

thinking

togetherness

ANDREJ BOŽIČ (*Ed.*)

THINKING TOGETHERNESS

PHENOMENOLOGY AND SOCIALITY

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THINKING TOGETHERNESS

PHENOMENOLOGY AND SOCIALITY

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Evgeniya Shestova

COMMUNICATION IN THE TEXT SPACE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE “LOGIC OF QUESTION AND ANSWER”

Abstract: In the article, I propose a phenomenological investigation of reading conceived of as communication within the text space. I consider reading as a *quasi-dialogue*. Such a concept allows us to avoid the problem of reality of the dialogue partner. I investigate what produces the effect of request to the reader and of communication in the text space. I start with the examination of Gadamer’s logic of question and answer, and interpret questions and answers as two interwoven aspects of sense: the negative and the positive. In Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of language as gesticulation, question, or the negative aspect of sense, points to a possible sense. In his late works, Merleau-Ponty re-interprets Husserl: the text conveys neither sense nor signification, but a significative intention. It is a request addressed to the reader from the other who produces the intention. I propose to consider this other as a *quasi-author* who is a part of the act of reading.

Keywords: question, phenomenology of reading, H.-G. Gadamer, M. Merleau-Ponty, quasi-author.

Introduction

Since Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*, phenomenology looks closely at the function of language. Starting from the examination of soliloquy, it comes to the description of language in the dimension of intersubjectivity. Therefore, it may have problems with the description of language functioning in a non-communicative situation, for instance, in reading. The latter is essentially ambiguous: I read the text all by myself, but this is not a “solitary life”; reading implies some sort of intersubjective action. Many descriptions of reading point out that the reader is affected by the text, he/she is requested by the text. What does this mean?

I will try to explicate why does reading as an interaction with a text—even if we do not read the text as an expression of the author’s personality—involve

the reader into *indirect communication* within the text space? What is the communicative potential of language? The concept of indirect communication allows us to suspend the reality of the dialogue counterpart by reading and to focus on the experience of reading.

The first author we think of with regard to this subject is Hans-Georg Gadamer. I will start with his descriptions of reading in the paragraphs about the logic of question and answer in *Truth and Method*, and investigate what Gadamer calls “question” as well as what is the role of question in reading?

For the phenomenological explication, I will turn to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of expression, speech, and language. I will consider how Merleau-Ponty describes the function of the question in communication in *Phenomenology of Perception*. I will demonstrate how the sense of the concept *question* can be extended in the terms of his theory of expression as gesticulation.

402 Finally, I will refer to the revision of the concepts of lingual gesticulation and question in the later works of Merleau-Ponty, where he specifies their relation to the Husserlian concepts of intentionality and tradition. This will make a return to indirect communication and its revision in the Husserlian terms possible.

One can suppose that there are reasonable grounds to traverse from Gadamer to Merleau-Ponty: their ideas about the function of language as well as their shared phenomenological background offer the opportunity for the accentuation of common problems, which they, however, elaborate in different ways.

1) Both philosophers consider language as a medium. Language is not a set of tools, but a way of the appearing of world (and of others) for me as well as of the appearing of me (and of others) in the world. “The meaning of words must be finally induced by the words themselves,” writes Merleau-Ponty (2005, 208).

2) Both authors want to maintain an ambiguity: they do neither suppose an autonomy of sense-giving consciousness nor do they hypostatize language, which determines thinking. Consequently, *tradition* becomes an important concept for both—tradition conceived as interaction within a language medium.

But the totality of language posited by Gadamer does not allow him to explicitly raise the question of the emergence of new sense. Merleau-Ponty

starts from this point and phenomenologically describes the nascency of sense (*sensus in statu nascendi*): production of sense, a shift of the language medium, the interplay between language and sense. I recognize this as a way from the history of effects to the phenomenological analysis of effect.

The sense of the question

At the very beginning of the paragraph “The Logic of Question and Answer” in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer argues: “a historical text [...] puts a question to the interpreter” (Gadamer 2004, 363). What does this mean?

