

## Draw Me a Language! Understanding the Imaginary of Young Children

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### Abstract

Following the careful and frequent observation of the children's drawings, this paper proposes a three-part analysis. The first two parts are focused on the ethnic, social and cultural imaginaries: (a) the drawings representing the dominant social imaginary; in Geneva, the Western, Swiss, francophone, and Calvinist, (*urban imaginary*); and (b) the drawings referring to other social imaginaries, often minority ones. The third part takes us into the creative imaginary suggested by Bachelard (1990).

The researcher tells Nadia: "Draw a language that you would like to learn!" (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Nadia, who is 5 ½ years old and bilingual in Spanish and French, draws a wonderful castle with three towers, with a prince and a princess in the dungeon. She says: "It's the *princess' language* I would like to learn when I grow up."

Nadia's story serves as a good introduction to the imaginary, as it impels us to wonder about the images that children build about languages. To what and to whom can a

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child refer when responding to the suggestion of an adult who asks him to draw a language, French, Chinese or Arabic, for example? But first, what is a language for the child? Before being a specific system of social communication differentiated from another through phonology or the graphic system, is it not this materiality, this organ, the language (tongue),<sup>1</sup> about which good manners teach the child early on not to stick it out at his pal! It is that language that very young children draw, whether Chinese, German or French. During an exploratory research with children 4 ½ to 7 years old enrolled in nursery school in a working-class neighborhood in Geneva, all the children we asked to draw languages had already constructed the concept of language. As we described in Perregaux (2009), this research sought to literally address the title of a seminar, *Languages and their images*, held in Neuchâtel in 1994. As far as we could tell, it was one of the first times that this issue was addressed in this manner and was the subject of a seminar in the francophone world, where images were a metaphor of representation. Not knowing in advance what children could draw if asked to illustrate languages, we went into the classrooms of the multilingual and multicultural neighborhood of Jonction in Geneva to ask the students to draw six languages (Chinese, Arabic, German, French, a language you know, and a language you would like to learn). In a first article (Perregaux, 2009), we studied in more detail the representations the children had of these languages. Observation and classification revealed two domains corresponding to two types of relating to languages. The first, called *Domains of language representation*, included the representations of languages illustrated by the drawing, moving from a non-differentiation of languages to a symbolic and graphic differentiation (Perregaux, 2009, p. 4), such as physical traits or stereotyped material; the second, called *Domains of socializing representations*, integrated a holistic representation between the language and the character (the language is represented by the drawing of people/speaking without reference to specific languages). The drawings and comments of certain children show that they could not draw the languages requested if they did not have physical contact in their close environment with a person who knew this language; therefore they needed proximity socialization to begin building an image of these languages.<sup>2</sup>

The issue of interest for us is the imaginary and the way in which we can move from the representations addressed in Perregaux (2009) concerning the social, shared representations to which the children gave us access through their drawings and their comments, to what we may call the imaginary or the imagination that some children display when they are asked to draw languages and when they do not respond to the instruction with expected sentences, that is, with shared representations. In that case, what is their position? Is a social imaginary different from the dominant one? Do their drawings depict other references, or do they express plural references that do not belong to the fields generally called upon in agreement by the social imaginary, which makes them create images “outside the norms”?

It is for this reason that in this article we will try to determine what we will call the imaginary (in order to undertake a descriptive and qualitative study of the children’s drawings and comments), interpreted here in at least two ways: (a) the ethnic, social and cultural imaginary from the perspective of Boyer (2001), who understands it as a type of a field of references shared by a society, operationalized as

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<sup>1</sup> Translator’s note: In French, *language* and *tongue* are homonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Among the few researchers to investigate the representations of students regarding languages based on their drawings are Castellotti and Moore (2005, 2009), Leconte & Mortamet (2005) and Moore and Castellotti (2001).

a cultural skill in communication; and (b) the imaginary as the ability to think, to construct images beyond the recognized types of social representations, a deviation from the collectively constructed reality (according to Merle, 2006, p. 4). We will briefly review the place and conditions under which the exploratory research was undertaken and we will then suggest a qualitative analysis in order to reflect on these types of imaginary. We will include several drawings in our article that were at the center of our analysis in order to open a dialogue in a sensitive field that could be the subject of multiple interpretations, for example, psychological, that we do not wish to address. Although we recognize the changes in the development of drawing skills of the child (Lurçat, 1979) during the interval studied, we will not include this aspect in our study.

