

«SO MANY WAYS OF SINGING THE WORLD».
REFLECTIONS ON TRANSBORDER MOVEMENT,
COMMON SPEECH, AND CARE FOR THE WORLD
WITH ARENDT AND MERLEAU-PONTY

*«Tantas maneras de cantar el mundo». Reflexiones con Arendt
y Merleau-Ponty sobre movimientos transfronterizos,
habla común y cuidado del mundo*

Maria ROBASZKIEWICZ
Paderborn University (Germany)

Recibido: 17 de junio de 2024
Aceptado: 10 de julio de 2024

ABSTRACT

Today, in times of intensification of migratory mobility around the world, and hence multiplication and diversification of languages spoken in and on the margins of the communities we inhabit, sharing a language is less and less a matter of course. In this paper, I examine practices of speaking to each other under the condition of lack of a common language, i.e. situations in which no foundation for verbal communication is given but also trans-lingual communication using proximity of languages, as well as mediated speaking. Theoretically, I primarily depend on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of language and Hannah Arendt's political and existential reflections on speech.

Keywords: Migration; Speech; Speaking; Speechlessness; Arendt; Merleau-Ponty; Unfamiliarity; Common Language.

RESUMEN

Hoy día, en tiempos en que se intensifica la movilidad migratoria en todo el mundo, y con ello, se multiplican y diversifican las lenguas habladas en las

comunidades que habitamos y en sus márgenes, compartir una lengua es algo que cada vez se debe dar menos por supuesto. En este artículo, examino las prácticas de hablar unos con otros en condiciones de ausencia de lengua común, esto es, situaciones en las que no se dan las bases para la comunicación verbal, ni tampoco una comunicación translingüística que use la proximidad de las lenguas, así como el habla con intermediarios. Desde una aproximación teórica, me baso en la fenomenología del lenguaje de Merleau-Ponty y en las reflexiones existenciales y políticas de Hannah Arendt sobre el habla.

Palabras clave: Migración; Habla; Hablar; Mutismo; Arendt; Merleau-Ponty; Extrañeza; Lenguaje común.

For most people, speaking to each other is a very intuitive and one of most common mode of intersubjective communication. In its basic form, speaking needs no materiality outside of a human body, no reification, and, as a spontaneous practice, no preformulated frame. It seems as if in its immediacy, speaking was the easiest and quickest way of connecting with another person. But speaking is also, and partly for the same reasons, an eminently complicated practice. Not only does it transport literal sense of the words spoken but it also opens innumerable contexts, turning even a seemingly simplest conversation into a meaningful event. When I leave my home and meet my neighbor in the street, I stop to chat for a moment. By greeting each other, we recognize a bond between us. We both have reasons to engage in this short conversation. We might want to share information, we might also want to share a space, confirming our connectedness through everyday practices that brought us to the same familiar place in the same moment. Our conversation will be laden with emotions, the mood of the morning, all tiny elements of lived reality that already organized or disorganized our being there. We will be using a specific tone; choose specific words and phrases in attempt to say what we hope to be heard, and we will rarely know for sure if what we intended to say was also understood according to our intention. Although the words that we exchange have a very fragile reality: they only exist in the instance of being spoken out and even then, are not graspable, they have originative power. Our conversation creates a piece of the world, condensing what we brought into it and producing thoughts, opinions, and emotions that we will take with us when our conversation stops. All this is subject to multiple conditions, one of which is at the heart of practices of speaking: sharing a common language.

In this paper, I reflect upon a situation, in which this crucial condition cannot be met because there is no language that is intersubjectively shared in a given time and place that could otherwise spark a conversation. The specific situation I have in mind is a community in the course of changing from a predominantly single-language to a multi-language space as a result of transborder migration between territories where different languages are spoken: when «the others» speak to «the others». The migratory practices that I consider here are not limited to what came to be called «forced migration», which describes mostly involuntary practices of moving from a space one inhabits but condition of which are threatening one's safety and often life to another, presumably safer, places. There are at least two reasons for me to broaden the notion of migration I use here. First, forced migration already is in the center of current philosophical discourses within this field, in the form of ethics of migration. Anyone familiar with the latter will know about the rather narrow theoretical frames used in these debates, as well as specific ways of delineating the world, in which they are taking place: analyzing actual and possible legal structures as spun between the rights of the states and of the refugees, ethical administration of forced migrants' practices of border-crossing, conditions of their eligibility as citizens. Politically liberal and philosophically analytic, this version of migration philosophy has been growing popular since the 1980s, more recently prompting responses from more critical scholars (Gündoğdu 2015, Sager 2018, Di Cesare 2020, Dumitru 2023, to only name a few), who came up with alternative, further-reaching accounts of migration and show interest in the worldly condition of refugees and forced migrants. I will critically address migration ethics in the last section of this paper.

