

The “Exact Location” of the Voice: Walter Ong and the “Embodiment” of Discourse

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I am trying in this paper to revisit the “presence” of language as understood by Ong and perhaps too quickly dismissed in post-structuralist theory. I am interested in the sense of voice itself, both as a physiological and neurological process, and as a metaphor applied to texts. I am exploring the potential richness of this concept in relationship to concepts of the body and identity, as well as to the experience of sound as a physical phenomenon. Additionally, I am attempting to retranslate this experiential and evidence-based knowledge into the metaphor of voice in texts.

Prologue: Hearing Voices

I have been “hearing voices” in recent years, though not in the fashion that might require a diagnosis and, perhaps, a prescription. These voices, rather, come from occasions of work or observations of work with language. One of those voices came from a machine—from our home computer—which was saying, “Bob got father’s shoe box out.” The occasion was my wife’s study of speech science and audiology while pursuing her MA in Communication Sciences and Disorders. Having already completed a graduate degree in writing and taught English for many years, she had returned to study language in a wholly different register so that she might pursue a new career as a Speech Language Pathologist. Studying utterances at the computer, while using a special program to judge frequencies and times, she sometimes asked for my help to record data as she worked at the keyboard. Sentences like the “shoe-box” one, intoned by some unknown male voice, were repeated countless times, becoming eventually a family joke. The process, however, did teach me something about the complexity of the spoken word and about the very physical properties of spoken language.

This was merely one of many instances of trying to hear language with a new ear, to experience voice with a new consciousness of its many forms and nuances. Still, as my wife progressed through several years of study and then began to practice her new profession, I grew accustomed to her talking about language, learning, and speech as she was dealing with it on a daily basis. She was helping small children overcome articulation problems one day and assisting aging stroke patients relearn the powers of speech the next. All this came to me through her voice, often at day’s end, as she vented and voiced the stresses, the conflicts, and the concerns of these struggles to give birth to utterances.

On the whole, I have grown accustomed to language on a page, to written language. For the most part, I study the reading and interpretation of texts, as well as the

composing and editing of texts. Though on personal level, I find speech often preferable to writing (I would rather discuss than email or text message), I know that my work is deeply bound with texts. So be it. Still, not for the first time, my wife's energetic commitment to learning about and working with language in a new fashion has both inspired and informed me. I have begun listening again for the voices I might hear in texts. I have also begun to remember some aspects of voice that, while I had not forgotten, I had largely ignored for some time. Observing my wife's work, I have been drawn once more to consider the very concrete, physical aspects of language, and I have begun to explore once again what voice means—by looking at the material roots of this term.

Disreputable Speech

During the past 30 years or so, speaking seriously about speech has come to seem somewhat inappropriate in English studies. Having some time ago passed through the liberating experience of being deconstructed, our discipline has grown quite diverse in its theoretical and cultural explorations. Still, as our supposedly anti-traditionalist practices have, ironically, accepted the deconstructive project as foundational and essential, “speech” is considered retrograde, the old regime that has been supplanted by writing. In our current disciplinary narrative, an accepted superiority of speech had once oppressed writing, making it seem foreign and unacceptable. Having successfully deconstructed this hierarchy, we were able to assert that speech is merely a “species” of writing. Although in most cases, deconstructive practice refuses to privilege either side of a binary couplet (i.e., in this case, speech/writing), it is clear that textuality becomes the “god” term in a universe where there is nothing outside the text, and text, whether taken conceptually or literally, is writing. Thus, we have come to consider speech as merely one form of writing, and a rather insubstantial one at that, given our disciplinary habits and practices. We usually study speech by reading its written text before or after it is spoken. Indeed, the act of speaking, the actual sound of speech, is often regarded as merely an accident, something ephemeral.

There is admirable intelligence and masterful skill in these long-standing practices. At the same time, I find this line of thought painfully abstract and disembodied, distanced from the experience of language that I find myself familiar with in my personal relationships with family, friends, and colleagues. I am not so much arguing that, in the wake of post-structuralism, our disciplinary attitudes toward language are in error, so much as I am suggesting that they may have been misapplied or over-applied, may be obscuring for us whole other registers of how we experience language. This disciplinary process began with the much earlier attempts to systematize language to the level of closure and rule governance that allows it to resemble a verbal calculus. Language philosophy and linguistic study a century ago was hard at work on this effort, and for quite some time these systematic views achieved dominance in sectors of philosophy and linguistics (many would say, they still maintain

dominance in those disciplines). The deconstructive project, and the various post-structuralist approaches to language it initiated, responded merely to the earlier structuralist modes of thought. All these theoretical communities, however, have operated on a very abstract plane, regarding language as something that is not so much part of human life—embedded in social relations and rooted in the brain and body itself—as an abstract environment in which signification occurs like a mathematical process. In the process, the physical and temporal act of speaking has suffered not only erasure but even intellectual disdain.