### **Representations and the Imaginary**

It is obvious that we do not intend to solve the complex issue of the imaginary and of its particularly complementary links with representations; however, we would like to discuss it in relationship to our hypothesis that we should find in the drawings of the children studied other traces than those of stereotyping, an imaginary belonging to the dominant social imaginary, and, to refer to Bachelard (1990), discover that children have the faculty of distorting images in order to create new imaginaries based on movement and association, according to their individual background.

Social representation, according to Jodelet (1989), is:

A type of knowledge developed socially, with a practical aim and participating in the construction of a reality common to a social body . . . . It is generally recognized that social representations are a system of interpretations that controls our relationship with the world and the others, directs and organizes social behaviours and communications. They also intervene in the diverse processes such as knowledge distribution and acquisition, individual and collective development, the definition of individual and social identities . . . . As a cognitive phenomenon, social representations engage the social affiliation of individuals with the associated affective and normative consequences, the internalization of experience, of practices, of models of behaviour and of thinking socially instilled or communicated. (p. 53)

The dialectical relationship between the representations and the social level is obvious and the former play “an essential part in the preservation of social relations” (Guimelli, 1994, p. 13). In the field we are interested in, the children will respond to the instruction by expressing through the drawing the images they have constructed in their environment about languages, whether these are social experiences in which the children came physically in contact with people speaking different languages (close or extended family, circle of friends, the school environment and, before that, kindergarten, daycare and the public space) or through the mediation of books whose characters, from here or from elsewhere, speak various languages, through oral stories or through television.

These social representations will be in the shape of graphic marks that show the co-constructions developed by the child and his environment, the resources of this environment that quickly become collective and therefore socialized. The experience of our first analysis shows that we are witnessing an overlaying between the language and marks representing characters with specific physical traits, stereotyped cultural

objects and/or national symbols such as flags or car brands. The language will have a proper symbolization only when the child is able to represent it through marks of the adequate graphic system. The example of the drawing of the Chinese language clearly illustrates this. For their drawings, the children already have at their disposal, in their social representations, specific physical traits of the Chinese-speaking population (slanted eyes) and stereotyped images of Chinese cultural objects such as chopsticks and the pointy hat. Their representation of the Arabic language is slightly different to the extent where several children cannot draw it since they have not yet constructed an image of the people who speak it. They do not have a representation of it and, therefore, it is not part of their social imaginary<sup>3</sup> (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* Tiago, a 5 year old who is bilingual in Portuguese and French, leaves a blank space for Arabic and says in his comment, “I did not draw the Arabic language because I do not know what they look like,” and he adds, “Do you know what language the one at the bottom speaks? He speaks the Indian language and that is why he has the feathers.”

The children are building their cultural competency through socialization, which, as we can see, is widely shared for Chinese, for example, but much less for Arabic.

Boyer’s work (2001) reveals thinking that connects social representations to the imaginary when he describes what constitutes cultural competency. For Boyer:

<sup>3</sup> The analysis of the drawings reveals that the space reserved for the drawing of the Arabic language has more often than not remained empty, particularly with the youngest children. A 6 ½ year old student did not draw anything for the German language, explaining: “I do not know anybody who speaks this language.” Damien has not yet constructed a socializing representation around this language, and this prevents him from remembering its image in full symbiosis with a person who not only speaks this language but who is known to him. Tiago, as well as Damien, could have constructed an image through experience, a specific situation involving persons of Arab origin (whether a real or a fictional situation—such as telling a story about Arabs) or of German origin.