Second, there is no doubt that reasons motivating many people to leave their places of dwelling are grave and war refugees and forced migrants deserve ethical attention on their own rights. Under pressure of war, oppression, catastrophes of different kinds or miserable economic conditions, millions of people around the world are left with very limited choices for their actions. At the same time, people migrate for a variety of reasons and while not all experience the hardships of illegal, often life-threatening transborder movement, it does not mean that their experience is not worthy of scholarly attention. Any philosophy, which aspires to a better understanding of our world as it is, should refrain from consciously concealing particular perspectives. Limiting the notion of migration, originally simply meaning «movement», to a cluster of what passes for forced migration practices, even though these endlessly vary, causes a philosophy to miss this aim.

My primary intellectual companions in this endeavor will be Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Hannah Arendt, who both developed a phenomenology of speaking and intersubjective communication, even though in quite different styles. While Merleau-Ponty's unfinished (Urban Coyne 1980, 308) phenomenology of speaking unfolds as a study of communication in its verbal and gestural guise, which he opposes to some psychological and philosophical theories prevalent in his time, for Arendt speaking has a distinctively political character when connected to acting; indeed, acting without speech seems to Arendt to hardly be possible. The rationale of referring to these two thinkers when addressing the question, which I consider in this paper is that they both were seeking to describe the phenomenon of speech not as an abstract, general concept a physiological/psychological process but as a lived practice, through which we as human beings experience the world and interact within it.

In what follows, referring mainly to Hannah Arendt's account of public speaking and migration experience and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on language and intersubjective verbal and gestural communication, especially with his remarks concerning the conditions of speaking to each other and multilinguality, I examine practices of speaking to each other under the condition of the lack of a common language. With «the lack of common language», I not only mean situations, in which no foundation for verbal communication is given but also different practices of bridging this gap with translanguing communication using sonic proximity of languages, as well as mediated speaking.

My aim in this paper is to demonstrate that practices of speaking to each other without sharing a language are of both existential and political relevance. I proceed in three steps. First, I shortly present the accounts of language in Merleau-Ponty and Arendt. In the second step, I discuss three aspects of speaking to each other under the condition of the lack of a common language: disclosure of one's otherness by one's specific linguistic performativity, not speaking a language or speaking in a diaspora, and mediated speaking. In my conclusions, I point towards the critical potentialities of my approach as adding to and complicating the current debates within philosophical migration studies, essentially dominated by analytic migration ethics approaches.

1. ARENDT AND MERLEAU-PONTY ON SPEAKING

Hannah Arendt was a refugee. This might seem to be a surprising way of beginning a section about speaking but it very soon becomes clear that the one has numerous intersection points with the other. Arendt was born in Germany, went to school in Germany, studied in Germany and wrote her doctoral thesis in German. For academically educated German people of her generation, knowledge of Greek and Latin was a standard. She was also familiar with French, which she could later use during the time in Paris when she emigrated to France shortly after National Socialists' coming into power in Germany. It was in Paris that she also studied Yiddish, which, after her flight to USA, resulted in one short polemic text written and published in Yiddish in 1942, between her master German and only-emerging English writing skills (Rokem 2013)¹. Curiously, in this publication Arendt responds to an opinion piece written on the occasion of a conflict between the Yiddish and the German speaking Jews, the latter of which the author, Aaron Zeitlin, accused of the lack of «Ahavat Israel» (the love of Jewish people) – so precisely what Arendt herself was charged with by Gershom Scholem two decades after and, I suppose, a few times in between. In this original response, Arendt calls for respect for a «simple man», who is in the center of every democratic politics and the specifically Jewish variation thereof. If German Jews, she argues, learn to respect a simple man «then you will be able to speak to them about Jewish politics in all the languages of the world» (Rokem 2013). The context, in which I want to read this conclusion today is no other than Arendt's connection of speaking to politics.

