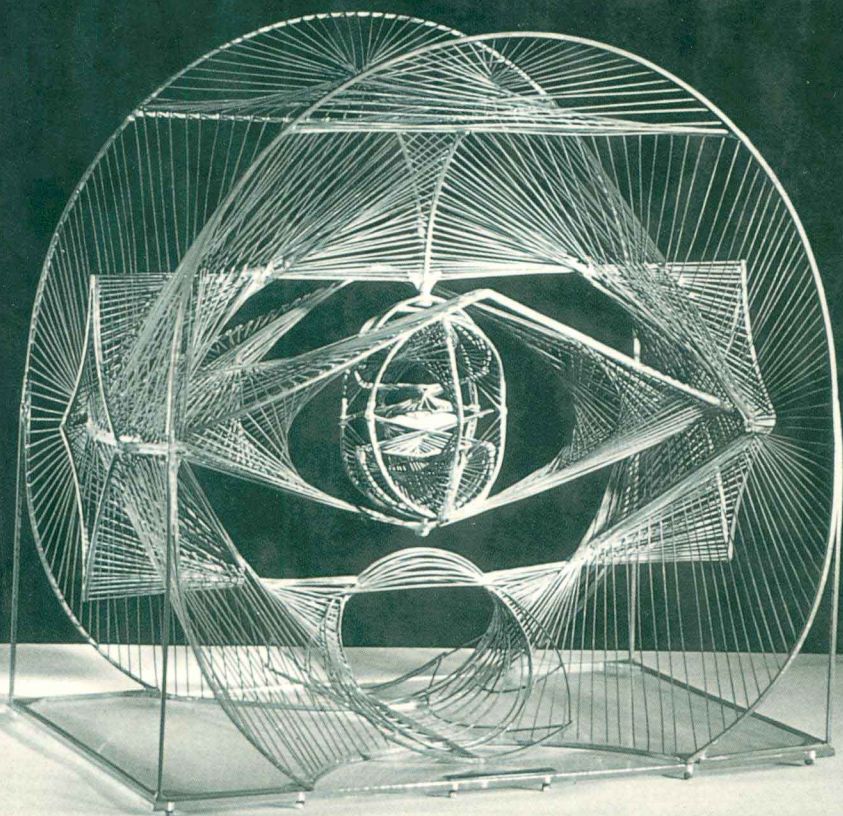


**THE OTHER
SIDE OF
LANGUAGE**
A PHILOSOPHY OF LISTENING



GEMMA CORRADI FIUMARA

ROUTLEDGE

The other side of language

A philosophy of listening

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Translated by Charles Lambert



London and New York

First published 1990

by Routledge

11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

a division of Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc.

29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

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Set in 10/12pt Times by Input Typesetting Ltd, London
and printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Corradi Fiumara, Gemma

The other side of language: a philosophy of listening.

I. Title II. Filosofia dell' ascolto. (Milan: Jaca Book)

English

195

ISBN 0-415-02621-0

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Corradi Fiumara, Gemma.

[*Filosofia dell' ascolto. English*]

The other side of language: a philosophy of listening/Gemma Corradi Fiumara.

p. cm.

Translation of: *Filosofia dell' ascolto*. (Milan: Jaca Book)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-415-02621-0

1. Listening (Philosophy) 2. Knowledge. Theory of. I. Title.
B105.L54C6713 1990

128'.3-dc20 89-10948

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The other side of language

In memory of Paola, Roca and Mirella

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Chapter 1

Towards a fuller understanding of *logos*

'SAYING' AND 'LISTENING' IN WESTERN TRADITION

Among the widespread meanings of the Greek term *logos*¹ there do not appear to be recognizable references to the notion and capacity of listening; in the tradition of western thought we are thus faced with a system of knowledge that tends to ignore listening processes. On the other hand, among the possible meanings of the verb *legein*² (besides the prevalent ones related to saying) there are meanings of a different nature, such as to 'shelter', 'gather', 'keep', 'receive', which would surely be more conducive to a cognitive attitude based on 'proper hearing'.³

Within the realm of practical activity that can be associated with a 'doing' word – the verb *legein* – we can identify relational propensities which seem to disappear entirely at the level of the substantive noun *logos*. As is well known, abstract nouns such as *logos* imply a level of linguistic achievement which surpasses practical matters; such terms require in fact a further stage in the skill for conceptual development.

