

ECHO: OR, ON THE ORIGIN OF WORDS

Garnet C. Butchart*

Abstract

It is within the context of thinking about the phenomenology and semiotics of the human experience of the world that this article explores the twin topics of sound and listening. The discussion is informed by Jean-Luc Nancy's recent volume *Listening*, a philosophy of sound that, I argue, raises communication as a question of listening. The first part of the article draws out this question from Nancy. The second part connects it to Werner Hamacher's examination of the word as a gift of Being (Heidegger), which resonates, or can be heard, I argue, as an echo of being when taken up in communication. The perspectives on listening, word, and echo advanced in the article demonstrate how human communication may be understood philosophically, rather than theoretically, as a reversible semiotic and phenomenological relation.

Key Terms

Philosophy of communication, Nancy, listening, echo, language.

YANKI: VEYA SÖZCÜKLERİN KÖKENİ ÜZERİNE

Öz

Bu makale, ses ve dinleme konularını, insanın dünyaya dair deneyiminin fenomenolojisi ve semiyotiği bağlamında incelemektedir. Bu tartışma, Jean-Luc Nancy'nin, iletişimi bir dinleme meselesi olarak gündeme getirdiğini savunduğum, bir ses felsefesi olan *Listening* adlı önceki bir çalışmasından hareketle oluşturulmuştur. Makalenin ilk kısmı, bu tartışmayı Nancy'den yola çıkarak yürütmektedir. İkinci kısım ise söz konusu tartışmayı, Werner Hamacher'in iletişimde ele alındığında varlığın bir yankısı olarak yankılandığını veya duyulabildiğini savunduğum sözcüğü, Varlık'ın bir armağanı (Heidegger) olarak, incelemesine bağlamaktadır. Makalede dinleme, sözcük ve yankı üzerine geliştirilen perspektifler, insan iletişiminin teorik olandan ziyade felsefi bir biçimde, tersine çevrilebilir bir semiyotik ve fenomenolojik ilişki olarak nasıl anlaşılabilirliğini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Terimler

İletişim felsefesi, Nancy, dinleme, yankı, dil.

Sound and listening. Vast topics, to be sure. But it is their vastness that brings them well within the realm of contemporary philosophy of human communication, and not only research in biology, physiology, or audiology, the latter of which may reduce the immensity of these topics to mundane sense perception which, when examined from the viewpoint of Western science and medicine, may not bring us any closer to understanding the *meanings* made of our empirical experiences of touch, sound, and sight. The objective of the discussion to follow is to engage Jean-Luc Nancy's recent book *Listening*, the learning outcome of which, I argue, compels future inquiry into human communication as a question of listening. Next, the discussion links sound, listening, and communication to Werner Hamacher's discussion of the origin of the word in Being—its *echo*—or what Nancy calls, *resonance*. Throughout, emphasis is placed on understanding human communication philosophically, not theoretically, as a reversible relation.

Sound, Listening, Resonance

Sound is a quantity. It has magnitude and intensity. Listening, however, is a conscious experience of sound. Listening moves us, bringing us closer to the source (we want more quantity, greater volume) or repelling us from it (if the experience of what is heard is disturbing). Listening is a quality that stirs. It excites. But it can also lead to fatigue, then perhaps to slumber. Even in the absence of sound, or in the void of the capacity to hear, listening is a primary human *engagement* with the world. It is, to listening as a

communicative engagement with the life world that Nancy's slim volume *Listening* critically attends.¹

For readers unfamiliar with Nancy, his general philosophical program may be characterized as post-phenomenological. That is, his concern is less with presence and immediacy—the appearance of phenomena as the central concern of more classic schools of phenomenology—and more with understanding being in its withdrawal. In that respect, Nancy's philosophy of sound is offered as a *critique* of visuality and visual presence that he contends dominates Western philosophical thought from Kant to Heidegger. Two main issues at stake in this philosophy are relevant to human communication inquiry.

