

Letter to the Brother I Never Had: Pa[i]ra-/Dia-/Logically Talking Back to Ono

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[Schwartzman, Roy](#) (1997) Letter to the Brother I Never Had: Pa[i]ra-/Dia-/Logically Talking Back to Ono, *Western Journal of Communication* 61 (1997): 485-492.

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Article:

Dear Reader:

This piece addresses the scholarly concept of voices by combining the personal voice of an epistle with the impersonal propositional format characteristic of Wittgenstein's philosophical writing. The resultant hybrid genre of academic prose examines how "voice" is employed in a variety of intellectual and everyday uses, thereby forming a phenomenological pastiche. Of particular consequence are the roles voice plays in constructing human identity and asserting political power.

Your partner in interpretation,
The Author

The Present

Dear Kent,

Although I write this letter ostensibly to you, it – like almost all my writing – also addresses my silent dialogic partner. I refer to David Berlo. His voice resonates in my memory; his lessons linger in my life.

You and I have never really corresponded unless you count the casual encounters at conferences. We don't talk much – in person, on the phone, or by mail. Maybe it's because, despite our best efforts to escape it, we inherit the masculine motif that silence is golden. Funny how the "strong, silent type" idealizes reticence. Since we're not Marlboro men, let's talk – and listen.

Let me accustom you to how my voice looks on paper. My writing has a Germanic accent, im-personating order on what might be indio[t]syncrasy. You didn't invite me to reply to the letter you wrote your mother, but I take all communication as an invitation to respond, to continue dialogue or create it by disrupting a[p]parent continuity. I jotted down reactions to your letter, then organized them using the thoroughly linear, left-brain outlining feature on the word processing program. By the way, listen carefully and you'll hear Wittgenstein whispering between the lines.

1. What can be shown cannot be said (Wittgenstein, 1922/1961, #7). "A form cannot be described: it can only be presented" (Wittgenstein, 1975, #171).
 - 1.1. Show and tell: Wittgenstein supposedly lost interest in movies when they became "talkies." Perhaps he found physical action and verbal declaration redundant.
 - 1.2. Show or tell: the assumption that words are cheap and actions count. Actions speak louder than the "mere rhetoric" of words. But must voices say something, as in the information-centered views of communication? Should we privilege verbalized declarations (i.e., propositions) over the apophansis of sounds signifying the presence of a subject/ivity? Receptiveness to voices (rather than imposing our voice on anOther) allows subaltern voices to become unconcealed (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 56-57). Heidegger employs a visual metaphor to connect this receptiveness with rhetoric, thereby distancing rhetoric from manipulation. "To perceive implies, in ascending order: to welcome and take in; to

accept and take in the encounter; to take up face to face; to undertake and see through – and this means to talk through. The Latin for talking through is *reor*; the Greek *peō* (as in rhetoric) is the ability to take up something and see it through" (Heidegger, 1968, p. 61), so rhetoric bridges the gap between thought and action.

2. Correspondence implies co-responsibility, an assumption (often if not necessarily counterfactual) of willingness to listen as well as to address.
 - 2.1. Addressing an Other invokes a Kantian courtesy of treating communicators as subjects-in-themselves. Instead of a *ding-an-sich*, an *ich-an-sich*.
 - 2.2. We try to approach Habermas's ideal speech situation, but we want to tie it to action, not just to formal conditions of establishing consensus. This project of combining reason with action-and desire-motivates Susan Wells (1996) to combine the theories of Habermas and Lacan to understand the mixture of rationality and desire (e.g., the desire to learn, the embodiment of reason in gendered bodies) found in teaching. Merleau-Ponty also observed: "The meaning of a work of art or of a theory is as inseparable from its embodiment as the meaning of a tangible thing – which is why the meaning can never be fully expressed" (1964, p. 4). The body becomes, for Wells and Merleau-Ponty (as for Foucault) the locus of the historicized network of relationships within which signification emerges.
3. Does a voice require a language?
 - 3.1. There are no voices that only I hear.
 - 3.1.1. A voice need not be vocalized, but must in principle be vocalizable.
 - 3.1.2. Suffering can be inchoate but not incoherent.
 - 3.1.3. "My voice": personalized but not privatized.
 - 3.1.4. A private language is logically impossible; it is selfcontradictory by definition (Wittgenstein, 1958).
 - 3.1.5. Poetry skirts the edges of the sayable, voicing what lies at the limits of language (Waismann, 1952/1962, p. 116).
 - 3.2. I do not hear only voices.
 - 3.2.1. Much important experience is not verbalized or verbalizable.
 - 3.2.2. Voices don't tend to assume primacy in our experience. Martin Jay (1996) might be closer to the mark (a visual image) when he traces (a visual image) the ocular focus (a visual image) of language and thought.
 - 3.2.2.1. Seeing is believing. Overseeing implies supervision. But the anonymity of hearing relegates information to rumor, as if overhearing diluted messages.
 - 3.2.2.2. You haven't really experienced the book until you've seen the movie.
 - 3.2.2.3. A relative newcomer to literary genres: novels based on screenplays.
 - 3.2.3. But vision does not hold a monopoly on experience.
 - 3.2.3.1. A vision is fleeting, much like a glancing blow skims the surface but a sound blow hits home.
 - 3.2.3.2. The notion of calling implies depth. We follow a call, but only glimpse a vision.
 - 3.2.3.3. Being prepared to follow a calling implies a readiness to respond, and this receptiveness connects listening with the potential for action (Heidegger, 1971, p. 209).
 - 3.2.4. Silence can be active and productive, not merely muteness or the absence of voice (Dauenhauer, 1980). Consider silent protests, the right to remain silent, the vow of silence, silent prayer, "Silent Night, Holy Night."
 - 3.2.4.1. A cacophony of unprioritized or uninterpreted voices constitutes chatter.
 - 3.2.4.2. Music gains its cadence through the use of rests.
4. What does voicing accomplish?
 - 4.1. Expression validates the communicator's identity as a subject (and sometimes as subjected to identities constructed by others).

