

Paper given at conference, Feminisms in a Transnational Perspective: Challenges for old/new economic inequalities, Inter.University Centre, Dubrovnik 24-28 May 2010

The gift in economic and linguistic communication

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The economy we have is not working. Neither is the patriarchal paradigm in which it developed and which helps to keep it in place. Both the economy and its paradigm have attempted to conduct and explain the world without women because women are likely to be mothers and mothers practice a different economy. That is, caregivers of small children (whether individual women or whole villages) practice a unilateral gift economy with a logic of its own, not because they have some sort of nurturing essence but because children require unilateral care in order to survive.

Maternal care, direct giving, can be considered as a mode of distribution which is as important and as real as the mode of distribution based on market exchange. Direct giving is an economic structure with a superstructure of ideas and values which are often in opposition to those of the market and its superstructure. This has the effect that two opposing economic models are locked together in the same culture

and often or even usually in the same person. The gift economy model is not recognized as such however and is seen as moral or instinctual behavior, a circumstance which contributes to its domination by the economy of market exchange.

Although it is popular to call for interdisciplinary approaches, the combination of the fields of linguistics and economics is not often broached. I had a personal introduction to this combination when I was quite young and have been trying to understand the connections ever since. What I have found is that both language and the economy can be considered as forms of communication. One is verbal and the other is material communication. In both cases something passes from one person to another to satisfy needs of some kind. In both cases communication has to do with creating human relations and forming community.

The first, material communication, is the actual creation of the bodies of the people in the community by the free giving of goods and services to children, and in every life it precedes linguistic communication. It is the interpersonal source of embodiment.

My hypothesis is that mothering is an economic model with a logic of its own, which is the basis of a possible economy, a gift economy *and* that it is also the basis of language. That

is, language should be understood not as the codification and decodification of information or the use of tools or “doing things with words” or the expression and understanding of intention or the implementation of rules of a Universal Grammar, but as verbal gift giving, verbal mothering.

With this hypothesis I hope to sketch a feminist theory of communication, language and economics that does not exclude mothering, but instead makes mothering fundamental. It is important to do this in order to reframe and re form epistemology because the way we know has a lot to do with who we think we are, and the politics we practice, especially since we call ourselves *homo sapiens*. Right now *homo sapiens* is creating havoc, destroying the planet. Knowing is not enough. Nor is it the deepest or the first human interaction with the world. Material communication, giving and receiving come before knowing. All humans, women and men, are *homo donans* before we are *homo sapiens*. The mother is the first environment. In fact she *is* the environment for the child in the the womb and after the child is born, she is a proactive need-satisfying environment as caregiver. The child is a creative, not a passive, receiver. Patriarchy and the market economy together eliminate a viable, general and inclusive or even *gender neutral* model of

the mother from the culture. We need to put this model back in the economy, and in academia, in economics, linguistics and philosophy in order to redefine our species as *homo donans*. We also need to use it to make the connection of the maternal with epistemes of indigenous gift giving (Kuokkanen 2007) and claim for mothering the various experimental gift economies that are now being tried on the internet and in alternative communities.

Perhaps it is clear already how patriarchy eliminates the model of the mother but it not so clear how the market does it. I believe this elimination happens through the mechanism of exchange itself, which excludes gift giving while exploiting it, requiring the replacement of each potential gift with an equivalent. While exchange seems normal and natural, even a particularly human capacity, its logic contradicts that of the direct gift. And the seeming neutrality of the market – concentrating on exchange value, the commodity as an object and its equation with money – is an exclusion of the positive model of unilateral caregiving, nurturing.

The market requires scarcity in order to function. If there were abundance, gift giving would be easy and hierarchies would falter. No one would work for capitalists in order to make a living. When too much abundance accrues in the system, it is wasted in wars in order to create the necessary

scarcity to control the population, while maintaining wealth and power in the hands of the few - arms manufacturers, 'security forces', suppliers of the military and other vested interests. The gift economy seems difficult or even impossible in scarcity but in abundance it is easy and even delightful. It is not the "fault" of gift giving that makes it impractical but of the context of scarcity in which it has to take place. A case in point is the internet knowledge economy which functions on the basis of abundance and is birthing a number of gift economy projects such as free software, Freecycling and Peer to Peer groups.