The metaphor of speaking about politics in all languages of the world might have been slightly more abstract to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who remained true to French all his life. His interest in speaking, communication, and language was also of another kind. Speaking is not, as in Arendt, primarily delineated by its capacity as a co-condition of acting, so in a way by its function in the world, but rather by its structure. Merleau-Ponty interprets speaking as a continuation of bodily gestures in form of linguistic gestures. He delves into how speech is being born in the subject and how it tends to expression as well as its connection to thinking. This is why, for my reflections, Merleau-Ponty's incomplete account of speaking provides a reference different

1. Na'ama Rokem offers a short but very rich reflection on Arendt's relation to Yiddish, departing from her polemic in *Morgen Zshurnal*. Her letter exchange with Scholem, as Rokem notes, was carried out in Yiddish, before the translation of the letters was published in German and English.

from Arendt's political speech, still leading to an already familiar endeavor: better understanding of not only what results when we engage in speaking to each other but how we actually experience speaking in a language and what happens when the linguistic linkage is missing.

1.1. *Merleau-Ponty: «Speech is a Gesture, and its Signification is a World»*

For Merleau-Ponty, there is an intimate connection between body and speech, speaking being one of the possible activities of one's body. This comes as no surprise considering the significance of embodiment for his phenomenology. «The body is a natural power of expression» (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 187), he writes. As I am an «intentional and expressive body-subject» (Vasterling 2013, 213), it is only through speech that I can capture my thought. Thought and embodied speech do not belong to two different orders but are «enveloped in each other; sense is caught in speech, and speech is the external existence of sense» (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 187, see also 189). As such, a verbal expression is a kind of gesture, a linguistic one. Similarly to bodily and facial gestures (as e.g. a gesture of anger), it carries its sense in itself: just as a gesture of anger «does not *make me think* of anger, it is anger itself» (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 190), a word or a phrase do not direct us to any referential system of signs existing before the speech and external to it. The gesture, as the word, are full of sense: «This is what makes communication possible» (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 189). It is so because gestures, including linguistic gestures, keep being exercised and become sedimented as ways of communication, for example languages.

According to Merleau-Ponty, we are born into a language. When we, as newborns, encounter the world, the language is already there for us to pick up and start speaking. But it does not mean that entire language is a stable system or a preconstructed tool we just need to implement. Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between originary and second order speech. So on the one hand, he notes that, in order for communication to be possible, in order for me to understand the other person's words, I have to know her syntax and vocabulary. Or, as he states elsewhere, «People can only speak to us in a language we already know» (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 184, 189). We live in the world, in which speech is already instituted, and in this sense basic or banal communication is not an effort. Used to this everyday, effortless way of communicating, we become unaware of the element of contingency in expression: «Our view of man will remain superficial so long as we do not rediscover the primordial silence beneath the noise of words, and as long as

we do not describe gesture that breaks this silence. Speech is a gesture, and its signification is a world» (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 190).

On the other hand, even though we mostly use constituted, sedimented language (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 194), there is a different way of employing speech that human beings are capable of: unprecedented way of speaking, bringing into the world meanings that were not there before and hence instituting new ways of speaking. Merleau-Ponty introduces this distinction as if *en passant*, in two notes to Chapter VI of *Phenomenology of Perception*: «Of course, there are reasons to distinguish between an authentic speech, which formulates for the first time, and a secondary expression, a speech about speech that makes up the usual basis of empirical language», and he further designates the former as «originary speech –that of the child who utters his first word, of the lover who discovers his emotion, of the «first man who spoke», or of the writer and the philosopher who awaken a primordial experience beneath traditions» (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 530)². He later (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 202–203) refers to these forms of speech as spoken speech and speaking speech. In spoken speech the meaningful intention is as if in a nascent state, the existence fails to meet up with itself in being, resulting with its non-being using speech merely as its empirical support. From there, however, a constitutive expression calls the existence back into being, which eventually results in possibility of «other authentic acts of expression –those of the writer, the artist, and the philosopher [...]. This ever-recreated opening in the fullness of being is what conditions the first speech of the child [...]. Such is the function revealed through language, which reiterates itself, depends upon itself, or that like a wave gathers itself together and steadies itself in order to once again throw itself beyond itself» (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 203).

