At first blush, phenomenology seems to be concerned preeminently with questions of knowledge, truth, and perception, and yet closer inspection reveals that the analyses of these phenomena remain bound up with language and that consequently phenomenology is, inextricably, a philosophy of language. Drawing on the insights of a variety of phenomenological authors, including Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, this collection of essays by leading scholars articulates the distinctively phenomenological contribution to language by examining two sets of questions. The first set of questions concerns the relatedness of language to experience. Studies exhibit the first-person character of the philosophy of language by focusing on lived experience, the issue of reference, and disclosive speech. The second set of questions concerns the relatedness of language to intersubjective experience. Studies exhibit the second-person character of the philosophy of language by focusing on language acquisition, culture, and conversation. This book will be of interest to scholars of phenomenology and philosophy of language.

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Contents

List of Tables vii
Acknowledgments ix

Introduction: The Language of Experience 1
CHAD ENGELLAND

PART I
Language and Experience 19

1 Language and Experience: Phenomenological Dimensions 21
   DANIEL O. DAHLSTROM

2 Merleau-Ponty on Expression and Meaning 43
   TAYLOR CARMAN

3 On Husserl’s Concept of the Pre-predicative:
   Genealogy of Logic and Regressive Method 56
   DOMINIQUE PRADELLE

4 Husserlian Phenomenology, Rule-Following,
   and Primitive Normativity 74
   JACOB RUMP

5 The Place of Language in the Early Heidegger’s
   Development of Hermeneutic Phenomenology 92
   SCOTT CAMPBELL

6 Logos, Perception, and the Ontological Function
   of Discourse in Phenomenology: A Theme from
   Heidegger’s Reading of Aristotle 115
   LESLIE MACAVOY
## Contents

7 We Are a Conversation: Heidegger on How Language Uncovers  
KATHERINE WITHY

8 The Phenomenology of Poetry  
JENNIFER ANNA GOSETTI-FERENCEI

### PART II

Language and Joint Experience

9 Complex Community: Toward a Phenomenology of Language Sharing  
ANDREW INKPIN

10 The Scaffolding Role of a Natural Language in the Formation of Thought: Edmund Husserl’s Contribution  
POL VANDEVELDE

11 Widening the World through Speech: Husserl on the Phenomenon of Linguistic Appropriation  
MICHELE AVERCHI

12 The Priority of Language in World-Disclosure: Back to the Beginnings in Childhood  
LAWRENCE J. HATAB

13 Play in Conversation: The Cognitive Import of Gadamer’s Theory of Play  
CAROLYN CULBERTSON

14 Translating Hospitality: A Narrative Task  
RICHARD KEARNEY

15 Inflecting “Presence” and “Absence”: On Sharing the Phenomenological Conversation  
CHAD ENGELLAND

Notes on Contributors  
Index
Translation serves as a paradigm for linguistic hospitality insofar as it involves a mediation between host and guest languages. There is a double duty here: to remain faithful to one’s own language while remaining attentive to the novelty of the foreigner’s. One can fail in this duty by succumbing to either of the following temptations. First, the impulse to assimilate and absorb the Other into the Same, reducing the singularity of the guest to the totalizing norms of one’s native speech. This makes for bad translation, and at a political level it can lead to various forms of linguistic chauvinism. Second, there is the contrary temptation to evacuate one’s own linguistic dwelling altogether, surrendering one’s speech to the in-coming Other, even to the point where there is no longer a host at home to receive a guest at all. In this case, one may be so seduced or overwhelmed by the Other that one succumbs to supine servility. To avoid these extremes of linguistic hegemony or humiliation, one is best advised to take a middle road of “linguistic hospitality” where one honors both host and guest languages equally while resisting the take-over of one by the other. The good translator is neither master nor slave.

1 Linguistic Hospitality

In On Translation, Paul Ricoeur spells out important implications of this paradigm of linguistic hospitality.

Translation sets us not only intellectual work . . . but also an ethical problem. Bringing the reader to the author, bringing the author to the reader, at the risk of serving and of betraying two masters: this is to practice what I like to call linguistic hospitality. It is this which serves as a model for other forms of hospitality that I think resemble it: confessions, religions, are they not like languages that are foreign to one another, with their lexicon, their grammar, their rhetoric, their stylistics which we must learn in order to make our way into them? And is Eucharistic hospitality not to be taken up with the same risks of translation-betrayal, but also with the same renunciation of the perfect translation?