Cultural competency is made up of a diverse set of *shared representations*, that are pictures of the collective reality, more often than not reductionistic and therefore distorting, but essential for the community, that provide its members with (almost) as many ready made thoughts and words as are necessary for the comfort (relative, of course) of their acts of communication. These representations—which, as we know, tend by their very nature to be frozen, that is, stereotypes—take part in *ideologies* (religious, economic, political . . .) and are the basic elements of the hard core of the communication skill: the community imaginary, which I call the *ethnic, social and cultural imaginary* (ESCI), which concerns not only the collective identity but also the other identity constructions within society. (p. 334)

Thus, the imaginary Boyer (2001, 2004) talks about gathers together the shared references of a society, the representations of implicit assumptions that facilitate communication and enable the speakers to recognize themselves as social actors who have constructed the same affiliation. We will not address here the issue of the imaginary as a function of a teaching objective in the field of language learning and more specifically of French as a foreign language, as Boyer situates it, where entering in other ethnic, social and cultural imaginaries is part of teaching and learning. However, as far as we are concerned, in contemporary multilingual and multicultural societies the acquisition of several imaginaries, some of which have common aspects, becomes the rule; in daily life, these imaginaries participate in dialogue, in confrontations, in negotiations through contacts established between individuals from various linguistic and cultural groups and must become flexible and adapt to new understandings between social actors. We enter then in the intercultural dimension Boyer speaks about, that must be wary of imaginaries with frozen stereotypes that define the others in order to arrive at a perspective of enlargement, movement and change. Zarate (1983) would say that it is not so important to address the prejudices about the other, and through the other, about the language (in the various imaginaries); we should rather try and enhance our own personality, or modes of operating, reacting, being and seeing. The young children who took part in our research construct multiple ethnic, social and cultural imaginaries, and their drawings could express this diversity of references related to their environments. The question is to learn how, in their daily life, children manage their heterogeneous linguistic inventory, their various ethnic, social and cultural imaginaries, and the images the others send back to them.

Another perspective about the imaginary was developed by Bachelard (1990). Using his perspective to review the children's drawings we will try to understand if some of them enhance their ethnic, social and cultural imaginary or whether they distance themselves from the shared, social imaginary in order to create new images. Thus, some of them might move from a reproducing imaginary (imagination) to a creative imaginary. According to Bachelard, the former links us to the past while the latter is a promise for the future. Bachelard's philosophical thinking suggests a new representational freedom through imagination, the creation of images issuing from elements we might call objective (here, in the drawings of languages, these would be the cultural stereotypes and symbols such as flags) to enter the domain of the subjective.

## **Place and Method of Research**

The research was undertaken in Geneva, Switzerland, where over 40% of the children enrolled in school were of foreign nationalities and spoke over 120 languages. More than half the students were at least bilingual. Today, the languages spoken in Geneva schools are even more diverse than during this research in 1995. The neighborhood of Jonction is in downtown Geneva. It is a working-class neighborhood that received successive migrations since the 19th century; its school population is mixed and multilingual.

The children from junior kindergarten to Grade 1 (4 ½ years to 7 ½ years old) received the following instruction: “On the page you received draw in the first space the Chinese language, then the Arabic language, the German language, the French language, another language that you speak, a language that you would like to learn” (for more details, see Perregaux, 2009). The same interval was allotted to the children for each drawing, which they could finish while the researcher transcribed the comments of the students about each of their drawings.

The drawings of 40 children constitute the corpus based on which we propose a qualitative analysis. You will not find a comprehensive analysis of all the drawings; we targeted those that made us think according to the framework we established. For the current analysis, we will refer to the theoretical assumptions of Boyer (2001, 2004) (the ethnic, social and cultural imaginary) and of Bachelard (1990) for whom imagination (the imaginary) is the basic ability to go beyond the given reality. As we have said above, an analysis of the categories of representations can be found in Perregaux (2009).