First, Nancy argues that “perceived meaning” (how we conceptualize lived experience) has visual *presence* more often than acoustic *resonance* as its dominant support (2007, p. 3). For instance, we say, “I see!” more often than “I feel!” or “I hear!” when responding to an experience described by another. Because of its attention to the visible, modern philosophical thinking therefore cannot often *see* what sound gives to it, according to Nancy. This is why in *Listening* Nancy turns our attention away from “what *presents* itself to view—form, idea, painting, representation” and instead shifts it to what *arises* in “accent, tone, timbre, resonance, and sound” (2007, p. 3). He argues that listening rather than looking deserves special attention because it is in sound that philosophical *truths* may emerge:

The sonorous outweighs form. It does not dissolve it, but rather enlarges it; it gives it an amplitude, a density, and a vibration or an undulation whose outline never does anything but approach. The visual persists until it disappears; the sonorous appears and fades away into its permanence (Nancy, 2007, p. 2).

Sound gives form an outline that comes close (it approaches) but does not fully arrive -in other words, the shape sonority gives to form is not easily grasped, therefore it is difficult to exhaust with concepts, to say nothing of putting into words. Such is sound, and the attendant challenges in writing effectively about it. That said, however, the difficulty

¹Philosophy of communication raises the experience of sound and listening out from under a transfer model of human communication, which underpins how listening is typically defined mechanically in communication-discipline specific research as, for example, “the active process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages. It involves the ability to retain information, as well as to react empathically and/or appreciatively to spoken and/or nonverbal messages” (Walker, 2015, p. 259).

presented by sound for philosophical thinking about communication does not diminish it. In fact, it *increases* it because what is left open is its resonance—which also means, its *contagion*. What sound gives for thought to think (resonance) can only be received. It is that which must be awaited, truly *listened* for.

Having identified sonority as the blind spot of modern philosophy in its visual prejudice, Nancy turns his perspective to the listening *subject*. This is the second point of relevance to philosophical thinking about human communication. Nancy asks:

What is at stake when one truly *listens*, that is, when one tries to capture or surprise the sonority rather than the message? What *secret* is yielded—hence also made public—when we listen to a voice, an instrument, or a sound for itself? ... What does *to be* listening, *to be* all ears, as one would say “to be in the world,” mean? (2007, p. 5).

Listening as part of philosophy’s curiosity for truth, *yes*. But more basic than that, listening is a basic ontological condition of sense *experience* of the world. “To listen is ... literally, to stretch the ear,” Nancy says (2007, p. 5). To stretch or to pull—to tug, or to guide and move in this direction or that—actions each of which calls attention to one’s *orientation* in the world. Listening, Nancy tells us, is a question of *being*. It is fundamental to the meaning of *human* being.

But this is already banal. The major value of attending to sound and listening rather than to vision and visuality (and to do so as an effort to better understand what it means to be human), is the extent to which it broadens how we understand *communication*. Nancy’s philosophy of listening contributes to what we know about *human* communication as both a semiotic and phenomenological *experience* of the meanings made of our shared life world. From this perspective (what we can call a “point of hearing” rather than a point of view) (Geva, 2012), human communication may be understood philosophically, in part, not only as an experience of sight and of sound but also of *listening*. Consider the essential proposal of Nancy’s book:

In all saying (and I mean in all *discourse*, in the whole chain of meaning) there is hearing, and in hearing itself, at the very bottom of it, a *listening*. Which means: perhaps it is necessary that sense not be content to make sense (or to be *logos*), but that it wants also to resound. My whole proposal will revolve around such a fundamental resonance (2007, p. 6).

Sense wants to resound, Nancy says, not only to be drawn into concepts. Rather than rehearse Nancy's philosophy, what I want to do now is to offer a sense of its perspective—or better, its *accent*—by working with its vocabulary as relevant to human communication.

One point of entry is the description Nancy offers of the levels of sensory perception. He writes: "Every sensory register ... bears with it both its simple nature and its tense, attentive, or anxious state" (2007, p. 5). Listening—truly listening—he says, is "an intensification *and* a concern, a curiosity or an anxiety" (2007, p. 5). For my purposes of adding to what we know about human communication, listening as "anxiety" is important. A basic etymology of the word anxiety (*OED*) not only includes the senses of concern and attending (Dutch, German), but also the senses of fear, sorrow, distress, affliction, and even torment (Swedish). Listening as sorrow, distress, and-or anxiety—in short, the embodied experience of sound, the sense of its resonance—adds to our understanding of human communication as an embodied *reversible relation*.