(Ricoeur 2006, 23)
A crucial step in resisting the lure of the Perfect Translation is to honor a dialectical balance between proximity (welcoming the stranger into our midst) and distance (acknowledging that something is always lost in translation: the other’s meanings can never be completely mine). A “hospitable” translator is one who aims at approximate correspondences between tongues without ever assuming these to be final or adequate; translation is always an endless task. It is work which is also a working through, in the psychoanalytic sense of *Durcharbeitung*—a difficult and demanding labor of mediation between one linguistic mind/culture/world and another. Such mediation involves a process of mourning and letting go—and in particular the renunciation of the egocentric drive to reduce the alterities of the guest to one’s own will for total adequation. As if, in translation, there were only one true language: my own. Our own. In politics we call this tribalism or imperialism. As Ricoeur insists, there is no such thing as language, only languages.

But it is not simple. *Traditore, tradutore:* to translate is always in some sense to betray; for one can never do one’s guest true justice. And this means accepting that we all live East of Eden and after Babel—and this is a good thing. Our linguistic fallenness is also our linguistic finitude: a reminder of human limits which saves us from the delusion of sufficiency, the fantasy of restoring some prelapsarian *logos* (in which we “play God” speaking a single divine language with a perfect word for each perfect thing). We also need to abandon the illusion of a perfect *logos* of the future—such as the enlightenment dream of a *caractetistica universalis* or the more contemporary delusion of a pan-European Esperanto. Indeed the translation model of hospitality stands, politically, as an indictment of all historical attempts to impose a single language on diverse peoples—Greek, Latin, French, Spanish or today English (sometimes known as “Globish”). Imperial campaigns have always sought to impose a normative *lingua franca* on the multiplicity of vernaculars. But it is the right of every living tongue to speak itself and, moreover, to be translated into other tongues while retaining a certain reservoir of irreducible, untranslatable intimacy. Each dialect has its secrets, whence the legitimate double-injunction of every guest language cries to its host: “Translate me! Don’t translate me!” Take me but not all of me—Take me in, incorporate me, get me, but leave something of me to myself. Good translation is transfusion, not fusion. It signals a mutual transaction between worlds, never a subsuming of two into one.

Hospitable translation thus renounces all claim to absolute sovereignty acknowledging that we share words as we share clothes. Or to paraphrase Ricoeur, we should let our language try on the garments of strangers at the same time as we invite them to step into the fabric of our own speech. Translation is transvestitude. And it begins from the word go. In the beginning was hermeneutics—meaning the interpretation of different meanings, tongues, intentions, lexicons. *In principio fuit interpres.* There is no pure pristine *logos*, unless it is God’s. And we are not God. To be human is to interpret and to interpret is to translate. Language is finitude, marked by gaps
of time and space: scars of separation and otherness. There never was a self without an other, a host without a guest. From the start was hospitality—and, as we shall see, its twin shadow, hostility.

As such, translation involves a certain humble recognition of our fragility and fallibility, keeping us always open to the never-ending task of more translation, better translation, alternative translation, again and again. The only criterion of a good translation is another translation, which is why the great classics are both untranslatable and infinitely translatable at once. There are never enough renditions of Homer, Shakespeare or the Bible. (Again, the truth of the Bible is Babel.) We are dealing thus with a drama of fragile hospitality. Ricoeur puts it well:

Despite the conflictual character which renders the task of the translator dramatic, he or she will find satisfaction in what I would like to call linguistic hospitality. Its predicament is that of a correspondence without complete adhesion. This is a fragile condition, which admits of no verification other than a new translation . . . to translate afresh after the translator . . . Just as in a narration it is always possible to tell the story in a different way, likewise in translation it is always possible to translate otherwise, without ever hoping to bridge the gap between equivalence and perfect adhesion. Linguistic hospitality is the act of inhabiting the word of the Other paralleled by the act of receiving the word of the Other into one’s own home, one’s own dwelling.