We could therefore better render the meaning of the term *logos* if we also refer to the verb *legein*. Of course this verb means 'say', 'speak', 'enunciate', and if we begin from this well-known rendering and follow the same semantic path we come upon similar meanings, such as 'reason', 'account', 'expression', etc. There is a need, however, to look further into the possible ways of understanding such a pivotal word in the west as *logos*. Perhaps we could start out by admitting that there could be no saying without hearing, no speaking which is not also an integral part of listening, no speech which is not somehow received. In view of the problems and contentions which can be encountered

in research into the phylogenesis and ontogenesis of language we are inclined to believe that an individual can speak only if he is listened to, rather than there being something he might say that one would subsequently attend to 'by means of' listening.⁴

The meaning the Greeks assigned to the word *logos* has gradually gained worldwide acceptance, and whatever might have been passed down through the action word *legein* has been disregarded. This moulding, ordering sense of 'saying', in fact, has become drastically detached from the semantic richness of *legein*. Elevated to an essential principle of our culture, such a ruling set of meanings appears to control and shape all of our rational pursuits, and it is amazing that our culture can develop in association with such a limited, reduced-by-half concept of language.

The tendency to constantly invoke dialogue in conjunction with this blind-spot on the issue of listening thus appears as a puzzling feature of our culture. As Heidegger points out:

Language came to be represented – indeed first of all with the Greeks – as vocalisation, as sound and voice, hence phonetically . . . Language is a vocalisation which signifies something. This suggests that language attains at the outset that preponderant character which we designate with the name 'expression'. This correct but externally contrived representation of language as 'expression', remains definitive from now on. It is still so today. Language is taken to be expression, and vice versa.⁵

The search for a listening perspective would not require us to devise some way of drawing out our knowledge claims, starting from some hypothetical centre, or conceptual frame, and then seeing how far it unfolds, or is reproduced, in the details of our understanding. It would be perhaps more fruitful to tackle an upward-directed analysis of our rational pursuits starting from the original mechanisms, from the basic premises. At any moment in which reality is constructed we can identify an attitude which is able to say and not to listen – at that moment, in fact, a halved and overwhelming *logos* manifests itself. If we start out from this basic concern we can then perhaps go back into the cultural wire-netting and discover how the mechanism of 'saying without listening' has multiplied and spread, to finally constitute itself as a generalized form of domination and control.⁶

It is not merely a question of understanding the power shifts from one epistemology to another: the unavoidable philosophical problem lies in clarifying the preliminary interactions behind the functioning of control mechanisms. 'Logic, as the doctrine of *logos*, considers thinking to be the assertion of something about something. According to logic, such speech is the basic characteristic of thinking'.⁷ A thinking primarily anchored to saying-without-listening.

Following this line of argument one should refer to Heidegger's etymological-philosophical study in which he attempts to reveal a more fundamental sense of *logos*. Starting out with Heraclitus' famous fragment – 'When you have listened, not to me but to the . . . *Logos*, it is wise to agree that all things are one'⁸ – Heidegger goes on to remark:

No-one would want to deny that in the language of the Greeks from early on *legein* means to talk, say or tell. However, just as early and even more originally, *legein* means what is expressed in the similar German word *legen*: to lay down, to lay before. In *legen* a 'bringing together' prevails, the Latin *legere* understood as *lesen*, in the sense of collecting and bringing together. *Legein* properly means the laying-down and laying-before which gathers itself and others.⁹

Perhaps this gathering of itself epitomizes the sort of concentrated listening that is required in intellectual midwifery – the maieutic method. It may be worth noticing that in another Heraclitean fragment the two terms 'listen' and 'speak' are, indeed, used together and, significantly enough, the first term *precedes* the other: 'Men who do not know how to listen or to speak.'¹⁰

In any case, the fact that in our western mother tongue *legein* mainly, though not exclusively, means 'say', 'speak', 'tell', is beyond question. At the same time we believe that it is essential for us not to neglect, or relinquish, our concern for any 'lesser' significance and not to be satisfied with the accepted, predominant meaning ascribed to *legein*. This is a tentative pursuit which keeps us linked with the complexity of humans; an effort to retrieve subordinate, minor dimensions and to explore those areas which provoke indifference or even repugnance in the clear logic of 'normal', established thinking.