By reversible relation I mean communication as recognition of another person (*as another person*) by way of the same means that one recognizes oneself. As Richard Lanigan explains this idea, human communication is "the necessary condition of observing in oneself *just that sense of self-consciousness* that is perceptible in the other" (Lanigan, 2013, p.13).² Although Lanigan uses the figure of observing (ocular-centric) in his definition of human communication as reversible, George Herbert Mead draws attention to the embodied experience of sound in human communication. He states: "The importance, then, of the vocal stimulus lies in this fact that the individual can hear what he says and in hearing what he says *is tending to respond as the other person responds*" (Mead, 1934, p. 71).³

The "vocal stimulus" in the above quotation is, for Mead, nothing less than the *human voice*. And we hear them all the time, especially in humanities teaching and scholarship whenever one commands, or is commanded, to "find your voice!" whether in writing or in speech. This simple command—*find your voice*—may be understood not merely as a call to look but to listen. However, why would one have to find something that one cannot lose? If there is anything that is truly one's own, something that makes a

² See also, C. S. Pierce on "communication": "The recognition by one person of another's personality takes place by means to some extent identical with the means by which he is conscious of his own personality" (1892, p. 558)

³ Emphasis added.

“me” *really me*, it is surely one’s voice, is it not? Voice comes *from me*. It is *mine* already. Yet the injunction “find your voice” makes sense for the reason that voice is an imminently alienating phenomenon. My voice not only comes from me, here, and now but also it *goes* from me. “It *goes* as it comes,” Nancy says (2008, p. 65). Voice—and in particular, *speaking*—is at once a coming and a going. One speaks, and it is gone.

We experience our voice as alienating when we hear the sound of it played back—a sound that is never sweet and doesn’t often sooth. It repels. “That’s not me!” we often hear ourselves shriek. The disturbance to the sense (or *image*) of oneself that is caused by the experience of hearing one’s disembodied voice, a sound removed from the here and now of an act of speaking—which is to say, the experience of *listening* to oneself speak—is not limited to voice recording. It also occurs in routine communication settings (again, reversible relations), such as when one hears oneself speak intra-personally (for example, when reflecting on what to say before coming out with it), and also inter-personally, heard, for example, when something we have said returns to us from another person who has been persuaded or moved by our words—or worse, when we hear the words of another recur to our own speech.

The experience of voice and of speaking as self-alienating was certainly not lost on Jacques Lacan, whose writings significantly inform Nancy’s work. It is Lacan who offers one of the most recognizable treatments of human communication as a reversible relation: “Human language is like a communication where the sender receives his own message back from the receiver in an inverted form” (Lacan, 2004, p. 83). In other words, a statement becomes *meaningful* once a receiver (who hears it, to say nothing of listens for it) starts with its end and then works backwards to the context of its utterance. It isn’t until a speaker finishes (with emphasis, say: You’re doing *WHAT?*) that the meaning of what is stated (its resonance) can be understood by a listener—understood retroactively, in the dissolve of its here and now. Understanding communication as a reversible relation (working back from the “here and now” of the utterance to the context of what was said in the first place) is especially critical in the context of the psychoanalytic interview for the reason that the receiver of verbal statements is always the subject-sender (the patient) him- or herself. In analysis, one talks to her *oneself* speak.

The Origin of Words

What the psychoanalytic example above suggests is that when we are listening—truly listening—we are open to what comes to us as well as what goes from us. But that being

said, what are we listening *for*? The first part of an answer to this question is that we are listening for *words*, not just their meaning (*signifieds*, that which is conceived) but also their origin—or better, the echo of an origin (the fact that there is language). Here, and as a second part of the answer, the “origin” of words must be approached not as a question of sign value and history (*signifiers*) as in Lacanian psychoanalysis; nor should origin be conceived here as a question of pure presence, say, in the rupture of silence made by an instance of speech, here and now. Rather, origin must be approached in its withdrawal—that is, in its dissolve, its echo.⁴

Echo is not origin, birth, or pure presence. Rather, it is resonance. It is what comes back and goes again, giving back what has been given already. In his celebrated essay, “What is Metaphysics?” Heidegger invokes the notion of echo and origin in reflecting on the presence of the word *as a gift of Being*. Werner Hamacher summarizes the thematic opened by that essay as follows: “It, Being, gives the word and this word is given back to it in answer, in the sacrifice of the answer” (Hamacher, 1993, p. 220). This claim deserves careful scrutiny in order to grasp the insight it offers into our philosophical vocabulary of listening, being, and the reversibility of human communication. Two clauses are particularly important.