(Ricoeur 2006, 10)

But the host can never “capture” the guest in his/her own house, without some degree of violence and violation. And sometimes “the guest must leave the host in order to remain a guest,” as the poet Fanny Howe reminds us (Howe, 81). There is an “untranslatable kernel” in every linguistic transaction which reminds us that host and guest languages are never the same—and never should be.

2 A Wager between History and Hospitality

While this acknowledgment of irreducible difference involves a therapeutic mourning of the dream of fusion, it also heralds the challenge of plurality and novelty. It is precisely when two distinct tongues cross that a third can be born. And this natality can be multiple, as mentioned, in the countless and in principle endless translations of the great classics—Greek, Sanskrit, Latin, Hebrew—rendered differently each time into numerous versions of vernacular speech. We do not lament the serial renditions of Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Proust. Au contraire! And the same goes for the Bible, from the Septuagint translation from Hebrew into Greek, St. Jerome’s translation into Latin, and the many subsequent vernacular versions in English (St. James), German (Luther, Buber, Rosenzweig), or French (Chouraqui), etc.
With each rendition a new “semantic surplus” is triggered by the creative collision of separate tongues—something mutually enhancing for both cultures. Think for example of how, in the Septuagint translation of Exodus 3:14 (“I am who may be”), the Greek ontological notion of being (*ontos on*), understood as formal and material substance, is radically transformed by its encounter with the Hebrew notion of God’s becoming as historical and eschatological promise. And vice versa. By the time Maimonides is writing his Hebraic-Hellenic metaphysics in *Guide for the Perplexed*, both Greeks and Jews have reinterpreted their respective notions of what it means to be in the world—and that twin revision informs new ways of thinking the person, time, relation, and finitude. After the biblical translation into Greek we can agree with Joyce that “Greekjew is Jewgreek.” Athens and Jerusalem are never the same.

But careful: translation is not always on the side of the angels. And each transition between linguistic host and guest involves the possibility of betrayal as well as rebirth. Hostility to the Other is as real as hospitality. As Emile Benveniste famously observed in *Language and Indo-European Language and Society*, hospitality and hostility share the same root, *hostis*, which can mean both host and guest, both friend and enemy (Benveniste 1969). Hence translation is a dramatic human action—a task, a labor, a wager between hostility (reducing host and guest to the same) and hospitality (rightly acknowledging a gap or separation between them). Which is why Antoine Berman speaks of translation as “*l’épreuve de l’étranger*”—an existential testing or trial of the stranger (Berman 1984). This notion of *épreuve* calls in turn for a kind of practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), an ability to discern between varying calls and demands of the stranger, as foreigner or immigrant, as alien or refugee, as adversary or invader. Hence, there is constant dialectical wagering between hostility and hospitality, between vigilance and welcome, a wagering that invites a critical capacity to navigate between diverse perspectives which operates not just inter-linguistically (between a native and foreign tongue) but also intra-linguistically (between speaking beings within a single language—the mother tongue has many children!). And one might also add, with psychoanalysis in mind, there is need for a capacity to mediate between one’s own conscious and unconscious selves. We can find ourselves aliens within our own *langue maternelle* and within the depths of our own minds. We are, deep down, as Julia Kristeva reminds us, always strangers to ourselves.

3 Hermeneutic Mixture: Deconstructive “Hostipitality”

It might be noted that Jacques Derrida makes a radical point here about the “impossibility” of any pure or absolute hospitality to the stranger. Every translation risks some degree of hostility toward the other insofar as it asks the Other to render itself in terms of the same (*my* language, life-world, culture, horizon). As soon as I, *qua* host, ask my guest, “Who are you?”
I am asking a stranger to reply in terms which I can recognize and identify. All hermeneutics in practice involves some mixture of hospitality and hostility—what Derrida calls “hostipitality”—welcoming the other at the same time as one translates its alterity into something “like me.” Though Ricoeur interprets this “like” in term of someone similar (semblable) rather than the same (même), Derrida holds to the strict deconstructive line that any need for similarity is already a compromise on the strangeness of the Stranger (a radicalization of Husserl’s phenomenological analysis of knowing others in the Fifth Cartesian Meditation).