There are many ways the market economy exploits gift giving. For example the 40% that would have to be added to the GDP if housework were counted in monetary terms (Waring 1989) is a huge gift that is being given to the market as a whole, mostly by women. Surplus value as that part of the value of the labor time that is not covered in the salary of the workers, is also free to the capitalist though forced or leveraged from the workers. The inputs of Nature into the market economy have been calculated as worth twice the Global GDP in monetary value (Costanza 1997). The gifts of nature are originally free for the taking by creative receivers but in Patriarchal Capitalism many of them are captured by privatization- and those that remained as

part of the commons like water and traditional seeds, are now becoming the property of global corporations. These resources have also been polluted and depleted in the commodification process, creating scarcity in the present and depriving future generations of humans and other species of our planetary birthright, the possibility of living in a gift economy.

What I propose is to work toward the elaboration of a free economy based on mothering not on the market. I propose this because a mothering economy would satisfy needs and safeguard the environment but also because I think the logic of mothering is fundamental for our humanity, and that exchange is a negative derivation of gift giving, the elaboration and implementation of which is actually psychologically harmful to everyone. The logic of exchange promotes the ego orientation, competition and greed which motivate the mechanisms of capital and merge with the Patriarchal values of domination. The replacement of gift giving by exchange as the 'social nexus' is the point of deviation in our thinking that leads to our present global calamity.

Indigenous peoples have usually taken a different road and had and have gift economies of various kinds. They have usually been read by Western anthropologists as if they

were on the same road as we are however, and their gift economies have been seen as “primitive exchange” a sort of undeveloped early stage of the market based on constrained reciprocity, debt and obligation - with the reward being reputation or status. The anthropologists do not notice the unilateral provisioning gift economy that is the context both of 'symbolic gift giving' and of the positive relations that are formed *beyond* debt and obligation. Many indigenous societies were and are more successful than our own at creating human happiness. Partly this is because in gift economies there is not a drastic break between the logic of the economy of childhood and that of the adult economy. In Capitalism on the contrary, we have to radically transform ourselves as we grow up in order to transition from the maternal economy into a gift-denying market economy.

Lets look at some of the characteristics of the logics of gift and exchange.

TABLE

Gift	Market Exchange
Unilateral, turn taking	Constrained bi lateral
Other oriented	Ego oriented
'Mind reads' needs	Expression of needs in money
Gives value to other	Gives value to self

Cooperative	Competitive
Mostly qualitative	Mostly quantitative
Gift passes 'forward'	Accumulation
Transitive logic	Logic of equation & identity
Includes other	Defends self from other
Creative receiver	'Earning', profit taking
Requires abundance	Requires and creates scarcity
Imbalance towards others	Balance in binary interactions
Positive relations of mutuality and trust	Debt and obligation, servitude and suspicion
Community interdependence	Separation, independence
Gives to market in Capitalism	Takes from givers but denies & hides gift giving

I believe the market economy causes a kind of blindness towards unilateral giving because exchange, based on identity and equivalence, is self reflecting and self validating and so much more like what we think of as logic. This makes exchange over-visible while gift giving is under-visible. There is a gift syllogism though - If A gives to B and B gives to C



then A gives to C. This chain of implication can be extended to a circulation of gifts, which creates positive relations of community among the people who are doing it. In community gift circulation everyone receives as well as gives so everyone is sustained and no one goes without.

Most of the problems that have puzzled Western philosophers could be solved by seriously reintroducing the model of the mother into their thinking about thinking. By finding a common root of language and economics in gift giving we can generalize the logic of the unilateral gift to society at large beyond gender, making philosophy, economics, linguistics and many other disciplines look very different. Long standing problems like the oppression of mothers and women can be re framed and addressed by understanding the reason for their denigration as a conflict between two economic and cultural models.

I want to just briefly sketch what I mean by language as verbal gift giving. Cognitive linguists Lakoff and Johnson started a kind of philosophical revolution some 30 years ago (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) when they began to revise the concept of metaphor, recognizing it as a cognitive device coming from common human experiences of the body. They continue to affirm today (2002) that “the corporeal or spatial logic, arising from bodily experience, is exactly what

provides the basis for the logic of abstract thought.” It would have been more accurate if they had said ‘*intercorporeal*’ logic and ‘*intercorporeal* ‘bodily experience’”.