4.2. Self-validation is independent of specific content.

4.2.1. Vocal reinforcers ("uh-huh," "I see," "Really?") serve as validators even if communicators don't offer solutions or advice.

4.2.2. Neil Diamond: "I am, I said, to no one there."

4.2.3. A limit case of self-validation: the primal scream, pure ex-expression.

4.3. Why are some voices so distinctive that it's "as if we're in the same room" (Ono, 1997, p. 114) with the utterer?

4.3.1. You mention how your mother's voice, even in writing, "almost lifts off the pages" (Ono, 1997, p. 114). I think you refer to what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca call presence: the ability to render immediate, "by verbal magic alone, what is actually absent" (1969, p. 117).

4.3.1.1. Precise images, idiosyncracies, and figurative language can give communicators a sense of im-mediacy with each other, as if they were face-to-face without the intrusions or distortions introduced by delivery modes such as writing.

4.3.1.2. Remember handwritten letters, each word a signature of the author's individuality? The author's voice is live-ly, dynamic as a living, unique person.

4.3.1.2.1. Secret Samadhi, the latest release by the band Live, is a studio album.

4.3.1.3. Presence is present-ing, a rendering of communication into the here-and-now, the antithesis of mass-produced appeals to audiences that exist only as numbers in surveys. Presence also is opposed to the sterility of documents that impersonate eternal laws, their exhibition in museums testifying to their status as objects, authorized but unauthored (ahistorical).

4.3.1.4. When presence wanes, a voice becomes less distinctive, perhaps the commanding voice of authority or the bland voice of bureaucracy.

4.3.1.5. Do you think computerized voices have the ability to "leap off the screen"? How rich is the standardized, ASCII compared to the imperfectly drawn, handscrawled (and vertically oriented) smiley face? My remarks have nothing to do with computer graphics capability or artistic talent.

4.3.1.6. How necessary is physical presence for the effect of a live-ly voice? Consider the phenomenon of online psychological counseling.

4.3.1.7 My voice is alien to me. "Did I write that?" I wonder, reading some of my papers. "Do I sound like that?" I muse, listening to myself on audiotape.

4.3.2. You mention, "Even dead things speak to us" (p. 116), and I wonder about the voices so long muffled by the can[n]ons of dead, white, heterosexual males.

4.3.2.1. Voices we never heard can speak. I hear Wordsworth, but in my voice. I cannot synthesize Wordsworth's voice. Wordsworth does not speak to me with a British accent.

4.3.2.2. Can we subjectify the voices of victims, understanding them as initiators instead of as merely the direct objects of oppression? On the bulletin board above my desk: a program from the 27th Annual Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches. The conference theme: "Hearing the Voices: Teaching the Holocaust to Future Generations."

4.3.2.3. Hermeneutics may be the attempt to [im]personate voices that have waned, become garbled, been marginalized. Or to dis-cover my voice in the voice of those considered distant, alien – and to dis-cover their voice in mine.

5. Vocal purity

5.1. There are no "pure" races. Thus there are no "mixed" races per se, just different mixtures. The only reason painters often use white as a primer is because it is so easy to cover or tint with colors.