First clause: “given back to it.” We can take this to mean that the human *Dasein* speaks (it *uses* words, it communicates) because it is *called*. That is, it is called to language by the sheer existence of the word, what Hamacher calls a sacrifice (or gift) of Being. I will return to the issue of sacrifice in one moment. But to continue, Being gives the word (Heidegger says), and *human* being takes it up—takes it up *and* gives it back. We can give the name *language* to this “taking up” or appropriation of the word and its putting into use in speaking. With regard to the relation between speech and language, Lanigan reminds us that “language is both the instrument and the product of speaking.”⁵ Taking up the word (in language) is a response to, or an echo of, the call put to human being *by the word* itself—that is, by the fact of language, the gift of Being. As Heidegger says: “This echo is the human answer to the soundless voice of Being” (Heidegger as cited in Hamacher, 1993, p. 220). The gift of Being (its word) is detected (and can be listened for)

⁴ See Watkin: “For Nancy, it is the statement as such that is true; the truth consists in the enunciation, and not in its content or message. ... True being no longer hangs on a statement, not on the substance of a speaker, nor in an utterance, but in an announcing” (Watkin, 2009, p. 152).

⁵ “Language in speaking can be existential by constituting meaning, or language can settle into a sediment after being spoken which is an essential meaning” (Lanigan, 1998, p. 161).

in this *answer*—in the resonance or echo of *communication*—heard, as just mentioned, in one's own voice or in the voice of another.⁶

Second clause: “in the sacrifice of the answer...” I understand “sacrifice” here not merely as a giving up by the giving over of something of Being itself (a gift, a pure donation). Sacrifice, instead, is a sharing—a sharing in *dialogue*. If Being gives up the word, then its “taking up” by the human *Dasein* is a response to the call, or one could say the request, put to it by the gift of the word, that which offers a mode of symbolic exchange, of *communication*. To be sure, it is not as if there is a human state of nature *prior* to language.⁷ Rather, human being is *abandoned to language*—that is, it is speechless without it, is ontologically at language's mercy and left to its own expressive capacities.⁸ Against this background, language can be conceived of as a dialogue (or a meeting) between the word of Being and the human answer provided in thought. But what is *sacrificed*? Hamacher offers an interpretation:

The sacrifice of which Heidegger speaks is thus a sacrifice *in exchange*, not a free gift which holds nothing back. It follows the economy of a dialogue between the word of Being and the answer of “authentic thought” which can be perturbed through no medium and interrupted through no mediation (Hamacher, 1993, p. 220).

If language echoes the origin of the word (a sharing of Being *voiced* in dialogue), then communication (the human *answer* offered in return by way of speech, writing, and/or gesture) may be understood as *thanks*—thanks for the sacrifice (the gift giving) of the word. *Given back ... in the sacrifice of the answer*. As I hear this, it means: the origin of the word (Being's gift) echoes *in its use*, that is, its exchange. It echoes as given, received, and returned, a continual gift giving.

⁶ Drawing on studies of sensory stimulation of infants, Rizzuto argues that patients who accept psychoanalytic treatment, do so out of *hope*. She states: “The experience of having been contacted as a self by the maternal voice bestows upon the spoken word a sense of hope about the voice and *words of the mother*, and later of other people, *the hope that one can be found psychically when one is lost and can be helped when in need*.” (Rizzuto, 2008, p.735) emphasis added.

⁷ “It is a speaking man that we find in the world, and language is its unique condition” (Benveniste, 1973, p. 224).

⁸ I develop this idea in my book *Communication, Embodiment, Community: A Contemporary Continental Perspective* (forthcoming). See (Agamben, 1991, pp. 31–37). For the concept of abandonment, see (Nancy, 1993, pp. 43–44).