## **Analysis and Reflection**

Following the careful and frequent observation of the children’s drawings, we propose a three-part analysis. The first two parts are focused on the ethnic, social and cultural imaginaries: (a) the drawings representing the dominant social imaginary; in Geneva, the Western, Swiss, francophone, and Calvinist, (*urban imaginary*); and (b) the drawings referring to other social imaginaries, often minority ones (let’s call them *migrant imaginaries*). The third part takes us into the creative imaginary suggested by Bachelard (1990).

### **Dominant Ethnic, Social and Cultural Imaginary**

We cannot do a comprehensive inventory of the content of the ethnic, social and cultural imaginary; however, we consider that the most frequent stereotypical traits evinced by the children in their drawings belong to it. Thus, the Chinese language is represented in the majority of drawings by the stereotypes of the dominant social imaginary beginning in early childhood (4 ½ year olds): slanted eyes, chopsticks, pointy hats (see Figures 3 and 4).

- “A Chinese woman with her chopsticks” (Crista, 5 years old and bilingual in Portuguese and French).
- “It’s a Chinese guy doing karate” (Georges, 6 years old and bilingual in Arabic and French).
- “It’s a Chinese guy eating with chopsticks” (Alben, 7 years old and bilingual in Albanian and French).

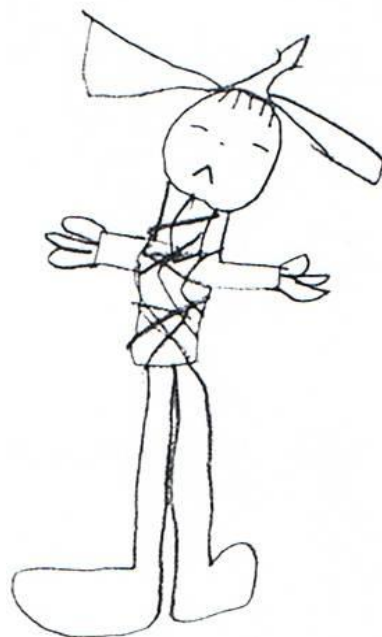


Figure 3. José, a 6 ½ year old who is bilingual in French and Portuguese: “It’s the Chinese guy, his eyes are blind and he has a pointy hat.”



Figure 4. Alex, who is 5 years old and trilingual in Polish, English and French: “I drew a guy with slanted eyes. I also wrote but I can’t write.”

As soon as the child identifies the language with a given cultural or national group (the two almost always overlap), he draws its stereotyped elements.

It should be noted that the dominant ethnic, social and cultural imaginary as defined by Boyer (2001) is not the only one that represents the Chinese language by the agreed-upon physical and cultural characteristics. The same stereotypes are found

in children who otherwise refer to other imaginaries. Thus, Alben, 7 years old and bilingual in Albanian and French, draws a Chinese man eating with chopsticks, but he is the only one who for Arabic draws “men cutting mutton,” which indicates that he belongs to another shared imaginary. As for Georges, who comes from Lebanon and speaks Arabic and French, he draws of course a Chinese man doing karate, but he sketches several Arabic letters to represent that language. These examples illustrate the difficulty in determining the specificities of ethnic, social, cultural imaginaries and their boundaries, and these drawings suggest that there can be representations that are intra-imaginary only as well as others that are inter-imaginary.

Shared representations on such a large scale do not exist for other languages than Chinese. Other stereotyped characteristics appear much less often for the Arabic language, where several students drew pantaloons, a veil or a smoking cap, like 5-year-old Alex (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Alex, 5 years old: “I drew an Arab with his scarf and I wrote.”