Merleau-Ponty refers to a plurality of languages, every of which has its own syntax and grammar. Because speaking is one of the activities of our bodies, speaking any language would be a different way «for the human body to celebrate the world and finally live in it» (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 193). This, as Merleau-Ponty continues, is the reason why translating full sense of a language is impossible. While we can speak several languages, we always only live in one. Every language expresses a world. To absorb a language fully, I would need to take up the world it expresses –and we never belong to two worlds simultaneously. However, human beings are not automata. «People can only speak to us in a language we already know» but we are capable of learning, of thinking beyond the spoken speech systematics.

2. Coyne (1980, 312) refers to this distinction as «a strikingly Heideggerian proviso».

Hence, is immersion into spoken speech even a desired possibility for a person primarily not speaking the language? Is world-travelling (Lugones 1987) between linguistic worlds a way of recreating an opening in the fullness of being? What practices of communication could emerge in its course? How could we communicate in a meaningful way when a shared language is not given?

1.2. Arendt: «*The Revelatory Quality of Speech*» (and Action)

Having migrated to a country whose language she was not familiar with, Arendt herself experienced the existentially challenging limitations in communication. Very soon after having provisionally settled in New York with her husband and her mother, she started learning English. It was, however, not out of worldly curiosity or for the regaining the possibility of political participation but much more out of necessity: someone needed to earn for the living and with her language portfolio, she was the most likely member of the family to do the learning (Young-Bruehl 1982, 164-165). Although she progressed quickly and step by step became language-wise less dependent upon her German-speaking friends and the Jewish community, which in relatively short time enabled her to join broader intellectual and then academic circles in the USA, her relation to English remained ambiguous. Far from what she described in «*We Refugees*» as chasing after new identities through compulsive adoption of the language spoken by the new community³, Arendt always kept certain distance to the language of her new land. Hence, in this same essay, she counts Change to: the loss of «our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings» (Arendt 1994a, 110) among the losses suffered by refugees. Later, 1964 in the interview with Gaus, she emphasized that

[t]he language remains. [...] I have always consciously refused to lose my mother tongue. I always maintained a certain distance from French, which I then spoke very well, as well as from English, which I write today. [...] there is a tremendous difference between your mother tongue and another language. (Arendt 1994b, 12-13).

Arendt's upholding an intimate relation to her mother tongue marks the existential dimension of her views on language and speech. She starkly criticizes

3. Similar reflections, though in a very different context, can be found in the first chapter of Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask*, 1-23, especially 7.

the attempts to develop such a connection to a new language as only resulting with cliché-ridden forms of language expression, lacking any deeper relationality to its actual fabric (Arendt 1994b, 13). While I think this might be too harsh of a judgment, there is a certain, nearly spiritual, tie to the mother tongue, in which anything I say seems to myself more meaningful, be it through the music and rhythm in the language or how certain things are said or not remain unsaid because it's clear that they are already there. I will come back to this in the next section of this paper.

Arendt's most systematic political account of speaking is to be found in *The Human Condition*, where she writes about the disclosure of a subject in action and speech, which, considering her notion of plurality, already establishes connections to others. Plurality –the fact that many human beings inhabit the earth– is the condition of speaking and action and hence at the very core of our readiness and need for both. It means that, as human beings, we are all equal and at the same time all different from each other, or better to say: unique (Arendt 1998, 8). Seemingly a paradox condition, plurality could arguably be seen as the most central element of Arendt's political phenomenology project altogether. Her appreciation of plurality is perhaps best visible in her reference to the notion of the human. Arendt clearly distances herself from any notion of the «human nature», stating that such a thing does not exist (Arendt 1998, 193), and the closest she gets to define human is when she addresses human existence as endlessly conditioned. Human beings, she states, «are conditioned beings because everything they come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence» (Arendt 1998, 9), not only the conditions under which life on earth is given to us, but also human-made conditions: the way we shape our world through work and action and speech. This openness allows her to accommodate all conceivable features within a notion of human being, today we could say: including but not limited to well-known axis of gender, race, class, or (dis)ability.

