which could improve the individual's abilities: exercise, provision of physical aids, etc. In this way, Diderot's thinking contributed to the development of social responsibility for the disabled. At the same time, however, the disabled were increasingly confronted by a technocratic and therapeutic system in which they risked being defined out of the community, as a victim, a repository of needs and failings, or an object to be repaired (Kristeva, 2008).

In the second phase of the history of disability, the main pillars are industrialisation, collective responsibility and assistance provided by the state. Disabled people were now seen as isolated objects of care living on the margins of society. These problems introduce, according to Kristeva, the third historical phase: otherness as a norm. The main concern is no longer about repairing defects but recognising diversity in society, and different ways of being human. "Life is conjugated in the plural", is Kristeva's poetical conclusion (2008:65).

Difference as a social key category

In her formulation of difference as a standard, Kristeva aligns herself with several central contributions from American culture studies. One of these is the concept of *dismodernism*, devised by Lennard J. Davis (2003). Disability represents, he maintains, a new ethics of the body. When we discuss biotechnology, the point of reference is living with disability. More and more conditions are being subsumed under the category of disability. In Norway, for example, the Norwegian Federation of Organisations of Disabled People (FFO) has 70

member organisations, from migraine sufferers to the overweight. Moreover, the country's aging population is creating an even greater number of people with disabilities. These examples represent a social trend that makes disability a potential key category. Davis develops the observation of this trend into the idea of dismodernism: We are all nonstandard, and this must be the prism through which we understand the world (Davis, 2003: 31f).

There is a similarity between Davis' perspectives and Kristeva's thinking. Both try to constitute disability as a universal trait. Disability is not limited to a particular, finite population, or to an oppressed minority; it is a vulnerability that affects us all. Disability affects us through the potential inherent in us all to be different or to have children that are different. The vulnerable body becomes an important site of meaning-making. From this perspective, disability is a difference, not a defect, at the same time it is a difference that makes a difference. The same point is made by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum in her own work. Discussing the situation of cognitively impaired children, it is important, she says, to give them special attention since the education system is designed with so-called normal children in mind. Progress, moreover, lies in our ability as a society to realize that the normal child doesn't exist. That we, quite simply, are children with different capacities and limitations, all of whom are entitled to be seen as unique individuals (Nussbaum, 2006).

Kristeva's linguistic activism is echoed in a work of critical importance by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. She proposes *the normate*, a position against which disability is defined. The disabled person is a culturally and historically specific figure, but oppressed by notions of the normal, of the norm, and the hegemony this notion enjoys (1997). Garland-Thomson takes this analysis a step further in her discussion of staring as a bodily impulse and social relation (2009). As a scholar of cultural studies, she concentrates most on this latter point, but not to the extent of ignoring ideas concerning the biological precursors of staring. Modern culture's erasure of mortality and physical vulnerability makes the disabled body extraordinary, something to be gawped at. But all such physical conditions are an unavoidable aspect of life, of what it means to be human.

Garland-Thomson extends her understanding of staring's socio-cultural significance in an analysis of different cultural idioms or means of expression. One of them is a series of photographs by Kevin Connolly. Connolly was born without legs and uses a modified skateboard to get around on (2009). His pictures are snapshots of people staring down at him (see Connolly, 2009 as well). They accentuate the staring, says Garland-Thomson, as an act of compassion,

creating a distance to the starer and alienating the staree. With the help of the philosophers Martin Buber and Emanuel Levinas, Garland-Thomson argues for bringing staring up to the level of social responsibility. Staring creates a responsibility that springs from our common human state. In making this move, it is possible to develop a concept of *staring management* to show how the staree can cultivate a position that can counter stigmatisation and create a space for compassion and humanity.

Our response to difference becomes the litmus test of the breadth and depth of society's humanity. As Kristeva puts it: It is knowledge and recognition of the other's vulnerability rather than the other's pre-eminence that constitutes the democratic tie (Kristeva, 2008: 70). This is the quintessence of a policy of vulnerability.