Contemplating on the essence of the hermeneutic experience in the preceding paragraphs, Gadamer is guided by the model of a dialogue. But reading is not completely analogous to dialogue: “It is true that a text does not speak to us in the same way as does a Thou.” (Ibid., 370.) Nevertheless, I am convinced that this is an important character of reading: there is something in the experience that induces Gadamer to describe a text like a seemingly autonomous actor.

The notion of *the question put by text* is a very obscure concept, especially taking into account that Gadamer somewhat later adds: we must interpret the text as an answer to author’s guiding question. So, what is the text: a question or the answer? Gadamer’s assertion is: “Both!” He writes: “Perhaps there is a logic of question. In such a logic we could note that the answer to a question necessarily arouses new questions.” (Gadamer 2006, 23.) The answer is in equal measure a question, and it is not a counter-question; a question is not necessarily marked by the intonation contour or by the question mark. The logic of question and answer has much wider terms and describes reading in general. Moreover: Gadamer explains his conception by discussing the logic of question and answer as proposed by R. G. Collingwood. Collingwood extrapolates his theory upon the analysis of historic events: the question is here a historic situation; the answer are the actions of a person in this situation. Gadamer does not discuss such an extrapolation, he contests Collingwood’s idea that the reconstructed question is the same question, which had induced the author.

Thus, the *question* and the *answer* go beyond the framework of dialogue; the question is rather a *request*, and such a request is included in the

structure of every expression. Logic of question and answer is the structure of understanding in terms of the history of effects. How does a request function?

In order to clarify the effect of *the question put by text*, Gadamer introduces the concept of *Betroffenheit/Betroffensein* (to be perplexed or touched).¹ The text puts a question by perplexing us; the experience of being requested is an experience of being perplexed. “The real and fundamental nature of a question,” writes Gadamer, “is to make things indeterminate” (Gadamer 2004, 367–368) or “suspended.” In German language this is what is denoted by *in-die-Schwebe-bringen* (Gadamer 1990, 369). We can find the verb *schweben* and its derivatives also in Husserl and Heidegger. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger criticizes *freischwebende* (soaring or free-floating) theses, which are not confirmed by the analytic of *Dasein*. Heidegger describes with this verb (*schweben*) the effect of dread (Heidegger 1976) or fear (*Angst*) (Heidegger 2001). “We are suspended in dread,” writes Heidegger in the lecture “What is Metaphysics?” (Heidegger 1976, 44); the dread, thus, leaves us hanging and all the things slip away. This is the suspension of all theses, they become meaningless in the face of Nothing. In Husserl, *schweben* is one of the verbs that describes the suspension of the thesis by reduction.

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The suspending question is a special sort of suspension. *Freischwebende Thesen* are not factually suspended, they appear to be evident. Gadamer’s suspending question provokes an openness—the openness, which “is not boundless” (Gadamer 2004, 357); it is not full indeterminacy and it defines the horizon of the answer. This orientation may be called the sense of the question.

The logic of question and answer presupposes that we cannot separate the question from the statement. An expression includes a request that may touch the reader; the question has a sense that defines the horizon of a possible answer. The experience of reading includes a question as its structural part. I would like to propose to call what Gadamer calls *answer* and *question* the

1 “However, we cannot take the reconstruction of the question to which a given text is an answer simply as an achievement of historical method. The most important thing is the question that the text puts to us, our being perplexed by the traditionary word, so that understanding it must already include the task of the historical self-mediation between the present and tradition.” (Gadamer 2004, 366.)

positive aspect and the *negative* aspect of sense, which are inseparable (a separation is perhaps possible only for a methodological clarification).

In the next part, I wish to analyze the function of the *negative* aspect of sense within communication. For this purpose, I refer to Merleau-Ponty and his analysis of language and speech in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

The sense of the expressive gesture

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty begins his investigation of language and speech with the description of the aphasic disorder, which afflicts the “unmotivated” language, while the “automatic” language remains undisturbed. The patient Schneider can use a word in the answer to the doctor’s question, but he cannot use the same word in arbitrary expression or just pronounce it. This example affirms: to know language, does not mean to know its vocabulary or rules, it means the ability to speak as the ability to co-exist in the world together with other speaking persons. The aphasic disorder afflicts this ability.