One's disclosure as a political being is through both speaking and acting with others. Arendt tends to mention action and speech in one breath and emphasizes that the disclosure of the who could not be genuine and complete without both. Action without meaningful speech⁴ amounts to violence: while a deed without speech «can be perceived in its brute physical appearance without verbal accompaniment, it becomes relevant only through

4. As opposed to speech as bare convention, like in a situation of war (Arendt 1998, 180) or in her report from the Eichmann trial, where she describes his Nazi jargon and his inability of speaking beyond clichés as a linguistic façade hiding the thoughtlessness (Arendt 1964, 48-49).

the spoken word in which he [the doer] identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do» (Arendt 1998, 179). For Arendt, speech as the human activity of speaking to each other in our plurality, is not only an addition to action but coequal with it. Just as acting, speaking is indispensable for our existence to become human through the twofold disclosure of the who, when «people are *with* others and neither for nor against them –that is, in sheer human togetherness» (Arendt 1998, 180), and the account of speech as a world-building activity is present throughout her work. Building a world must be accompanied and followed by caring for it⁵. As Arendt notes,

this environment, the world into which we are born, would not exist without the human activity which produced it, as in the case of fabricated things; which takes care of it, as in the case of cultivated land; or which established it through organization, as in the case of the body politic. (Arendt 1998, 22).

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt focuses on this political role of speech and largely disregards the phenomenal context of human speaking and speaking to each other. It is perhaps telling that the only instance, in which she uses the notion of voice in other than rhetorical sense, is an ambiguous remark, in which she states that in disclosing the who, human beings actively reveal «their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear *without any activity of their own* [*my italics, MR*] in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice. This disclosure of «who» in contradistinction to «what» somebody is [...] is implicit in everything somebody says and does» (Arendt 1998, 179). Now, is the unique sound of my voice a part of my political disclosure? Or is it something that belongs to my «what», a mere trait of my natural body? Has Arendt asked herself these questions when typing the words on her Underwood typewriter? Possibly not, since the German version of the book, which she authored herself⁶, lacks this remark altogether. She might have been disinterested in looking deeper into the activity of speaking or the phenomenon of voice and its political implications. However, since we by now know, thanks to the newer critical literature about and around Arendt, that through the openness of her political phenomenology, she is an ally in

5. Arendt's account of care for the world has been recently significant in discussion about climate crisis and Anthropocene, see e.g. Hargis 2016; Hyvönen 2020 and 2021; Robaszekiewicz & Weinman 2023, especially chapter 6.

6. Unlike a number of translations of her writings into English of German, which were made by other persons and published during her lifetime or posthumously.

politicizing challenges of our times –and this is to say, of any moment we decide to reach out for it.

2. SPEAKING TO ONE ANOTHER WHEN A COMMON LANGUAGE IS NOT GIVEN

If one migrates over national borders, more often than not she will leave her language behind. Her linguistic situatedness may be of different kinds: she may have more or less advanced command of the language spoken in the space she migrated to; she may need to use a third language as an intermediary; she may also have no means of verbal communication with the community she migrated to due to there being no language in common. All these situations put her at risk of being recognized as the other who does not belong. In what follows, I address three aspects of speaking to each other under conditions of unfamiliarity, namely disclosure through speech, speechlessness, and mediated speaking.

2.1. *Disclosure*

Migrants, in their embodied individuality, appear not only through their looks, but also through their voice, and this is what Arendt points towards in «We Refugees» (Arendt 1994a, 269) when she refers to exposing oneself as an alien when «shopping for milk and bread». One's way of speaking may differ from what is perceived as common speech in the community. Through the words she speaks and the sound of her voice, a migrant exposes herself as a migrant, disclosing herself as the other, a stranger or an alien within the space she inhabits. She awakens interest, either emanating from curiosity upon encountering a curiosity, a stranger, or from a deeply-seated distrust of everyone, who apparently is not from here, because, as Sara Ahmed (2010, 2, 21) notes, «The alien [...] is not simply the one we have failed to identify [...] but is the one whom we have already identified in the event of being named as alien». If exoticizing or demonizing, this disclosure changes the situatedness of a migrant in her immediate community.

Language proficiency is not even decisive here. If it is very limited, challenges will appear that I address in the next subsection of this paper. However, even if an exchange of words tracing the right grammatical patterns is no difficulty, it is still difficult to hide behind one's fluency. Chances are good that one's way of speaking, accent, and the culture that she is expected to represent inevitably become the center of conversations –in spite of good

many more engaging alternatives— sometimes accompanied by a neat package of cultural prejudice.