A wider circulation of meanings which may safeguard the

lesser elements can only enhance our respect for the inexhaustible complexity of rationality.¹¹ It is difficult to imagine how we could possibly claim the right to neglect one of the possible thought formulations winding along the path towards hominization. Neither is there any reason for letting go, or allowing ourselves to lose, the sense of *legein* as laying down or keeping. As Heidegger puts it: 'Is it not finally time to engage ourselves with a question which probably decides many things? The question asks: How does the proper sense of *legein*, to lay, come to mean saying and talking?'¹² To carry forth this unavoidable question rather than attempt to devise any kind of acceptable answer to it, it may be fit time to follow Heidegger in his investigation into the meaning of *legein*. He eloquently says:

To lay means to bring to lie. Thus to lay is at the same time to place one thing beside another, to lay them together. To lay is to gather (*lesen*). The *lesen* better known to us, namely, the *reading* of something written, remains but one sort of gathering, in the sense of bringing-together-into-lying-before, although it is indeed the predominant sort. The gleaning at harvest time gathers fruit from the soil. The gathering of the vintage involves picking grapes from the vine. Picking and gleaning are followed by the bringing together of the fruit. So long as we persist in the usual appearance we are inclined to take this bringing together as the gathering itself or even its termination. But gathering is more than mere amassing. To gathering belongs a collecting which brings under shelter. Accommodation governs the sheltering; accommodation is in turn governed by safekeeping. That 'something extra' which makes gathering more than a jumbling together that snatches things up is not something only added afterward. Even less is it the conclusion of the gathering, coming last. *The safekeeping that brings something in has already determined the first steps of the gathering and arranged everything that follows.* If we are blind to everything but the sequence of steps, then the collecting follows the picking and gleaning, the bringing under shelter follows the collecting, until finally everything is accommodated in bins and storage rooms. This gives rise to the illusion that preservation and safekeeping have nothing to do with gathering. Yet what would become of a vintage which has not been gathered with an eye to the fundamental matter

of its being sheltered? The sheltering comes first in the essential formation of the vintage.¹³

Here we have a vivid description of the basic doing engendered by listening; as such it brings forth into full bloom a *logos* no longer understood as mere 'saying' but also, and perhaps above all, as a capacity for cultivating proper hearing.

Heidegger further suggests that:

Lesen (to gather) thought in this way does not simply stand near *legen* (to lay). Nor does the former simply accompany the latter. Rather, gathering is already included in laying. Every gathering is already a laying. Every laying is of itself gathering. Then what does 'to lay' mean? Laying brings to lie, in that it lets things lie together before us. All too readily we take this 'letting' in the sense of omitting or letting go. To lay, to bring to lie, to let lie, would then mean to concern ourselves no longer with what is laid down and lies before us – to ignore it. However, *legein* . . . means just this, that whatever lies before us involves us and therefore concerns us.¹⁴

Legein, therefore, is to lay: 'Laying is the letting-lie-before – which is gathered into itself – of that which comes together into presence.'¹⁵ At this point, however, the question could once again be raised: 'How do we shift from the proper sense of *legein*, to lay, to its official meaning, to say, and to talk?' We believe that it is no longer a matter of elegant question-and-answer subtleties. A wider perspective would no longer justify the usual kind of investigation; through the concern for listening we are engaged in a pursuit of such scope that it can not simply be reduced to the question of how this Greek word, *legein*, shifts in meaning from 'lay' to 'say'. And its relevance lies not in the etymological vicissitudes of certain basic terms in our western mother tongue, but in recognizing that meanings may be other than mutually exclusive and that, in any case, *legein* in the sense of 'to lay' allows itself to be placed in a subordinate position by its more assertive meanings which thus acquire semantic predominance. No one would deny that talking necessarily implies listening, and yet no one bothers to point out, for example, that in our culture there has always been a vast profusion of scholarly works focussing on expressive activity and

very few, almost none in comparison, devoted to the study of listening. And if cultural concerns lose the 'powerful eros'¹⁶ of true *philo*-sophy then we may find ourselves within a culture that is increasingly separated from the cultivation of rational life.