Human communication, characterized from this perspective as giving back/answer, is not some act of moral obligation (to pay a debt or to offer a donation in kind). Nor is it merely another name for simple “exchange dealings” (Hamacher, 1993, p. 220). Rather, it is, and shows itself (it occurs) as a fundamental ontological condition of human being. Allow me to explain.

Human being is thrown into existence, says Heidegger, but it does not know why (Raffoul, 2012, pp. 74-75). Thrownness is not by choice; human being has no alternative but *to-be*, which is why the meaning of its being arises as a question. Human being is both a having-to-be and a having-to-question. Human communication is therefore the mode and voice of that questioning: it is a taking up of the word (in language appropriation) by and to which human being is abandoned in its very being. Human communicating is, in this sense, being in dialogue with and responding to the “soundless” voice of Being, the *taking place* of language.⁶ As the “origin of word and language,” (Hamacher, 1993, p. 220), Being echoes or *resounds* in communication.

To attend to human communication (that is, to *listen*, and especially to listen to linguistic communication) is, at least in part, to listen for Being—to listen for its echo given in the facticity of the word. It is in that respect that human communicating may be characterized as an answer, reply, or giving back, a *thanks-giving* [F. grace] for the gift of words which makes human communication possible in the first place—a sacrifice, perhaps, of the silence and ownness that, without words (without language), would eliminate all exchange dealings. As Hamacher says:

[T]he gift of which Heidegger speaks is given and thus heard as the ‘soundless voice of Being,’ and in the answer of thought it can only find an echo which is just as soundless. *What thought hears there and lets resound*: ‘that Being is’ is nothing other than itself in the strangeness of its own Da-sein first made its own in the echo. The word is the echo of its own facticity, and it emerges as a word of language only out of this echo (1993, p. 221).⁷

Heidegger’s insight into “what thought hears” in words as the gift of Being confirms that human communication is not merely self-giving (expression) and reception (perception),

⁶ “Language is then in the first instance nothing else than this taking place and this self-transference of language into language and in this sense, what makes it into language, language’s “origin”: the switching of language into language” (Hamacher, 1993, p. 221). Cf. (Agamben, 1991, p. 25).

⁷ Emphasis added.

but is rather, and more profoundly, a giving back of what is *already given* (a taking up and return). If the presence of the word inaugurates the possibility for symbolic exchange, and in fact renders the speaking subject as *lacking* without it, then communication is the human answer (a response) to this possibility, this gift of being (of *life*). It is a taking up of the word in response to the calling into language by Being's sacrifice, its gift of the word echoed in all our communications.

To be sure, communication does not occur carelessly and with abandon, at least not in most circumstances. *Human* communication is the taking place of word *and* language in the pursuit of a meaningful existence, a pursuit accompanied by the fading or withdrawal of the word (the "origin" of Being) that can only be listened for in the voice that takes it up. Philosophically, listening for the word and the taking place of language as they resound in communication *calls us back to being*. One could even suggest that listening reminds us of who we are: namely, beings that have-to-exist together with other beings but without fully knowing why. For Nancy,

To be listening will always, then, be to be straining toward or in an approach to the self (one should say, in a pathological manner, *a fit of self*: isn't [sonorous] sense first of all, every time, a *crisis of self*?) (2007, p. 9).

In short, human being *has-to-be*; it is called to communicate (it is *existentially* obliged to do so) by the word given, heard, and taken up (appropriated) in language as it works out *how* to be.

The upshot of this perspective, and the value of it to philosophy of human communication, is its deepening of the sense of what it means to *engage* in communication. When we listen, or when attending to what has already been given in what is being said (namely, word/Being), we may not only hear one another but also hear ourselves. Here is the reversible relation of communication exposed in speaking and listening, an echo of *co-being*. As Hamacher writes:

[A]s answer the sacrifice is an essentially linguistic event, it is the event of language, the coming-to-language of language, the event of its making over to itself, in which its Being as "soundless voice" holds itself back and remains inappropriable. The word is transference and indeed transference out of the singularity of its bare *that* into multiplicity, humanity and a making known of what can only then be called "word" and "language" in a wider sense (1993, p. 221).

Here, Here! Écoute!