Lakoff and Johnson introduced and made popular the idea of image schemas, which come from the implications of interactions between the embodied mind and the environment (but somehow the mother is not considered part of the child’s environment). Some of these schemas are: "up and down", which map to other areas like ‘Up is good’ or ‘More is up’ and “path to goal “ which maps to areas like ‘life is a journey’ or ‘love is a journey’ or containers, and going into or out of containers, which map to categorization. Lakoff and Johnson’s work contains a vast collection of these image schemas and the metaphors deriving from them which I will not go into now.

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I believe the image schema that underlies both material and verbal communication is the interactive, interpersonal sensory-motor schema of giving and receiving, first located not in the body of the child alone but intercorporeally, beginning in a moment in which the child has recently been part of the body of the mother, in the womb and proceeding through the long period during which s/he is dependent on the mother’s need- satisfying gifts and services for h/er

body's very existence. This is a *complementary intercorporality* which is embodied in the individual and *implies* the body/mind of the other.

Independence (autonomy) is actually a false ideal of patriarchy and capitalism, because it does not recognize the constitutional interdependence of everything. The child is first inside the mother's body and then is embedded in the material care which is accomplished by the mother's body (and mind), and later as the child grows older s/he continues to be embedded more directly in the gifts of the environment and society at large. Everyone is dependent on the gifts of air, sunlight, warmth, and all the products of Nature and culture (whether free or accessed through the market). What we call 'independence' in Capitalism is really usually just efficient integration into and dependence on the market.

Recent studies on mirror neurons (Gallese et al 2007 ) show that children as well as adults unconsciously simulate what others are experiencing, so we can suppose infants actually know what their mothers are experiencing when they are giving to them and vice versa. Thus "giving is receiving and receiving is giving" even neurologically. The material care

that children receive is an important part of their early sociality. Material communication is at the same time also interpersonal social communication.

To me, studying the development of children without their intercorporeal experience is like studying the development of the baby kangaroo without considering the fact that it is living in its mother's pouch.

The cognitive psychology project itself excludes the mother-child interaction by concentrating on the individual from the skin inward not recognizing that for anything at all to happen from the skin inward there have to be constantly renewed conditions of care from beyond the skin.

The repetition of the mother-child interpersonal intercorporeal interaction gives rise to a pattern of giving and receiving, which anchors and elicits sociality from the beginning. This pattern is positive because it has survival value. It also gives us access to the experiences of others, which are formed in the same way, and it can be projected upon Mother Nature/Mother Culture whose gifts we receive/perceive, elaborate and give again. From this point of view, giving and receiving is the underlying pattern or image

schema of material *and* verbal communication, expressed and embodied in a routine that the child learns with her mother's milk, a minimal play or script with three roles: giver, gift (or service), and receiver. This routine which is repeated in many different ways is the interpersonal intercorporeal experience that "provides the basis for the logic of abstract thought".

The child can play any of the roles of this routine. S/he is a giver because s/he gives smiles, cries and gestures (as well as urine and feces) which are creatively received by the parent. S/he is carried and birthed, given to life by the mother and is given h/herself by adults like a gift from hand to hand. S/he creatively receives h/her motherers' care of all kinds, and also the perceptions and experiences that come from he/r surroundings. Sometimes this creative reception means that s/he proactively (not passively) goes out to explore the world around h/her, crawling to reach the table, grabbing the keys and chewing on the book. That is, the creativity of the reception includes the fact that the child actively goes forward to receive the perceptual gifts.

The roles of the dependent child necessarily imply the roles of the mother. The role of giver of cries implies a receiver, and the role of being the gift given from hand to hand also, while the role of infant receiver implies an actively engaged, attentive and repeated giver who is always doing 'mind

reading', guessing the needs of the child and is successful in satisfying them. The child can play these three complementary roles herself, and quite early can understand the other's part in the interaction because s/he also takes turns and plays that part in another moment. (S/he knows it by doing it).

We can abstract the schema according to different emphases. The basic schema is A gives B to C. However B is given by A to C and C receives B from A constitute the schema from different starting points. One common variation on the schema is A gives directly to B when there is not a gift object involved but a service such as cleaning, dressing, carrying etc. The unilateral giving changes in character according to the kind of gift that is given or service that is done. Giving can transform into an activity with multiple steps as when for example the mother warms the milk for the baby. Warming the milk is a service that is then transmitted as a gift of the warm milk to the baby.