The Eiffel tower was drawn twice to represent the French language; flags are sometimes drawn by children to represent languages that raise questions to which we do not have answers when a child draws the Swiss flag for the French language. Certain students find the solution in a thought that links the State and the Nation by saying: “It’s the Swiss language;” others perform a decentering between the territory and the language by saying: “They speak French in Switzerland.”

There are many children who draw people they know or have heard of. Sometimes they put them in specific situations that do not have the same expected stereotyped characteristic and which are due to diversity of the children’s experiences and knowledge.

- Clara, 7 years old and bilingual in Portuguese and French: “I have an Arab uncle and an Arab auntie. They taught me words. It’s nice to listen to it.”

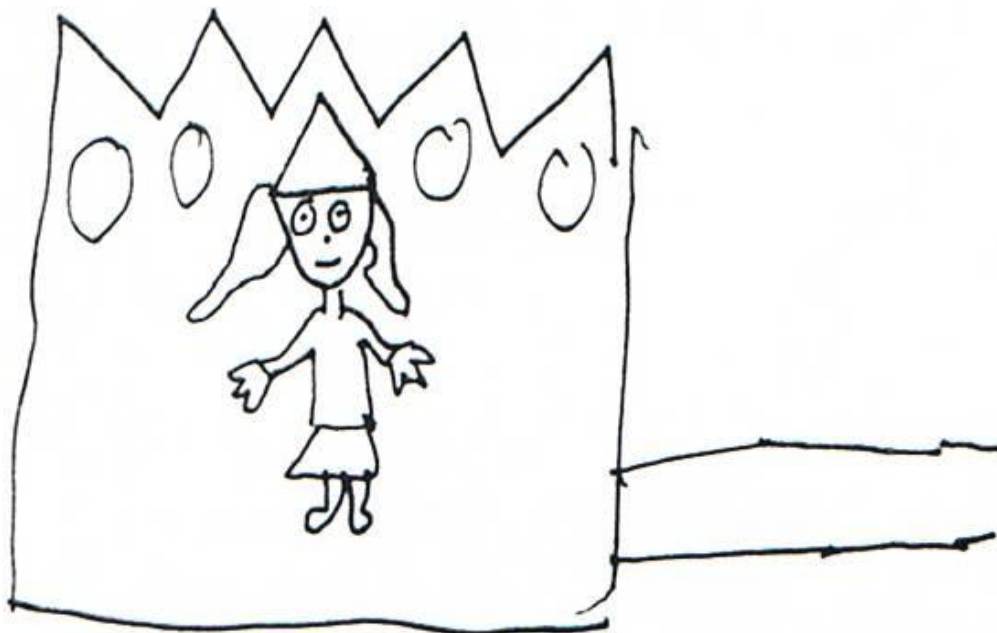
- Lucie, 5 ½ years old and a francophone: “I drew Denis. I like the Turkish language. I already went to Turkey. They bought me slippers with a tassel on top, red and gold.”



Figure 6. Laure, 7 ½ years old and bilingual in Portuguese and French, draws and describes the Arabic language: “It made me think of the beach in Arabic, there are beaches and I would like to go there.”

The children’s attitudes towards the languages are often positive, except once towards Arabic when a child “finds them useless and mean and they even write backwards” and three times towards German: “My sister teaches me German, she does not like German.” The need to develop positive attitudes towards languages and the people who speak them is addressed in the approaches in *Éveil aux langues* (Candelier, 2003; Perregaux, de Goumoëns, Jeannot, & de Pietro, 2003) that promote language learning. Activities may be suggested as soon as the children begin school to develop an imaginary with positive representational resources towards the language of the other and, therefore, towards the other.

Some children enrich their drawings by adding to the common stereotyped characteristics references that they co-constructed with their entourage (see Figures 6 and 7). Thus, Monica, 7 years old and bilingual in Portuguese and French, draws a darbuka saying: “It is a darbuka because in Arabic they play it.”