The doctor who puts the question seems to supply the speech disability of the patient: the ability to speak implies an antecedent questioning, which is required for expression. The act of speech includes a question (in the broad sense) as *the negative aspect of sense*. Merleau-Ponty characterizes Schneider’s speech as “ossified” (Merleau-Ponty 2005, 228); Schneider seems to have a total coincidence of world and language: a proposition, which describes a fictional or possible situation, is for him meaningless. Schneider cannot lie. This state seems to be ideal for expression and description, but it results in Schneider being nearly unable to speak. He does not have any need to speak—the expression, which just duplicates the experience, becomes pleonastic. When the space of the possible does not exist, the expression becomes useless. The question put by the doctor creates a gap between the lived (non-expressed) experience and “the spoken word” (ibid., 229).

Merleau-Ponty likens expression to gesticulation, and this likening clarifies how the gap arises as well as how it becomes a question posed to the reader.

Merleau-Ponty elaborates the Husserlian concept of the “linguistic living body” (*Sprachleib*) (Husserl 1989, 161) by incorporating

language as the outer layer of the human living body. This layer is not individual, it is a kind of an intersubjective body layer. This idea prevents the conception of language as a sign system or a tool for the ciphering and deciphering of meanings. The lingual gesticulation rather outlines and points out sense within the sense medium than expresses it.

What is a bodily gesture, which is the benchmark for Merleau-Ponty's analogy? In *Phenomenology of Perception* and in later articles, Merleau-Ponty defines it in different manners.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, the language gesture is characterized as a sort of nuanced emotional gesture like a smile or a grimace of anger. The smile does not express happiness, it *is* happiness. By the same token, the word materializes, or incorporates, sense.

But I assert that mimicking has a social dimension, it is addressed. Often it is said that we understand emotions by analogy: I juxtapose the facial display of the other and my own facial display in a certain situation, and this is a way to understand what the other feels. But this conception implies the possibility

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to see my own face and presupposes a knowledge about my own mimicking. I propose to turn our attention from the conception of mimicking as an expression of emotions to the theory called *behavioral ecology view of facial displays*. In the article "Facial Displays Are Tools for Social Influence," Alan J. Fridlund and Carlos Crivelli (2018) describe some tests in the recognition of emotions on photos conducted among indigenous people in Melanesia, Africa, and Papua New Guinea. Indigenous people in general had difficulties with the recognition of emotions on the photos. The first conclusion of researchers was expectable: facial displays are determined culturally; people of another culture can interpret the facial display usual for us quite differently. Mimicking is not a natural physiological reaction to stimulus (as Merleau-Ponty also emphasizes; 2005, 246). But the researchers perceived an interesting thing: tribal people recognized the "fear" face (marked so by the researchers) as a "threat" display. They associated the emotional facial display with the face of the communicative counterpart. The idol that protected the house had such a "fear" (for us) face—it should trigger fear in the intruder, make his/her face the "fear" face.

The most important conclusion of the scientists is the following: facial displays are tools for social influence: they provoke an action or request an

interaction. Smile is an invitation to play or affiliate, pouting is a request for protection or help, anger is a demand to submit. Facial displays get their sense within the definite social circumstances, they do not express any sort of inner life, they are the mode of interaction and provocation of the possible (or wishful) action of others.

In his descriptions of lingual gesticulation, Merleau-Ponty also tends to such a conception—he writes that the expression of emotions is socially determined and presupposes a “setting common to the speakers,” our common world, which we influence by expression (verbal or not). The common world is a medium between me and my counterpart. The communicative request of a facial display is the negative aspect of sense in the dimension of mimicking. When an expression becomes more detailed and comes to language, speech outlines sense and at the same time opens the space of possible answer and reaction. The gap mentioned above is a gap between the present intersubjective configuration of the world and the wishful one, a gap between the spoken wor(l)d and the new sense.

But there is a problem: this approach to the essence of language through expressive gesticulation and speech means also primarily direct communication. Can we use this conception in the analysis of the experience of reading—an experience without a direct communication?