The dream to conform, to speak the language of the hosting community *as if* one was a native speaker of this language is what some pursue with verve and others with despair. Continuously improving one's language skills, immersing oneself into words and expressions as they are spoken and understood by the community, not standing out and exposing oneself as a stranger; to speak and be heard as one of «us» is guided by this dream until its anticipated happy ending: the passing for (Lapina 2018). Not being recognizable upon one's speech may be experienced as a bliss. This, however, when regarded from the perspective of national states or ethnicities, always has a critical aspect, as Arendt reminds us when she mentions her distancing from languages other than her mother tongue, but also in «We refugees», when she ironically speaks of «the optimists», who, after one year, are convinced to speak English better than their mother tongue they believe to have forgotten (Arendt 1994a, 111). This opens a question about the meaningfulness of primary language or languages for the construction of the self, not in simplistic terms of cultur or shared identity but rather in relation to the possibility of genuine expression in language.

2.2. *Speechlessness and Speaking in a Diaspora*

One may experience speaking to each other as impossible when a common language is not given. This corresponds to the experience of the loss of one's language that Arendt writes about, where the language is not *per se* forgotten but simply becomes useless as means of communication. This experience marks an existential crisis but it also becomes a situation of political significance. Even though, as Merleau-Ponty (2012, 187) notes, the body is a natural power of expression, we might ask how a nonverbal gesture of a migrant plays into an interaction with others, with whom she does not share a language, as opposed to words, which she potentially could and normatively should be able to speak out? It is an exact opposite of what Merleau-Ponty (2012, 189) refers to as «a world where speech is already *instituted*. [...] Thus, language and comprehension of language seem self-evident». Not so for migrants who did not acquire any knowledge of the language spoken in the community prior to their arrival. But if the communication in a language is seen as self-evident, if we forget, as Merleau-Ponty mentions in the same paragraph, about the effort of language acquisition and the contingency of expression in language, not only everyday communication is affected.

In political terms, as Arendt shows, action without speech bears a threat of violence. If speech is what, at least according to Aristotle, differentiates us from other animals, not speaking reveals something animalistic about us. This results in perceiving a migrant as vulnerable (seemingly not unlike a child who still cannot speak) but also as an incomprehensible creature to whom one can only hastily ascribe certain cliché characteristics. A non-speaking migrant is disconcerting for the ones who share a language and communicate in it effortlessly. When «others» speak to «others», on both poles of attempted or inhibited conversation, in which a common language is not given, this leads to a sense of alienation, unfamiliarity. If I am «the other», coming from without, I feel lost in the surrounding world, reluctant to move around in this space while anticipating a situation of being addressed in a language I do not know. In turn, if I am «the other», who self-perceives as inhabiting and hence owning a certain space, in which I encounter «the other» who *cannot speak*, I might feel irritated, challenged, prompted to use coercive measures, including language but also significant silence, rather than attempt potentially troublesome communication. My liberal conviction of owning the space lets me believe that it is my right to demand «the speechless other» to conform and make this communication, in Merleau-Ponty's (2012, 189) words, demand no effort of expression for us and no effort of comprehension for our listeners.

As I already mentioned, in such situation, a «non-speaking» migrant often awakens an image of a child, disoriented in her surroundings and only just finding her connections to the world. The awkwardness of her first words when she seeks to name things around her or communicate her needs or questions in a language, may result in very different reactions in people speaking this language as a daily practice, as a matter of course. It may irritate, like an adult person learning to ride a bicycle on a frequented bicycle path; it may meet with disbelief, like when someone misunderstands signs that are presumed to be universal; it may also evoke a need of care or even rescue, like when a helpless child loses her guardians in a crowd. All these reactions, while some of them may actually be fitting in a particular instance, misplace a subject well-experienced in the ways of the world into a position of a complete newcomer. Looking at this through the lens of Merleau-Ponty's distinction between spoken and speaking speech reveals a different aspect of this situation. Not connected to the sedimented practices of spoken speech around them, migrants would tend to involve in speaking speech, discovering

new styles of expressing and possibly developing new languages⁷. When we notice that «words, vowels, and phonemes are so many ways of singing the world, and they are destined to represent objects [...] because they are extracted from them and literally express their emotional essence» (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 193), this novel contribution to the pre-existing language might become more appreciated. If not for the whole community, it is at least among people sharing a condition of having migrated that this gesture of new speech may break the silence beneath the noise of the words. In this sense, but not in any other, migrants are like children, engaging in practices of speaking speech as a result of unfamiliarity with the sedimented ways of spoken language.