THE 'SECONDARY' ISSUE OF LISTENING

'The vulgar tongues', suggests Vico, 'should be the most weighty witnesses concerning the ancient customs of the people that were in use at the time the languages were formed.'¹⁷ The practical sense of *legein* could perhaps be construed as the most 'weighty', reliable witness to the ancient customs of western civilization, when the term was able to unfold in its fuller meaning. With the advent and rule of concepts, the fullness of the word was reduced to mere 'saying' and it almost lost its sense of 'gathering'. This 'second' sense is fully borne out by the 'doing' *legein* understood as an activity expressed in the germinal productivity of traditions, and in 'vulgar tongues'. The meaning of sheltering, then, although primordial, is not primary in our culture.

Adopting the superior conceptual functions of a coercive *logos* we may thus lose the secure foothold from which we could set up ways of life capable of 'letting-lie-together-before'.¹⁸ 'Scientific' research seems to be the only cultural area in which progress (in the sense of success) can be achieved, since it revolves around such basic logical forms as asking questions, predicting and conditioning. The vital need to be listened to must coexist as a subordinate with the derivatives of an increasingly arrogant *logos*, ready even to ignore anything that does not properly fit in with a logocentric system of knowledge.¹⁹

Our fashionable language, for example, already resounds with worrisome expressions such as 'ozone layer', 'greenhouse effect', 'acid rain' – all sad news coming across from nature. And yet, it is difficult to perceive that we *hear* this news because these things begin to affect us and that in fact we hear *nothing* until the damage inflicted by our deaf logic only concerns the planet we inhabit. There must be some problem of listening if we only hear from earth when it is so seriously endangered that we cannot help paying heed.

Exploring the term 'logos' Heidegger repeatedly wonders: 'If such is the essence of speaking, then what is hearing?'²⁰ It may be worth pointing out how rarely this kind of question is engaged

in throughout the vast parabola of western tradition – magnificent with philosophic-scientific achievements and perhaps rather opaque in the use of archaic mechanisms of paranoid, Manichaeic, excommunicating ‘rationality’. We are confronted by a way of thinking that is associated with only half the meaning of our *logos*, so that the simple connotation of *legein* as ‘laying’ and therefore as ‘letting-lie-together-before’ may sound banal or even incomprehensible.

Wittgenstein, for instance, recalls: ‘In the course of our conversations Russell would often exclaim: “Logic’s hell!” And this *perfectly* expresses the feeling we had when we were thinking about the problems of logic; that is to say, their immense difficulty, their hard or slippery texture.’²¹ A hardness that might stifle the potential for listening and induce an unfavourable climate for dialogue, constraining it in the coils of restrictive arguments. Logical constructs, seen as ‘hard’ and slippery’, do not appear to further an attitude of listening. And Wittgenstein goes on:

I believe that the main reason for feeling like this was the following fact: that every time some new linguistic phenomenon occurred to us, it could retrospectively show that our previous explanation was unworkable. We felt that language could always make new, and impossible, demands; and that this made all explanations futile . . .

And further on: ‘We say: but that *isn’t* how it is! – *It is* like that, though! And all we can do is keep repeating these antitheses.’²² And, of course, that is all we can do in a logocratic culture in which it is ‘logical’ for us to remain anchored to assertive discourse. In simple speaking all we can do is ‘keep repeating these antitheses’, thus uprooting language from a wider and deeper context in which the vast realm of listening could be included. Perhaps there is no justifiable reason why we should have to ‘keep repeating’ and could not decide, instead, to listen.