So here is the difference. A hermeneutics of translation, à la Ricoeur, involves conditional hospitality (which in effect means some measure of interpretive judgment regarding mixed bags of “hostipitality”), whereas deconstruction invokes a notion of unconditional hospitality where one accepts the Other regardless of its origin or identity—human, animal or divine! Pure hospitality does not ask for IDs or passports; it is not concerned with border controls or contracts but demands pure exposure to alterity, welcoming the stranger without why. If there is a knock at the door, you open it without asking in advance if it is a messiah or a monster. Once you put hospitality into laws, rules, or norms you take the daring out of it, the radical risk of undecidability, the “yes” to all that comes. “Let us say yes to whom or what turns up,” writes Derrida in Of Hospitality,

"before any determination, or anticipation, whether or not it is to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an uninvited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female."

(Derrida 2000, 77)

In short, absolute hospitality welcomes the stranger independently of all legal, political, or epistemological conventions; it calls for an impossible leap of faith toward the “absolutely Other”—or as Derrida puts it in his typically hyperbolic way: “Every other is absolutely other” (tout autre est tout autre). The stranger is always, at bottom, absolutely strange. And no stranger is too strange to be included.

Such pure hospitality is, of course, not actually possible in terms of everyday practice—where the only feasible form of welcome is always contingent upon this or that condition (and thus never “pure”). Absolute hospitality is impossible, but if it did exist it could only do so, Derrida admits, as a blind, mad, mystical dream. All attempts—which occur daily—to make the impossible possible are already matters of betrayal, compromise, and contagion. Where hermeneutic hospitality speaks of conversion between host and guest, deconstructive hospitality speaks of contamination. Which perhaps goes some way to explaining Ricoeur’s claim that the difference between him and Derrida is that between the terms “difficult” and “impossible” (Ricoeur 2004, 469).
4 Narrative Hospitality

In an important and oft-neglected text, “Reflections on a new Ethos for Europe,” Ricoeur applies his model of linguistic hospitality to what he calls, more specifically, “narrative hospitality” (Ricoeur 1996, 3–14), which he describes as “taking responsibility in imagination and in sympathy for the story of the other, through the life narratives which concern the other” (Ricoeur 1996, 7).

In the case of memorials and testimonials, narrative hospitality takes the form of exchanges between different peoples’ histories so that we may practice an art of transference allowing us to welcome the story of one’s neighbor, opponent, adversary, or forgotten one. For one nation’s narrative of glory is often another’s narrative of suffering and defeat. Victors and victims need to exchange places by exchanging stories. And exchanging stories is already an invitation to change history: to reanimate forgotten memories out of our debt to the dead.

As I have already explored Ricoeur’s ethics of narrative hospitality elsewhere (Kearney 2008), I will confine myself here to four central features of a catharsis of exchanging memories.

First, we have need of an ethic of narrative flexibility. Good memorials face the challenge of resisting the reification of an historical event into a fixed dogma by showing how each event may be told in different ways by different generations and by different narrators. That is not to say that everything becomes relative and arbitrary. On the contrary, acts of trauma and suffering call out for justice, and the best way of achieving this is often to invite empathy with strangers and adversaries by hosting a plurality of narrative perspectives. The resulting overlap may thus lead to what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls a “fusion of horizons” where diverse horizons of consciousness may not refute each other, but at last find some common ground (Gadamer 1975).

Ricoeur describes this reciprocal transfer between opposite minds: “The identity of a group, culture, people, or nation is not that of an immutable substance, nor that of a fixed structure, but that, rather, of a recounted story.” A hermeneutic exchange of stories effectively resists an arrogant or rigid conception of cultural identity which prevents us from perceiving the radical implications of the principle of narrativity—namely, “the possibilities of revising every story which has been handed down and of carving out a place for several stories directed towards the same past” (Ricoeur 1996, 7).