The sensation of unfamiliarity, when the others speak to the others, is being amplified if the only possibility of communication is silent, mediated through the signs of our bodies, in face of speaking to each other as one of the central human activities (Arendt 1998). Of course, non-verbal gestures also provide a meaning. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty notes, in a gesture, the meaning is not given; it is rather understood in an act of the spectator. Communication in gestures happens in a reciprocal relation between my intentionality and the intentionality of the other, which is in our mutual gestural communication

as if the other person's intentions inhabited my body [...] The gesture is in front of me like a question, it indicates to me specific sensible points in the world and invites me to join it there. Communication is accomplished when my behavior finds in this pathway its own pathway. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 191).

In this, we confirm each other. Now, Merleau-Ponty's remark introduces an uncertainty. Understanding non-verbal gestures entails hesitation, it is an exercise in approximation with an uncertain result. Especially because in communication, we not only exchange simple everyday expressions but also more complex matters, opinions, emotions, reflections. The path to this kind of communication is either closed or tremendously rocky if a common language is not given.

In such situation, finding similarities in a landscape of differences and speaking in a diaspora become life-saving strategies. Not only do they help

7. Example of this will not only be known to many readers from their own experience and practice but are also to be found in philosophical writings, such as Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) or Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952/2008), or generally in accounts of language and coloniality.

in overcoming challenges posed by daily concerns in an alien space, but they also allow for a moment of rest, in which the tension of our body and the attention of our mind can become less alerted. Immersing in the language I know, in which I feel at home, in which I can *truly* say: «I love you», or *honestly* curse, is a relief, recharge and reclaim of my living space. These strategies, however, if they exceed the moments of withdrawal and become our whole life, a micro space which we inhabit within the alien space, affect migrants in two ways. On the one hand, they provide us with a sense of community when speaking to each other reappears, is a possible again in its most genuine sense. On the other hand, they give us an illusion of a home, while they in fact augment the perceived isolation, when leaving one's diasporic community exposes us to speechlessness again.

2.3. *Mediated Speaking*

When a common language is lacking, speaking to each other requires a mediator. I will refer to three forms of such mediation: translation by a person speaking both languages; use of the sonoric proximity of the languages or mediation by a person with a basic knowledge of the language of the other; and technology-based mediation.

If communication is mediated by a person, who can move freely between both languages, as for example in formal situations including simultaneous translation or when –purposefully or coincidentally– such a person is a part of our closer community, the mediation as translation should be, we would think, relatively smooth. However, it is still an encounter, a relation between two (or more) unique humans conditioned by everything they encounter, as Arendt (1998, 9) emphasizes, and hence bringing with them their endlessly complicated world-entanglements, experiences and opinions; it runs without a script or an algorithm, so it remains very fragile.

If mediation is provided by persons with a basic knowledge of the other's language(s) or using sonoric proximity of languages (as Spanish to Italian or Polish to Ukrainian), elementary analogical comprehension is possible. This kind of mediation is a reaction to the emergency of an event of not sharing a language, hence it lacks any precision, and so it seldom adequately transfers the meaning of what was intended by the speaker –even if, as Merleau-Ponty (2012, 193) reminds us, it is impossible to translate the full meaning of a language into another. It also puts all involved at risk of missing the sense of what has been said entirely when what I say is different from what you hear.

Technological translation options mediate communication through algorithmic patterns, which diminishes the challenge of precision and provides a quick, pragmatic tool for answering to the above-mentioned emergency, lessening the chance of a mediation-translation fatigue inherent in other forms of communication without sharing a language. Still, even if technology-based solutions work properly in communicating the desired message, they preclude the individuality of communicating subjects, thus equalizing the plurality of communicating subjects in a harmful way. For now, digital translation is impoverished in its impossibility of communicating meaningfulness of speech beyond the signification of words, even if artificial intelligence today is more advanced than we could ever imagine.

All those practices of mediation and translation open a possibility of communication but not of free expression. They also create impediments and limitations as to what and how can be transported in circuits between mouths and ears (Robert Stam in Ahmed 2010, 157). In any case, a mediation prevents me from speaking with my own voice, it is, in the best case, only a reflection of my voice. It eventually adds to the practices of «speaking for» presumably speechless subjects. This reveals the deeply political dimension of practices of speaking to each other when a common language is not given. Arendt (1998, 178) notes that «speech corresponds to the fact of distinctness and is the actualization of the human condition of plurality, that is, of living as a distinct and unique being among equals». Speaking is a sign of uniqueness, my voice allows me to insert myself into a community of equals. As Adriana Cavarero puts it,

for Arendt the political lies entirely in the relational space between human beings who are unique and therefore plural. The faculty of speech is political because by speaking to one another in a relational space and communicating themselves, men at the same time communicate the political nature of this space⁸ (Cavarero 2005, 192).