The problem

An important issue in Kristeva's thinking is the distance between her own vantage point and the role and agency of disabled people themselves. In her most important texts on disability, she appears to imply a "we" which hardly seems to extend to people with disabilities. She refers moreover to disability as pertaining to an otherness beyond this "we" (Grue, 2012). We only get a marginal impression of the disabled as organising in interest groups in order to share experiences and fight oppression. Kristeva's field of reference consists of somewhat scattered examples: a French woman who moved to Sweden and received personal assistance (Kristeva, 2008); and a documentary about an outsider artist who is referred to simply by his or her first name; and a mother fighting on behalf of her disabled daughter (Kristeva & Herman, 2010). Kristeva also refers to her own personal experience as mother of a disabled son (Kristeva, 2010).

As an academic and political campaigner Kristeva relates actively to disability, but without referring to contributions made outside France from the thriving field of Disability Studies worldwide. And there are hardly any references to Kristeva in the international literature on the subject, either in Disability Studies or special needs education. One reason is that she has not published her main ideas on the subject in English until relatively recently (Kristeva, 2006; 2010). But as she invariably speaks *about* the disabled, rather than with disabled people, this could also be a factor behind the lack of attention.

At worst, Kristeva's position could be taken as an expression of self-sufficient paternalism. But her status as humanist and political activist also allows us to

see Kristeva as representing an otherness in our attempts to situate her within an established discipline such as Disability Studies and special needs education. It is important to understand that Kristeva's professional project is basically an examination of the fundamental conditions of life, a study in which psychoanalysis plays a central role. On this point, we believe, Kristeva offers an original and challenging contribution to solidify the language of vulnerability and its significance.

The psychoanalytical perspective

Extensive psychoanalytic practice as well as Freud's and Lacan's works on the unconscious underpin Kristeva's most original contributions to an understanding of disability. In *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991) she develops a discussion of the stranger, particularly of the stranger inside ourselves. For Kristeva, difference is a fundamental condition catered for by language and religion, and an independent state. She unites the co-existence of differences under the concept of cosmopolitanism. But within the identification with what is shared, the familiar, *das heimliche*, we find the stranger or alien, *das unheimliche*. We are our own outsiders, we have the stranger within us; we are disturbed by the stranger's presence, and we have to confront the stranger actively to relate to it in the form of the actually existing other. This point is what she identifies as being the existentialist basis of a cosmopolitan politics. Recognising and acknowledging the stranger in ourselves creates the building blocks for committed relationships (Kristeva, 1991).

Disability is brought into the discussion of the potential of psychoanalysis in the article "On the Frontiers of Living" (2006). Cognitive, sensory and motor disabilities do assail the non-disabled, Kristeva points out, with not only fears of castration but also the unbearable fact of our mortality. We can resist racism and discrimination on the basis of religion and social class, but when it comes to disability we are poorly equipped, she suggests, overcoming the fear it arouses in us. It is in this situation Kristeva believes the psychoanalytical ear, sensitive to vulnerability, can achieve political impact. Kristeva's point is not at all the old cliché about us all being disabled now or in the future. Disability is already in us. And when we confront our fear of castration, failings and death, a transformation takes place in which we – aided by care, patience and sense of community – intensify our experience of human life. We do not become ourselves before we have confronted the unhealable within ourselves.

When we fear disability as a foreign body in ourselves, we project that fear onto disability as a social category. An internal struggle and uncertainty in the face of otherness, that which is not us, are closely linked to the social construction of the disabled, the stranger and the insane (Kristeva, 2006). Aspects of our existential condition affect our social relations and social organisation. This can take us in two diametrically opposite directions. First, otherness can lead to exclusion. This can happen both structurally in the form of political and economic discrimination, and at the personal level in the form of hate violence (Hanisch, 2011). Second, contemplation of disability as an otherness in ourselves, Kristeva maintains, can be nursed into a foundation for community and political responsibility.