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Merleau-Ponty’s answer can be summarized as a sort of *mutatis mutandis*. In the article “On the Phenomenology of Language” and in the book *The Prose of the World*, he proposes a modified conception of lingual gesticulation, which is more appropriate for a description of reading.

The sense of the intention

The article “On the Phenomenology of Language” aims to integrate the whole of Husserl’s conception of language, from the *Logical investigations* to the *Origin of Geometry*, and clarifies the coherence between particular significative intentions and tradition. Merleau-Ponty demonstrates in what way the reader joins in the tradition.

In the article, Merleau-Ponty develops a new conception of the lingual gesture. The idea was already delineated in *Phenomenology of Perception*:

“the spoken word is a gesture, and its meaning, a world” (Merleau-Ponty 2005, 214). There exists not only the *expressive* gesture, but also a sort of *practical* gesture: we can tie a shoelace or take a spoon. This gesture does not mean any communication, it does not include any immediate requests. I propose to analyze this art of gesticulation for a more productive and precise characterization of the question contained in the text.

If we interpret the language gesture as a practical gesture, the word will relate to its meaning as a gesture to its object, so the meaning is something that “awakens my intentions” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 89). The word does not express any ready-made meaning, it has meaning as its goal, just as—in *Phenomenology of Perception*—a hand moves voluntarily to the point where a mosquito stung me. To have meaning as an aim is the “animation” of the word by meaning.² The word expresses a significative intention.

408 The significative intention is a goal orientation, so it signifies a lack of meaning; it is a gap (*ibid.*), the expression of something not yet signified that I try to signify, to fixate through my speech. The gap becomes a gap against the background of *spoken words*, of a language medium made of sedimented speech. Thus, the gap is “no more than a determinate gap to be filled by words” (*ibid.*). It is a productive, fruitful gap, requesting of the reader to produce sense.

Such an elaboration of the notion of *the lingual gesture* gives more clarification to the idea of *the negative aspect of sense* or of the question inherent in the text.

The meaning of the word, as well as the objective aspect of the act, is given through nuances. It is the pole of the significative intention that orients the intention. This sense core “determines” the gap in the medium, consisting of

² This interpretation has its origin in § 9 of the first *Logical Investigation*: “We shall [...] have acts essential to the expression if it is to be an expression at all, i.e. a verbal sound infused with sense. These acts we shall call the meaning-conferring acts or the meaning-intentions.” (Husserl 2008, 192.) Merleau-Ponty does not have regard to the Husserlian explication: “One should not, therefore, properly say (as one often does) that an expression expresses its meaning (its intention). One might more properly adopt the alternative way of speaking according to which the fulfilling act appears as the act expressed by the complete expression” (Husserl 2008, 192), because he proposes another conception of language, which is involved in the constitutive process (and does not express a ready meaning) and in the communication.

many similar, yet not-fully-determined core meanings. Language is full of voids, but it functions as a strong tissue, which allows us to understand each other.

The written word transmits not a fixed meaning, but the “determinate gap,” which the reader has to fulfill by changing his way of articulating the correlation with the world. The significative intention marks something lacking, something not yet expressed in language; it produces a gap, a lack in the language system. This shift involves the whole language system, which reshapes, in order to embrace the new meaning. Concurrently, it is only partly new, while codetermined with sedimented meanings. Thus, communication transcends the bounds of the momentary and direct communication of two people, it involves a changeable language world: the word in speech reveals its intention and meaning as the goal of intention, as the matter under question. In such a way, it puts forth a question and provokes the reader to answer it. The tradition is communication within the text space.

The thesis can be an unauthorized assertion, the question provokes much more, in order to implicate the questioner who does not understand something. The negative aspect of sense and the request addressed to the reader provoke us to see in the text some sort of the Other.³ Such an analysis exposes what the agency of the text consist of—agency, which Merleau-Ponty describes as a sort of fusion with the author inspired by the book,⁴ and which Gadamer denotes as a *Thou* of the text or the “text that puts the question.” Of course, the reader is not really possessed with Stendhal or Flaubert, the author’s name marks a transformation of the language system. The reader experiences a rupture between his/her language correlation with the world and the correlation expressed by the text. The author is philosophically dead and gone, but not forgotten: *the quasi-author* as the structural aspect of the

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3 By re-reading my own text, I can observe new senses or unexpected ideas. This is illustrative of the thesis that the Otherness of the text does not presuppose the Other as a real person, it is an aspect of the reading act. “In the heart of the alternation of question and response an ethical impulse arises,” writes Waldenfels (1993, 11).