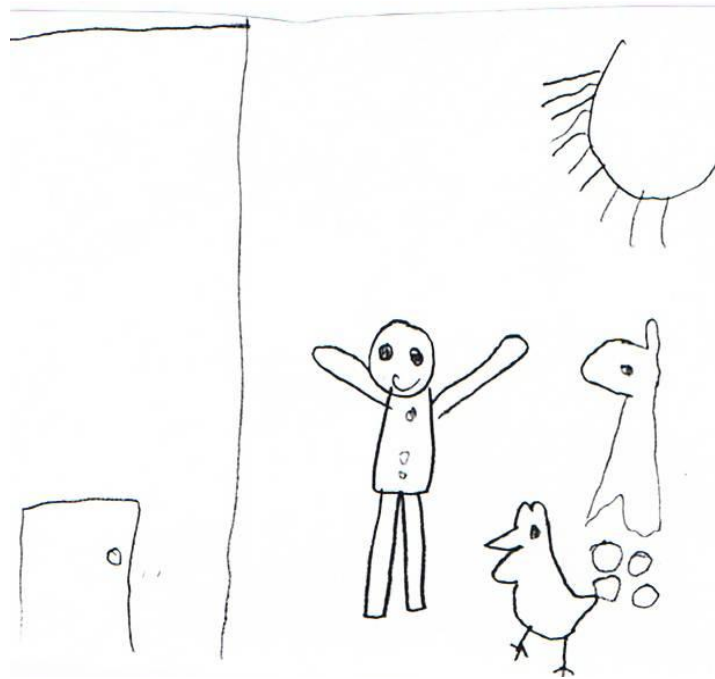
*Figure 7.* Laure, 7 ½ half years old and bilingual in Portuguese and French, explains her very explicit drawing for the Chinese language: “In China, there are ladies and gentlemen who wear pointy hats. I drew them in front of the wall of China.”

### **Other Ethnic, Social and Cultural Imaginaries and Expressing Various Imaginaries**

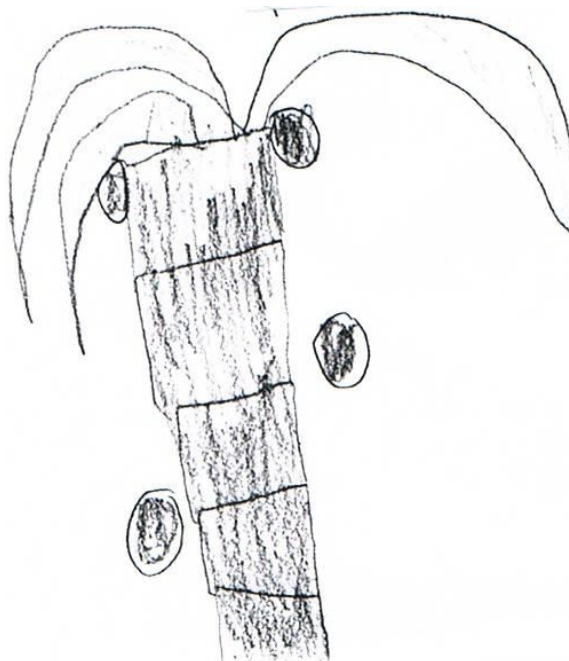
Most of the children in this research are in various constructions of ethnic, social and cultural imaginaries: that of their family environment that refers them to a specific elsewhere and images, and that of their school and macro-social environment, where their experiences contribute to the construction of the imaginary shared by a large part of society, which we called above the dominant imaginary.

Three African children in the research refer, for example, to the languages they know as if they had appropriated the multilingual dimension of their environment in their daily life, and two of them even refer to a continental dimension (see Figures 8 and 9):

- Kestia, 5 years old and bilingual in Lingala and French, writes “yo” in the space reserved for another language she knows and says: “I wrote in Lingala, it’s yo and it means you.” She also draws a kind of large mouth decorated with lines of various colors, saying: “It’s all the languages, Lingala, German and French. I would like to learn all the languages.”