Recognizing a distortion in our conception of the *logos* underlying western culture, Heidegger argues: ‘We *wrongly* think that the activation of the body’s audio equipment is hearing proper. But then hearing in the sense of hearkening and heeding is supposed to be a transposition of hearing proper into the realm of the spiritual.’²³ Irreplaceable and yet ignored, the value of ‘heeding’ and of ‘hearkening’ is once again advocated: it is

precisely this aspect of our culture that rationality has largely neglected; a culture that still toils with the monotony of so-called theoretical contrasts which perhaps only represent an archaic warlike strategy transposed into the realm of epistemology. The wearisome logomachies of our culture testify to a way of reasoning that is not sufficiently interested in 'heeding', and manages to express itself most of all in the deployment of controversies and invectives, often unaware that it is even trying to stir up contrasts.

Paradoxically, fomenting conflicts seems to be tragically liberating with respect to the crushing deafness produced by an assertive culture intoxicated by the effectiveness of its own 'saying' and increasingly incapable of paying 'heed'. 'Acumen in all areas of life, always driving them apart, and no acumen for bridging the chasms between them',²⁴ remarks Canetti. This cognitive 'acumen', in fact, appears to be inevitable as it derives from the premises of a *logos* aimed at 'saying' (which is practically equivalent to 'defining') and only occasionally prepared to glean the messages by means of which it could 'bridge chasms', or resolve the gaps that no one knows how to come to terms with any more.

'In human relations', Gadamer points out:

the important thing is . . . to experience the 'Thou' truly as a 'Thou', i.e. not to overlook his claim and listen to what he has to say to us. To this end, openness is necessary. But this openness exists ultimately not only for the person to whom one listens, but rather *anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without this kind of openness to one another there is no genuine human relationship.* Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another.²⁵

Well then, if in the absence of a radical reciprocal openness to listening 'no genuine human relationship' exists, we might wonder why listening has never been the focus of philosophical research, and why we should concern ourselves with less fundamental ways of 'openness' when there is an admission that it is possible to be '*fundamentally*' open.

In the light of what we have been discussing, a question like this seems almost futile. In fact, we believe that no one could be held responsible for failing to create a philosophy of listening since this neglect (or blind spot) could be better understood as

the harbinger of a desperate, voiceless need, one of the most disturbing and 'secret' queries of our times. In the rapidly escalating self-affirmation of *logos*, very little 'logical' space is left for the tradition of *legein*, and it is therefore unthinkable (unheard-of) that listening could be accepted as a philosophical concern, having by now become too alienated from the assertive tradition of *saying*.

Vico argues that:

It is another property of the human mind that whenever men can form no idea of distant and unknown things, they judge them by what is familiar and at hand. This axiom points to the inexhaustible source of all the errors about the principles of humanity that have been adopted by entire nations and by all the scholars. For when the former began to take notice of them and the latter to investigate them, it was on the basis of their own enlightened, cultivated and magnificent times that they judged the origins of humanity, which must nevertheless by the nature of things have been small, crude and quite obscure. *Under this head come two types of conceit, one of nations and the other of scholars.*²⁶

'The inexhaustible source of all the errors', then, is to be found in the enlightened, cultivated and magnificent custom of evaluating the phylogenetic and ontogenetic origins of hominization as subordinate to the enlightened logical standpoint of its investigators, so that *any* attitude which is *not* magnificently dialectical and assertive – listening, for example – will 'by the nature of things' have to be small, crude and obscure. The tacit, ubiquitous belief that recent western logic represents the most reliable cognitive standpoint appears to characterize world-wide culture. 'To this conceit of nations is added that of scholars, who will have it that what they know is as old as the world.'²⁷ And if listening, instead, were an even more ancient 'art', a capacity that has gradually been lost in the noisy inflation of discourse or in the infestation of pseudo-symbolic language? Or conversely could it be the vital, eco-logical rationality of times to come?