4 “I create Stendhal; I am Stendhal while reading him. But that is because first he knew how to bring me to dwell within him. The reader’s sovereignty is only imaginary, since he draws all his force from that infernal machine called the book, the apparatus for making significations.” (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 12.)

reading act is unavoidable. The notion of a quasi-author is meant as a pole of the significative intention transmitted by the text; it is responsible for the non-coincidence of the reader's mode of correlation with the world and the other one, the expressed one; the quasi-author is inaugurated as the Other who delimitates the reader and communicates with him/her.

Conclusion

The conception of the sense-giving and function of language proposed in this article delineates the possibility to complement the phenomenology of expression (from the author's position) with the phenomenology of reading, which means that the word has its definite sense in communication and within a specific context.

410 The investigation of Gadamer's logic of question and answer makes clear that an expression always implicates a question, also without it formally being a question. The question means here that the expression brings the reader into suspension, while the positive aspect of sense outlines the horizon of the answer. Therefore, I have proposed to designate the *question* and the *answer* as *the negative and the positive aspects of sense*.

Within a dialogue, the question marks a gap between the spoken (as sedimented in language) and what is to be spoken, but does not yet have a proper expression. The negative aspect of sense opens for the counterpart in the conversation the definite space of a possible sense. I would like to propose to complement Merleau-Ponty's conception of the language expression as a nuanced gesture with the behavioral ecology theory of facial displays, which demonstrates that mimicking is communicative and evocative.

The description of the function of question in a dialogue can clarify the function of the implicit question in the text in reading, which becomes a question of the reader. The negative aspect of sense functions as a request that provokes the reader to the act of sense-giving. There is a specific communication within the text space: it is not a real dialogue between two persons, but it implies an activity on the part of the text. In his later articles, Merleau-Ponty describes this circumstance with Husserl's terminology: an expression does not transmit sense, it transmits the significative intention. The significative

intention at work directs the reader's sense-giving and discloses the absence of proper sense. A text touches the reader, and the tradition becomes a history of effects (Gadamer's *Wirkungsgeschichte*).

Gadamer's and Merleau-Ponty's repetitive description of reading in terms of a dialogue with the text or an effect from the text denotes that the quasi-author is a structural part of the reading act. It designates that the significative intention in the text, which affects the reader, is initially owned by the Other. The reader is demanded to transform his/her language medium according to the text.

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“The publication edited by Andrej Božič on *Thinking Togetherness. Phenomenology and Sociality* presents a novel and up-to-date account of phenomenology, which comprehends this philosophy as an essentially intersubjective or a communal enterprise; in the volume, phenomenology exceeds narrow limits of subjective life of consciousness, and focuses on various phenomena connected to the public, communal, and political spheres. [...] The book can serve both as a textbook in the heritage of the phenomenological movement and as a collection of original studies.”

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Institute of Philosophy, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw

“The comprehensive collection of contributions entitled *Thinking Togetherness. Phenomenology and Sociality* represents an important scientific achievement within the field of phenomenological philosophy. The monograph, the central topic of which is the elucidation of some of the essential dimensions of the social, was prepared, as already a simple glimpse over the table of contents reveals, in cooperation with an assemblage of authors from across the world. Such an international configuration of the whole composed of 32 chapters, meaningfully arranged into seven thematic sections, imparts upon the volume the character of an extensive and exhaustive, panoramic scrutiny of the phenomenological manner of confronting the question what constitutes the fundamental traits of interpersonal co-habitation with others. [...] *Thinking Togetherness. Phenomenology and Sociality*, therefore, not only offers a historical account with regard to the development of phenomenology, but also quite straightforwardly concerns its relevance within the philosophical research that deals with the contemporary problems of society.”

Assoc. Prof. Dr. **Sebastjan Vörös**

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