*Figure 8.* Ngopa, 6 ½ years old and bilingual in French and Lingala, comments on her drawing: “I drew Africa because I drew Lingala.”



*Figure 9.* Samir, a 6-year-old francophone: “I drew Africa with the languages of all Africas.”

No other child spoke spontaneously of Africa and its languages. We can therefore advance the hypothesis that these three children refer to another ethnic, social and

cultural imaginary than the dominant<sup>4</sup> one, where African languages occupy a specific place.

It would be interesting to plan a research regarding the references children can have in multicultural and multilingual societies and school systems so that the teachers understand concretely what are the references shared by the majority of the students and what are those specific to some of them. The purpose would be for the children to construct large ethnic, social and cultural imaginaries common to multiple affiliation groups, and for them to use their cultural or rather intercultural skills to play with their representations and their references knowing in which communication situations they will make sense.

### **Creative Imaginary**

To reprise Bachelard's (1990) perspective, we will review here several of the children's drawings that seem to meet the criteria for belonging to the creative imaginary. What are these criteria: re-interpret the drawing outside the stereotyped standards or use the latter to describe them differently; grasp elements of different fields, such as that of the world of stories and the supernatural and express them in order to include them in the required instruction, namely, to draw languages. Einstein (thinker, mathematician, 1879–1955) said, "In order to invent, one must think aside," and Bachelard (1990) said, "The imagination is the ability to distort . . . to free ourselves of primal images, to change the images" (p. 7-8). It is an action that explores the world and requires invention. The imaginary uses the reality or the representation of reality: "the raw materials it digests and transforms . . . sifting them through the filter of individual histories" (Merle, 2006, p. 2).

From this perspective, 5-year-old Nadia's invoking of the princess language is very interesting for our analysis (see Figure 1). The little girl expresses several semantic fields that make sense for her: (a) that of the languages that she has an idea about, since in another of her drawings she speaks of the French language: "They speak French here. We go to friends who speak French" (she drew two houses connected by a road); and (b) that of stories she is told or movies she watches—and mainly those people who refer to the worlds of fairy tales, of princesses, not a princess out of her context but close to her castle, with her prince charming. From the synergy of several representations, that of the language she wants to learn and those of the world of princesses, the image and the word are born: the princess language. This language can only be beautiful, provoke envy, make life pleasant. Then we can see that it is an imaginary, subjective creation that Nadia makes up based on her representations and by changing the main meaning. Janet does the same (see Figure 10). She is 7 years old and she is trilingual: Spanish, English and French. She draws the French language and suggests the drawing of two angels, saying: "I love French; it is the language of angels".

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the dominant ethnic, social and cultural imaginary here is not the always the same elsewhere and that it can be in minority in another situation.



Figure 10. Janet: "I love French; it is the language of angels."

She too finds inspiration in unexpected images to express her pleasure in knowing French. Georges, whom we already talked about, bilingual in Arabic and French, newly arrived from Lebanon, draws a stylized Latin A in the space reserved for the category *another language you know*. He does not name it directly but he too refers to the world of fairy tales: "I drew the language of the desert, the language of Aladdin," he says.

All in all, the children are rather conformist and most of the time they display a strong logical connection between their drawings and the languages. Others, not many, play with associations of ideas, such as Zéphyr, a 7 ½ year old who describes his drawing by saying: "Arabic makes me think of the desert and a camel." Heven, 6 ½ years old and bilingual in Tigrynia and French (he also takes English courses) also launches himself in associations of ideas: "When I say Chinese, I think of a flower; when I say Arabic, I think of a house, when I say Tigrynia, I think of a pencil because I am learning to write; when I say Albanian, I think of a heart because it is the language I would like to learn" (see Figure 11).