5.2. Our racial voices are not pure.

5.2.1. They may speak in different volumes, whispering amid assimilation, shouting amid assertion.

5.2.2. They may acquire different accents as we discover our heritage – or as we find a heritage imposed upon us.

6. Can (or should) anyone give someone else a voice?
 - 6.1. If so, the speaker risks falsifying the genuine voice of the Other. Ventriloquism: throwing one's own voice atop another's. Ventriloquists can transgress social conventions, since they merely transmit what the "dummy" says. A convenient escape from responsibility: the dummy's jokes were bad. The medium isn't the message, the writer isn't the activist, the presenter isn't the professor.
 - 6.1.1. Donna Haraway calls the persona of the Western scientist that emerged in the seventeenth century the "authorized ventriloquist for the object world" because he (gender specificity intended) bore witness to nature, which spoke through him (1996, p. 24).
 - 6.1.2. "History speaks through me." History's voice is a verdict, rendering definitive judgment while obscuring the (often messy and imprecise) deliberative process (Schwartzman, 1995).
 - 6.1.3. "Speak for yourself." Aaron spoke for Moses in Egypt. Speechwriters put words in the mouths of speakers.
 - 6.1.4. Maybe you couldn't "find your voice" because Bruce Gronbeck assumed that voices are found, not made. It's tough to find what isn't there yet. You said that "all voices are learned ones" (p. 119), so don't consider yourself lost until the map is drawn. And an indefinitely large number of maps can depict the same territory.
 - 6.2. Speaking with others might not suffice for instigating social change.
 - 6.2.1. Speaking with others may constitute only talk among ourselves, preaching only to the converted.
 - 6.2.2. Speaking with others in the sense of unifying our voices as a chorus may require public-izing our voices. But if a neutral public forum that allows emergence of all voices doesn't exist . . . (Haraway, 1996, p. 25)?
 - 6.3. But if we do not speak with others, "speaking for myself" renders all voices singular. Soliloquies instead of solidarity.
 - 6.4. Might we learn the art of impersonation, voicing an identity not our own but of others we identify with? Can we identify with but refrain from identifying as? Does it take one to talk as one, or must we cling to the simile, at best talking like?
 - 6.5. A plurality of voices becomes. . .
 - 6.5.1. Cacophony if they remain, as you say, "discordant voices" (p. 119).
 - 6.5.2. Symphony if their individuality is harmonized.
 - 6.6. Where should we locate the voice of "the people"?
 - 6.6.1. In the masses themselves, whose din may render words unintelligible? This buzzing confusion alarmed Ortega y Gasset, who lamented, "There are no longer protagonists; there is only the chorus" (1932, p. 13). The voice of the masses in this view is the "average" (Ortega, 1932, p. 13), but in two senses:
 - 6.6.1.1. The statistical mean, the "middle of the road," the "moderate."
 - 6.6.1.2. The meanness of the "mere" or "vulgar" masses as opposed to an elite of perhaps fewer but more strident voices (of the wealthy, militarily powerful, etc.).
 - 6.6.2. In elected or self-proclaimed representatives of the people?
 - 6.6.3. The closest approximation to the vox populi: polls of public [which public? a representative sample of. . . ?] opinion. The silent majority thus expresses itself without saying much.

7. Voicing

- 7.1. Descartes lives in the guise of Gallup. We have opinions, therefore we know. Everyone's entitled to voice their opinion. But not every voice is entitled equal claim to our attention. Who authorizes which voices get heard and prioritized?
- 7.2. Suppose we fired our internal censors, which enable manners but restrain candor. In other words, imagine liberating all our voices (the logical limit of free speech).
 - 7.2.1. The information explosion would paralyze us. The quantity of voices and their messages lies at the root of our confusion. Schizophrenia: the inability to silence or prioritize voices.
 - 7.2.2. We need to improve our ability to process voices as well as express them, to sort as well as say.

7.2.3. Perhaps a first step: specify finer differences among voices. Learn to discriminate better. The mechanics of code switching might hold many clues about using voices as well as identifying them. When do I speak as a Jew? As a male? As an ungendered, disembodied academic voice? Why do I choose these voices in these circumstances? How can others identify my voice as the voice of one or more of my identities?

8. Prevention and treatment of laryngitis

- 8.1. Diagnosis: Muteness may arise from the apparent insufficiency of words for an expressive task. Survivors of the Holocaust sometimes refuse to talk about their experiences, since verbalization might cause them to re-live their horrors. A new book by Sara Horowitz (1997) explores this theme of muteness, which differs from the communicative functions of silence.
- 8.2. Etiology: We lose our own voices when they boil away in the great cultural melting pot. And we are left with a flavorless but palatable blandness whose ingredients are unrecognizable.

Bon appetit!

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[Citings for My Soundings]

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