Relations of mutuality and trust arise from the repeated unilateral satisfaction of needs in these patterned interactions. The gift schema thus has positive relational implications and it becomes part of the child's identity. It is already part of the mother's identity because the mother

herself learned the gift schema in childhood and continues to practice it in various ways throughout her life.

My hypothesis is that the interpersonal gift schema can be seen as a basic communicative cognitive-linguistic structure which is projected, modified and used at different levels and in many different ways. At the linguistic level, verbal products are given and received, passed from one person to another, satisfying communicative needs. The assembly of these verbal products into broader units by applying – giving – the words to each other in syntax provides a way of constructing linguistic gifts, which are understandable by all because everyone who survives childhood has had to experience maternal care and consciously or unconsciously continues to play and project the roles of the gift schema and its variations from childhood on.

Unfortunately the schema of giving and receiving can also function as the schema for harmful transitive actions like hitting, hurting, beating, shooting and killing. I believe that the construction of gender in our culture, by putting little boys in a gender category opposite to that of their mothers, alienates them from recognizing and performing the nurturing gift schema they are actually using, and encourages them to replace it with hitting. (Phrases like ‘Take that!’ “You asked for it!”, “It serves you right!” recall

gift giving) Like giving, hitting touches the other, enters h/er proxemic space and establishes a relationship - though one of dominance and fear rather than one of mutuality and trust. Violence is thus a deep distortion and negative mirror image of gift giving communication. It may even appear to be the *basic* schema rather than gift giving, and thus to justify acts of violence, and even war. It also may appear to be the violent structure of the human, even of Nature and of reality itself.

Violence also serves to force others into a permanent gift giving position towards the dominant person or group or nation. Hierarchies of power are actually hierarchies of gift giving 'upwards' held in place by commands and 'transitive' violence 'downwards'. These hierarchies are also used to support the market.

Perhaps exchange, the market and the law seem better than violence as such. However the market has the disadvantage that it allows and promotes economic violence, hides, discredits and exploits gift giving and makes an egalitarian maternal gift economy impossible.

There are many issues in the study of language that can be seen differently in the light of giving and receiving:



In the speech situation itself the giver, speaker (or writer) gives word-gifts to the receiver, listener (reader), which satisfy the receiver's need for a means to create mutual human relations to things, ideas, perceptions. The speaker is the giver, the verbal product is the gift, and the listener is the receiver.

At the beginning of the philosophical turn towards metaphor there was a study of the 'conduit metaphor' by Michael Reddy (1979)<sup>1</sup> which showed that there are hundreds of metaphors in English about communication that use the idea of the conduit. These, like 'I can't get my idea across' and 'conveying one's thoughts', 'sending a message', were considered erroneous despite *vox populo vox dei* because language was seen as tool-using<sup>2</sup> and because the transfers seemed not to be like the real world where giving something to someone means the giver doesn't have it anymore. But that is because we live in an exchange economy where scarcity is normal. In a gift economy we would live in abundance, and we do experience abundance linguistically because we do not lose the word-gifts we give to others but can re create and re combine them at will. From our linguistic capacity we can understand something of what it

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<sup>1</sup> The critique of the conduit metaphor remains a tenet of cognitive linguistics and demonstrates the extent to which this discipline is still operating in the anti-gift exchange paradigm.

<sup>2</sup> Reddy wanted to encourage this interpretation.

would be like to live in material plenty even if we don't have any experience of it in our present reality.

We have an abundant store of verbal gifts and can always make more, giving the gifts of words and replaying the roles of the gift schema in the sentence itself. In fact the subject of the sentence can be seen as giver, the predicate as gift or service and the object as receiver. The roles of the image schema of the gift can thus be seen as transferred into the transitive grammatical constructions of language. The ditransitive construction can be seen as the variation on the schema in which there are two steps in the giving as we saw above, where the mother warms the milk (a service to the milk which passes as part of the gift to the receiver) and gives the warm milk to the baby. Sentences of the type 'Mary bakes the cake for Sue' function the same way.

I will just mention a few more aspects of language that can be seen differently from this point of view.

The linguistic creativity that Chomsky talks about is not, as he seems to think, an end in itself, not just verbal exuberance or munificence. Rather we create linguistically in order to satisfy the communicative needs of others for a relation to something and it is on the basis of this satisfaction of needs that we develop and communicate new ideas.