This entails, by implication, a second ethical principle—that of narrative plurality. Pluralism here does not mean any lack of respect for the singularity of the event narrated through the various acts of remembering. It might even be said to increase our sense of awareness of such an event, especially if it is foreign to us in time, space, or cultural provenance. “Recounting differently,” writes Ricoeur,

is not inimical to a certain historical reverence to the extent that the inexhaustible richness of the event is honored by the diversity of stories which are made of it, and by the competition to which that diversity gives rise. (Ricoeur 1996, 8)
And he adds this critical point: the ability to recount the founding events of our national history in different ways is reinforced by the exchange of cultural memories. This ability to exchange has as touchstone the will to share symbolically and respectfully in the commemoration of the founding events of minority ethnic and religious cultures within one’s own nation state, as well as the founding events of other cultures beyond our nation state (Ricoeur 1996, 9). This point applies as much to events of pain and trauma (as in war, famine, or genocide memorials) as to events of triumph and glory. One community’s memory of victory can be another’s memory of victimization—a question of power which calls for constant ethical discernment.

A third aspect of Ricoeur’s hospitality of memories is the transfiguring of the past. This involves a creative retrieval of the betrayed promises of the past, so that we may respond to our “debt to the dead” and endeavor to give them a voice. The goal of memorials is, therefore, to try to give a future to the past by remembering it in the right way, ethically and poetically. A crucial aspect of reinterpreting transmitted traditions is the task of discerning past promises which have not been honored. For

the past is not only what is bygone—that which has taken place and can no longer be changed—it also lives in the memory thanks to arrows of futurity which have not been fired or whose trajectory has been interrupted.

(Ricoeur 1996, 8)

In other words, the unfulfilled future of the past may well signal the richest part of a tradition; and the emancipation of “this unfulfilled future of the past” is the major benefit that we can expect from the crossing of memories and the exchange of narratives” (Ricoeur 1996, 8). Again, it is especially the founding events of a community—traumatic or dramatic—which require to be reread in this critical manner in order to unlock the potencies and expectancies which the subsequent unfolding of history may have forgotten or travestied. This is why any genuine memorial involves a certain return to some seminal moment of suffering or hope, to the original events and textual responses to those events, which are all too often occluded by “Official History.” As Ricoeur notes, “The past is a cemetery of promises which have not been kept.” Good memorials can, at best, be ways of “bringing them back to life like the dry bones in the valley described in the prophecy of Ezekiel” (Ricoeur 1996, 8).

A fourth and final moment in the hospitality of memory is pardon. If empathy toward others is a crucial step in the ethics of remembrance, there is something more—something which entails moving beyond narrative imagination to forgiveness. In short, the exchange of memories of suffering demands more than sympathy and duty (though these are essential for any kind of justice). There must be pardon insofar as pardon means “shattering the debt.” Here the order of justice and reciprocity can be supplemented,
but not replaced, by that of “charity and gift.” Such pardon demands huge patience, an enduring practice of “working-through,” mourning, and letting go. But it is not a forgetful forgiveness. Amnesty can never be based on amnesia. Amnesty remembers our debt to the dead through stories while at the same time introducing something other, a hospitality to the darkness of the past which resists language and is difficult almost to the point of impossibility—but something which is all the more important for that reason. One thinks of Brandt’s words at Warsaw, Havel’s apology to the Sudeten Germans, Hume’s preparedness to speak with the IRA, Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem, Hillesum’s refusal to hate her hateful persecutors: all miraculous moments where an ethics of reciprocity is touched by a poetics of pardon. But I repeat: poetics does not replace ethics—both pardon and justice are equally important in the hosting of past trauma.

To the degree that charity exceeds justice we must guard against substituting it for justice. Charity remains a surplus; this surplus of compassion and tenderness is capable of giving the exchange of memories its profound motivation, its daring, and its momentum.

(Ricoeur 1996, 11)

We may say in conclusion that a poetics of narrative hospitality complements and supplements an ethics of historical judgment. In an increasingly hostile world where memory is questioned, truth challenged, and history too often forgotten, the task of linguistic hospitality could not be more urgent.

Notes
1 See also Walter Benjamin’s notion of the “untranslatable kernel” (Benjamin 1996) and Marc Crépon’s work on the relation between linguistic singularity, translation and hospitality (Crépon 2001), as well as his work on the foreignness of even the mother tongue (Crépon 2005). I am grateful to Sarah Horton for the Crépon references.
2 See also Derrida’s discussion of language, translation and cultural identity (Derrida 1996). For a very illuminating analysis of Derrida’s complex reading of hospitality, see François Raffoul (2012).

References