And yet Heidegger asks again:

'Is all this no more than an arbitrary interpretation and an all-too-alien translation with respect to the usual understanding which takes *logos* as meaning and reason? At first it does

sound strange, and *it may remain so for a long time* – calling *logos* ‘the laying that gathers’. But how can anyone decide whether what this translation implies concerning the essence of *logos* remains appropriate, if only in the most remote way, to what Heraclitus named and thought in the name of *logos*?²⁸

But the most important query arising from what Heidegger has indicated is that not only does it seem ‘strange’ to think that *logos* means ‘the laying that gathers’, but that ‘it may remain so for a long time’. For *how* long? Perhaps until the well-spring of western tradition has become exhausted in its overwhelming production of a talking that is not sufficiently interested in listening, and which is parasitic to a ‘culture’ which can not properly be such, since it is more involved in hunting than in cultivation. The intellectual heritage based on the generally accepted meanings of *logos* is then of primary importance compared to the tradition associated with the meanings of *legein*, which, in fact, remains subordinate and ‘secondary’. ‘The saying and the talking of mortals comes to pass from early on as *legein*’, insists Heidegger. ‘The original *legein*, laying, unfolds itself early and in a manner ruling everything unconcealed as saying and talking. *Legein* as laying lets itself be overpowered by the predominant sense . . .’²⁹ Moreover, as Feyerabend often suggests, the intellectual heritage of the west causes the conceptual connections of other traditions to disappear and thus gives rise to an idea of truth which is fitting for the vacuum it has produced. ‘Intellectuals’ (like Vico’s ‘scholars’) appear to be comfortably intent on a logic that has little interest in diverse logical paths. And this attitude seems to tally with a partial sense of *logos* understood precisely as a capacity for ordering and explaining, detached from any propensity to receive and listen.³⁰

The countless voices of our culture, in fact, always seem to propound wise and rational arguments, arousing in us a desire to appear as equally rational, and therefore to give assent by competing in that same style.

It might be more fruitful, however, to train ourselves in detecting those ways of thinking that are able to parody the values of hominization and yet are unable to develop them. We could thus remain indifferent to those ‘rules of good manners’³¹ set up by the all-powerful tradition as well as by any contrasting *avant-garde*: the more timorous we are, the more we can be

intimidated by those ‘rules’ that codify the complex games pertaining to the use of a half *logos*. Rules that exclude any attempt to re-establish a fuller *logos* of listening and saying. It almost seems that ‘culture’ requires aspirants to participate according to their specific qualifications, to become adherents to an immense task of justifying a ‘logic’ that knows very well how to say practically everything and hardly knows how to listen.

As Kant points out:

The proverbial saying, ‘*fiat iustitia, pereat mundus*’ (i.e. ‘Let justice reign, even if all the rogues in the world must perish’) may sound somewhat inflated, but it is nonetheless true . . . But it must not be misunderstood, or taken, for example, as a permit to apply one’s own rights with the utmost rigour . . .

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It would appear that here the serious risks inherent in misunderstanding a sound principle of right and the ‘permit to apply one’s own rights with the utmost rigour’ are held to be comparable. Both misunderstanding (in the sense of incorrectly using a message) and using one’s own rights (not only civil rights but, above all, rational rights) ‘with the utmost rigour’ may derive not so much from a ‘misleading’ categorization or abuse of current logic as from the pre-established dismissal of listening. Both the misunderstanding and utmost rigour (‘hard’ and ‘slippery’) that Kant warns us about would appear to be the primary derivatives of a dominant thinking that can not and hence will not further comprehension. ‘Rigour’ and, conversely, misunderstanding are deeply rooted in the exclusion of listening, in a trend which brooks no argument, where everyone obeys without too much fuss. These interwoven kinds of ‘reasoning’ lead us into a vicious circle, as powerful as it is elusive, a circle that can only be evaded with a force of silence that does not arise from astonished dumbfoundedness, but from serious, unyielding attention.

A DIVIDED *LOGOS* AND ITS RESTORATION

Paradoxically, it is the major theoretical trends that appear to be in search of that aspect of our *logos* which has been lost in western thought, namely the capacity for attentive listening. In fact, the more rigorous the knowledge claims are, the more ‘greedily’ they demand to be listened to. And the need becomes