Let me repose the guiding question of the present discussion. What are we listening for when we are truly listening? *What* should in fact be replaced with *where*. When we truly listen, we strain to hear, we are listening for what is not immediate, what is elsewhere, in another place, emerging but not yet arriving, as Nancy puts it. The origin of the word, or its echo discernible in its sheer “presence,” is neither here or now, but always on the move—it is coming and going, going *and* coming back. “The here has no place: at every moment it is here and there, here and now, for here *is* now,” Nancy says (1993, p. 47). “It is at each moment here *or* there,” Hamacher adds (1993, p. 221). It is for the movement or *passage* of the word that we listen, the *taking place* of language, of sheer being, its presence in withdrawal.

According to Hamacher, there is in fact nothing more banal in philosophical discourse than to speak of the *here and now*—which, he claims, is Nancy’s career preoccupation. Doing so, as a unique singularity—a *subject* with the capacity for expression—inserts one into a community of what came before, Hamacher says, a community and a history of discourse about the here and now. To speak here and now *of* the *here and now* in order to put it into question—that is, to seize on a moment so as to break through the generality of the formula “here and now” —is, in fact, to corroborate it, to continue. To *begin*, here and now, says Hamacher, is already to *continue*, to go on repeating what has been said before. The here and now *of* which one speaks, and *from* which one speaks, now, here, constitutes a movement away from it, from *here*, to *here*, *or* here—that is, to another now. To speak of the here and now, or presence, is to distance oneself from it, to *desist*, separate, or move away from it, continuing *there* and *then*.

That being said, another way to articulate that for which we strain when we are truly listening when communicating, and why this matters, is that we listen for the *possibility* of communication given in the word by way of its taking up—heard, for instance, in quotation, translation, questioning, debate, and-or discussion, whether in writing or in speech (even, for instance, in pauses, gaps, silences, and in stuttering—the, the, the...). We strain for more than what *appears* given—listening, that is, for multiplicity, for polysemy, to use the vocabulary of communication theory. When we truly listen, we attend to the possibility of communication given in the present passing—the now, *here*, which together spells “nowhere”—of the word, its phonemic and graphic function, a possibility summoned up (hence, audible) in its use, in *discourse*, the event of language’s taking place (its movement) in every instance of speech/speaking/writing.

To be sure, the *where* of the word is not some pure origin, a transcendent Being. Rather, its *where is* the present passing (the resonance) of language, the placement (or “transference,” Hamacher says) of the word *in* language (signaled each time by the “or” carried as background of this word *or* that, here *or* there, as Hamacher takes pains to point out) (1993, p. 222-225), and its iteration (in citation, translation, in discoursing, and so on). Perspective such as this calls our attention to the openness (the existential exposure) required for the challenge of *listening* (as straining) in contrast to the mere physical capacity for hearing (the difference of which, Nancy says, is signaled by the condescension that resounds whenever someone tells us, “I’m all ears”). Playing on the distinction between *écouter* (F. listen) and *entendre* (F. hear *this*), we may take from Heidegger/Nancy what Lacan asks of the psychoanalyst: namely, to “have ears in order *not* to hear, so as to detect what is to be understood” (Lacan, 2004, p. 46).

The obvious upshot of the discussion is that listening in communication is not merely perception, a sensory organ function. Rather, it is part of the faculty of *understanding*. But understanding what? To be sure, listening is not equivalent to understanding, just as hearing is not equivalent to conceptualization. Listening is an activity of attending (of broadening and-or narrowing focus) so as not just to hear but also to acknowledge, *to be open to* that of which we may as yet be unaware. “To be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning of extremity,” Nancy says (2007, p. 7). We should therefore replace understanding with *thinking* and offer the following axiom: To listen is to *think*, to be open. Listening is what we do *in the open* of our shared existence: human being is fundamentally a being-with one another—being in contact and thereby always in communication.

The practice of listening exemplifies the experience of communication as a reversible relation of self-expression and other-perception: You hear what I am saying, here, or now, and so too can I. *But are we listening?* This basic question (*are we listening?*) deepens awareness of (that is, our ability to *reflect upon*) our awareness of being-with and being-open to others in our mutual condition of having-to-be. Inquiry into listening as an embodied, intersubjective experience of sound, grounds it phenomenologically and semiotically as a question of *communication*.

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