Voicing Concern / Concerning Voice

In this disciplinary environment, the concept of “voice,” rooted as it is in the experience of language as sound, can seem irrelevant or trivial. From this perspective, the spoken word becomes mere sound and fury, and as a physical experience (oral and aural), signifies nothing. Yet it is this experience of sound, of people sharing that sound through speech, through dialogue, that most powerfully motivates my interest in language. It is what, for me, makes all of this study “personal.”

If I am to move against the theoretical grain and concentrate on “voice,” I must begin to explain what I mean by this ambiguous term that is so difficult to describe and analyze and yet seems so experientially valid. To begin with, it is obvious that “voice” in writing is a metaphor for our experience of hearing an individual human being utter the sounds of speech. In using this metaphor, we are obviously suggesting something about the uniqueness of individuals and of their speech. To hear someone’s voice, to hear that person speak, we sense a character, a personality, a presence. Of course, this now often-critiqued concept has been declared an illusionary metaphysics—the misconception that, somehow, speech makes something more “real” happen for listeners than writing does for readers. Likewise, it is considered foolish to find anything unique in speech, since it is merely a species of writing. Supposedly, sound is accidental, ephemeral.

The easy dismissal of sound disturbs me, especially as I think of my wife’s daily labors to help clients to utter sounds. That child who can finally begin to form full words with tongue and teeth, that stroke patient struggling with damaged brain and nerve tissue to recover the ability to form sounds—their efforts to learn and re-learn the difficult process of making sound, and my wife’s efforts to assist them—these seem far from accidental or ephemeral to me. Without arguing that spoken language is superior to writing, I would suggest that it is too reductionist to think of speech as merely a species of writing. Something is happening when we speak, when we utter sounds, something concrete, important, and perhaps, unique.

We should remember that the dismissal of sound flies in the face of over a half century of scientific research and scholarship, along with intensive clinical research and practice in the field of speech science. In addition, the fields of neuroscience and neuro-anatomy, along with a wide range of medical and psychological specialties have added their research and clinical expertise to the efforts to understand the physiology and psychology of speaking, of making sounds. That research consistently

points to specific brain, nerve, and muscle activities in the production of speech, and specific sense organ, nerve, and brain activities in the reception of speech. All of this, known generally as the “speech chain,” leads to very specific kinds of ongoing brain activity and development related to the learning and use of language. Most of these processes are intricately interwoven with the physiology and the physics of sound, and sound as produced and experienced by human beings is always a bodily phenomenon (not only heard but literally “felt,” as the waves of sound that enter our ears also move across our bodies and trigger further, if rather subtle, neurological responses—those without a sense of hearing also experience sound as sensation—the deaf can also dance). When we speak together we bathe in sound. This is not ephemeral. It is, quite literally, the embodiment of language.

All of these experiences are further complicated by the intricate and idiosyncratic features of the speech organs of a specific individual, along with the even more intricate and idiosyncratic neuro-synaptic structures within that specific individual’s brain. This set of complications is duplicated for any listener, involving that listener’s own complex neuro-physiology. Thus, the acts of speaking and listening are unique physiological and psychological experiences, confronting participants with the uniqueness of those involved. Speech, as sound, is in many ways merely moving air, and yet like the air, despite seeming ephemeral, it is essential.

Concentrating on the materiality of speech helps us to enrich our understanding of the oral/aural experience from which the metaphorical use of voice comes when considering written discourse. What then can voice be in this written context? I would argue that, along with their many other strategies and techniques, writers both consciously and unconsciously seek to emulate the uniqueness experienced when we hear an actual human voice (in particular, when in the physical presence of the person whose voice we hear—not necessarily as reproduced through some electronic means). In analyzing the processes of persuasive speech, Aristotle claimed that “ethos,” or the “character of the speaker” as experienced in the speech, was of major significance. This is merely one of many theoretical formulations of what we recognize experientially when engaged in the acts of speaking and listening—that an actual, individual human being is interacting with us. Writers have long found it compelling to bring this same force of interpersonal connection to their work, and the term “voice” has long been used to indicate this quality. While “style” is sometimes substituted in this regard, style can also be understood as a series of compositional and editorial choices, often governed by a more generalized strategic concept of how a particular piece of writing should work. “Style” more appropriately reflects a set of textual features and the choices made to construct them, whereas “voice” describes the effect, on writer and reader alike, of experiencing a unique personality evoked from the text (the result of stylistic choices). Ultimately, in the concept of “voice” we suggest the re-embodiment of discourse, making it once again personal and interpersonal.