We know others have these needs by “mind reading”<sup>3</sup>, putting ourselves in their places, figuring out what it is they do not know and giving them the word gifts that people in their/our linguistic community give for that kind of thing.

If it is true that we create relations with others by satisfying needs, giving and receiving material gifts and services, we can also create relations by giving them verbal gifts. These are not relations of obligation and debt but positive relations of mutuality and joint attention. Since the gifts of language are much easier and faster to produce, give and receive, the relations created are not as intense and binding as are the relations created by giving and receiving material gifts. Nevertheless they affirm mutual recognition and a kind of species specificity, a common identity as humans and as part of a linguistic community. As substitute gifts, words remain associated with the gifts they have substituted and therefore refer to given aspects of the material and cultural environment. Common human relations are provided to these parts of the environment through verbal substitute gift constructions. New combinations of linguistic gifts allow us to attend to combinations of the non linguistic gifts that are given to perception. The information

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Mind reading’ is a term used in psychology for a skill children develop relatively early for understanding how others would feel and think in the same situation.

that we pass on to others through linguistic gift combinations can be true, satisfying a need of the other to know or false, like an ego oriented exchange. It can be beneficial like a gift or harmful like hitting.

The 'slots' and 'fillers' that linguists see as explaining aggetival 'attribution' or the 'merger' of words with each other, can be understood as 'needs'(slots) and 'need-satisfying gifts'(fillers). That is 'red' can be given to 'ball' because 'ball' cannot express redness on its own and so has a need for 'red'.

The mystery of recursion can be clarified by considering each new subject as the beginning of a new gift act, taking the receiver in the previous phrase as the giver in the subsequent one:

This is the dog that worried the cat  
That killed the rat that ate the malt  
That lay in the house that Jack built.

'Dog' is given, then 'that' is given in a new giver role. 'Worried' is given in the gift/service role and 'cat' in the receiver role. 'That' is then given in the giver role for 'cat', 'killed' in the gift/service role and 'rat' in the receiver role etc.

An epistemology based on gift giving and receiving can be construed by viewing language in the way indicated by these brief examples. This approach would also lead us to understand perception as the reception of the perceptual gifts of our surroundings and perhaps to project the mother onto Earth as Indigenous people often do.<sup>4</sup>

An epistemology of this kind would pave the way for a movement towards a gift economy. It would allow us to become conscious of the gifts we are already giving and receiving as mothers, as children, as women and men, as Indigenous peoples and colonized peoples, and even as colonizers and capitalists, as Mother Earth and all her children. It would allow us to see that the market is actually a small and alienated mechanism which floats upon the gifts of the many and indeed is parasitically dependent on them.

We have been led to believe since Aristotle that reason, logos, is an abstract rational process that has very little to do with mothering. Through the centuries the image of the dominant patriarch and of money have merged and have become the prototypical image of domination.

Instead if we take the image schema of the gift as a basic structure of language and economics, we can understand

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<sup>4</sup> If the mother is a particularly proactive environment for the small child, the environment can be seen as a less proactive mother.

logos as an abstraction from the mother-child interaction. The so called faculty of reason does not exist on its own but is derived from the schema of giving and receiving.

If the image schema of the gift is the basic intercorporeal logic of communication, projecting the mother onto Nature and the Earth can only help us find our place here as a species which is particularly maternal because we do nurturing verbally and mentally as well as materially.

Patriarchy and capitalism have dispossessed our species of its birthright by dominating and destroying mothers and Mother Earth and by dominating and distorting both the economy and economics, both language and linguistics.

It seems at this juncture in history that there is no alternative to (fallimentary) Patriarchal Capitalism but more Capitalism. Instead we need to build a new economic mode by accessing and recognizing the multifunctional gift schema we already possess. In fact those of us who are able to recognize the giving and receiving maternal capacity within us (whatever our gender or sexual identity) should be the leaders of this movement. I believe most of these people are women.

We need to create a matriarchal (Goettner-Abendroth 2009, Sanday 2003) gift economy, matriarchal not in the sense of a mirror image of patriarchy but an egalitarian economy

based on the maternal gift values. In order to do this we need to give value to the gift economy and to the gift paradigm, to mothers and to our species as *homo donans* and *recipiens*, the species of the maternal gift.

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