Kristeva bases admission to a fellowship associated with disability is based on the personal encounter. Not only does she address “those affected by a disability”, she stresses, “but the society of others, who, instead of integrating them, might have real interaction with them” (Kristeva, 2010: 44). In a special needs education sense, it is particularly interesting to see her challenging the notion of integration and articulating a vision of interaction. Or might friction be an even more clarifying concept for Kristeva’s ambitions? It is the acknowledgement of disability as friction – both in a psychoanalytical and sociological sense – that opens the door to liberation. Her vision is about a plurality that is allowed to flourish. The encounter with disability should be informed neither by normality nor deviance, but by surprise, ambiguity and return of language to its plurality (2010).

Kristeva’s main point is that disability is inside us, not only because disability can happen to everyone, but also because it is innate in our subconscious as a void or absence in our being. Like other fears, it needs to be excavated and exposed to the light of day. Doing so heightens our sense of being in the world. But Kristeva won’t let the subject remain on the analyst’s couch. She insists that our innermost vulnerability has a political potential. She sees the potential in a politics of vulnerability, and points to the social ties in the form of liberty, equality, fraternity ... and vulnerability (Kristeva, 2010).

Conclusion

Kristeva’s thinking on the language of vulnerability gives us two different contributions by which we mainly gain a better understanding of the conditions enabling and promoting an inclusive reform of education. First, it makes us

more aware of what stands in the way of establishing inclusive procedures and practices. We draw here on the symbolic dimensions of language, which creates order and discloses to us the systematics of discrimination. Second, Kristeva equips us with certain tools that we can work with to establish an inclusive approach to education. The semiotic occupies a central place here. Language disturbs and disrupts, and makes our own vulnerability productive by getting us to realise that while we are all different from one another, we are all equal to one another as well.

One element preventing inclusion efforts is the way we think in a linguistic sense of disability as a problem afflicting a particular group of people. This is evident in, among other things, linguistic activism in the field of disability studies and advocacy. Professionals and disabled people alike are working to change designations and terminology because of their stigmatising effect. An example is the word “cripple”, which was replaced with “handicapped”, which in turn was replaced with “disabled”. There are a considerable number of people with impairments who loathe to having anything to do with “disability” at all. We are seeing the contours of a process where it is virtually impossible to talk about disability in any shape or form without causing a sense of stigmatisation. One reason for this is the linguistic othering of disability. Disability is not part of the same, what we non-disabled people stand for; it is alien to us. And the stratagems employed to reduce the stigmatising effect of disability through new educational philosophies and new terminology will unavoidably be overtaken by xenophobia – and stigmatisation will continue to take place.

Taking Kristeva’s thinking as our starting point, we can see the contours of a contribution to inclusion reform which attempts to destabilise othering. At this juncture, the concept of vulnerability acts as a point of entry. From Kristeva’s perspective, disability is an aspect of vulnerability that affects us all. She is calling for us to engage with this vulnerability as a fundamental human condition, one which can form the basis of a social pact. Everybody can potentially discover disability in themselves. Doing so provides us with an opportunity to see disability as a universal attribute of life. In efforts to make schools more inclusive, it could help prevent the othering of disabled pupils. It could act as a counter force to the ever new and presumably humanising categories, such as “persons with support needs”, but which are often merely used as euphemisms for socially stigmatising practices (Slee, 2011).

In a further development of Kristeva’s language politics and activist philosophy related to an inclusive approach to education, the greatest promise lies in

the semiotic. The key question here is what type of solidarity can best promote inclusive practice. One of the main components of the concept of inclusion is that we are all different and of equal value. But what does recognition or acknowledgement mean in practice? It is into the nucleus of recognition's essential workings that Kristeva's semiotic ruminations insinuate themselves and can help us see new ways of achieving and preserving equality for all.

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