It is the very intricacy and idiosyncrasy involved with “voice” that makes the concept so difficult to analyze. As noted, we can much more easily analyze style as a set of features constructed based on a writer’s strategy and technique. What is more

difficult to analyze is the shared experience of an evoked “character” or “personality,” a presence suggested in the text. Obviously, when used with texts, the term “voice” is always a metaphor, and like all metaphors, exhibits the strengths and weaknesses of analogical thinking. Likewise, when Walter Ong argued that a “writer’s audience is always a fiction,” he was examining the operations of a similar kind of metaphor regarding how writers prepared their texts to be received. With great insight and careful analysis, Ong explored how writers anticipate how a text will be read, constructing not only the text itself but the unwritten fiction (at least, usually unwritten) of the possible reader. This fictional reader may be constructed from various sources of experience, though for literary writers, Ong believed that the source was a writer’s own reading of prior literature. Perhaps this may be too limiting a construct, and certainly, our sense of potential readers may be drawn from the full range of our experiences (personally and socially), but Ong’s analysis is fundamentally useful in helping us to understand how our writing and reading of texts is linked with our experience of spoken language.

At the same time, throughout the full range of his work, Ong considers how the discourses of both speech and writing work in different registers of language experience, informing but not supplanting one another. His overall intellectual project was to examine, in great detail and over a wide range of historical periods and cultural contexts, the complex ways in which human beings engage in meaningful discourse. He examined with great care how the technologies of writing, printing, and broadcasting, as each became culturally significant, changed the ways in which societies, and individuals, developed and shared knowledge (a theoretical analysis that has, to a great extent, been confirmed in recent cognitive science research about how communication and mediation technologies affect the brains of those who use them). This consideration of the materiality of language, as it is mediated through technology, is only one aspect of Ong’s ongoing effort to establish connections between language as an abstract system of structures (stable or unstable as they might be) and language as lived experience, be it through the experience of speech or of writing (or of whatever other form of meditation that might be used). Ong’s used the terms “orality” and “literacy” properly to describe the cultural constructs through which different cultures, at different times, established the norms for the meaningful use of language—the cultural epistemology of language in context. For all this, Ong frequently returned to the consideration of the language of the body, the ways in which the very act of speaking was incarnate and shared, not unlike his sense of sacramentality that he understood from his Catholic and Jesuit experience. His work shows a genuine respect for the physical materiality of language, as well as for the spirit of meaning that might be evoked through that language. In this body of theory we find a great deal that helps us to understand and appreciate the embodiment of discourse.

Returning then to the concept of voice, we can see that it is both complex and simple at once, both fundamental and ambiguous. In all our writing and reading, we continue to expect (consciously or unconsciously) that we will be “meeting” the writer through the text. Certainly, this expectation is sometimes disappointed, and at

times, for some very technical texts, it is even inappropriate. We read with the expectation of voice because we read as beings who live in bodies, and whose very brain structure frequently leads us to this expectation. Moreover, our social experience of language suggests that people, often individuals, are the sources of the discourses we read, and we expect that we might hear those individuals speaking through their texts. It is the textual embodiment of what we experience with spoken language—not a mere transcription but a recreation of something very personal, but very substantial.

None of this is terribly new or revolutionary. At the same time, it seems largely to be ignored in much of the current discourse, theoretical and applied, in our discipline. Speech, after all, is the problem of somebody else's discipline, somebody else's department, somebody else's budget. In some senses, all that is true. At the same time, I find that, just as listening to my wife's discussion of her new profession, of its research and its practice, has enriched my understanding of my work with texts, so I think our discipline needs to start listening again to discourses from our colleagues in other departments, in other disciplines, especially, those who begin in sound in order to approach a knowledge of language. I believe that the problematic concept of voice can draw together a number of different intellectual projects, from a number of disciplinary communities, all of whom have a stake in how human beings construct and share meaning. Likewise, the particular scholarly project of Walter Ong (and of others who shared his concerns), with its intense concentration on the interactions of speech and writing, can provide an invaluable structure to organize this kind of disciplinary effort.

At present, the voice I hear most powerfully is the voice that calls us together to begin making a new body of knowledge from what we can share. It is a voice both individual and collective, each of our voices, in fact, when we express openly our questions and concerns about the full range of language experience. Centuries ago, philosophers and theologians debated the "exact location of the soul," trying to pin down in the body a concept both metaphysical and ambiguous. I am not suggesting that we can find "an exact location for the voice." I do think, however, that by exploring once more the difficult concept of voice, we can relocate productively a great deal of our scholarly activity. I hope we can begin a host of new conversations, and inspire a great chorus of voices.