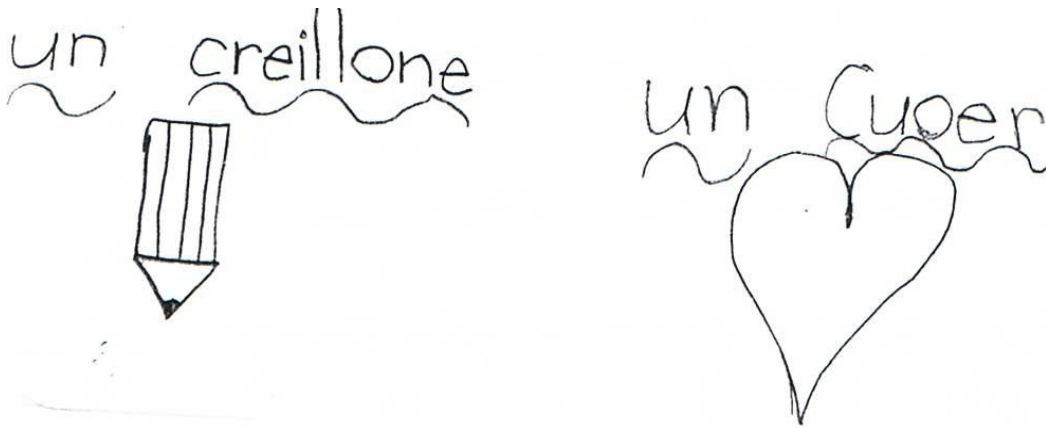


Figure 11. Heven and his associations of ideas.

These children display more or less a decentering from the instruction given and from the set representations of the ethnic, social and cultural imaginary. We are witnessing here much more subjective responses, sometimes emotional, also showing a certain distancing from shared imaginaries.

### Conclusion

It seems that most of the drawings correspond to representations that concern the languages, and we could be surprised that children so young have already so many representational resources to illustrate the proposed languages during the research. However, we saw that the density of the presence of images may be very different according to the language: Thus, Arabic remains mostly absent from many children as opposed to Chinese. It would be interesting to repeat this research in France to see the extent to which an explicit discourse about the presence of the Arabic-speaking population in this country creates images of the Arabic language in the dominant imaginary and influences the representations of children.

Stereotyped images are already present in the representations of the children, at least beginning at 5 and 6 years of age, which pushes them to conform: Either they use stereotyped images, taken from the shared social imaginary, or they have not yet constructed any, and they leave the sheet blank. It seems that most of the students who can rely on several ethnic, social and cultural imaginaries are better able to follow the instructions than those who only have one.

We should also continue reflecting on the presence of different ethnic, social and cultural imaginaries in the same societal space, their recognition and their role in learning, particularly academic learning, and the management of the misunderstandings to which they can lead. Are ethnic, social and cultural imaginaries porous; can they grow in contact with new social realities such as migrations, or do they remain isolated, on the defensive, afraid of a blending, where the relationships between “us” and “others” move only a little? From the same perspective, such a research fosters questions about the representations of the other recorded in the shared imaginary, expressed here through the representation of the language: The vast majority of children had extremely positive attitudes towards languages (with a small exception for Arabic and German), which could be a good start for learning languages and the development of a positive relation with the other.

Finally, it seems that the creative imaginary is barely present in the drawings of the children, whereas we thought that they would avail themselves of this

opportunity either to compensate for absent images or to displace the instruction from its main meaning. This did not happen, and as we have already said, the children show a match between their drawings and the social imaginaries to which they belong. We should note that drawing languages means for many of them, particularly for the younger ones, drawing first characters who speak but who are undifferentiated according to language, then characters burdened by stereotyped characteristics, national symbols or examples of the related graphic systems. The children are building the contents of their social imaginary(ies) and the assumption should probably be that they have appropriated them in a solid and diversified manner so that they can play with them, distort them and forge new images, such as Nadia's princess language.

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