If my ability of speaking is inhibited by my unfamiliarity with the language, communication relies more than usually on the kindness of others. This and the fact that these others often speak for me, restitutes the power relation as in the «them and us» scheme. If my voice is silenced in that I am being spoken for, so is my very existence as an individual within such a community in political sense.

8. For a critique of Cavarero's account of uniqueness of voice, see: Cahill & Hamel 2023, 48-51.

Speaking to one another under the condition of the lack of a common language is an experience currently shared by many migrating persons around the world. A refusal of such engagement brings about a peril of violence, if not violence itself, which threatens our common world in its very core. If speaking to a neighbor in front of your house, between parents in the school yard, I will risk saying: between kids at school, or even in private contexts, speaking to each other when a common language is not given becomes political and it is at the heart of caring for the world in linguistically plural communities.

3. EXTENDED CONCLUSIONS

Researching for philosophy of migration, we inevitably face a plethora of contributions to the field of migration ethics. The chief interest here are normative questions about forced migration, which, eventually, sum up to one: how to deal with masses of migrants in an ethically justifiable way? From the start, this debate was structured by two opposed frames: Walzer (1983) supporting the right of communities to control and close its border versus Carens (1987, see also Carens 2013), advocating open borders based on individual right to free movement, reinforced by utilitarian argument (Singer 1993). This framework has still not changed, as may be observed in recent introductions to migration ethics (e.g. Bauböck et. al. 2022, Hosein 2019). Donatella Di Cesare comes up with perhaps the most on-point description of this debate:

Behind the intricate discourse, the meticulous observation and the subtle argumentation⁹, in which the phenomenon of migration itself seems to disappear from view, what becomes noticeable is emotional indifference, the cold imperturbability, the impassive detachment, which so irritatingly contrast with the migrant's own drama. Who should be admitted? How and why? Should the borders be opened or not? The impression is that the debate is nothing but a contained tiff, a temperate exchange of ideas between well-off *bien pensants* who have in common both their intent to resolve the problem and the wholly internal perspective they adopt what is going on outside of them. (Di Cesare 2020, 21).

Indeed, the limits of this approach are quite clear. It presupposes a subject-object structure where the ethicist investigates her object of studies from

9. At times not so subtle, as e.g. Miller 2019 shows.

the outside, on a normative basis («them» and «us»). Very often, as a reader, one has the impression that these publications are not concerned with human persons or living beings of any kind but rather with fully abstract and easily manageable systems, like computer games from the 1980s, perhaps. Migration ethics engages in the «normative administration» of forced migrants rather than problematize it; it makes no critical effort and remains completely conform in terms of institutionalized politics. Last but not least, it operates with a clear-cut vision of the world and a limited figure of a migrant, framing migrating persons as either alien intruders, the stranger danger (Ahmed 2000, 32-37) or victims deprived of freedom to make their life choices, where it is up to «us» to save «them» (or not) as in the question «What do *we* owe to refugees?» (Owen 2020, *my emphasis, MR*).

This limited framework not only seems to be going round in circles but it also has fairly little connection to actual worldly situations and experiences of the migrants as well as those, who already are a part of in-migration communities. It operates within a predesigned analytic field, in which migration streams always go the same ways. The terms «migration» and «immigration» are automatically equalized with what came to be labeled as forced migration: migratory practices resulting from some kinds of tension in the countries of origin, predominantly political oppression, war and other life-threatening conditions, or famine and poverty, whereas the latter already awakens a suspicion of a fraud. Mostly absent from these debates are persons migrating for reasons different from those enlisted above; persons, who leave their place of origin or dwelling, as it were, unforced. While we may, or even must, argue for ethical primacy of forced migrants, at the same time, limiting the notion of migration and restricting the research attention solely to this field brings another phenomenon out of focus: the more macroscopic image of the world, in which «national states» become less homogenous than they ever were. Our societies, within the conceptual frame of national state supposedly held together by a unity of ethnic phenotype and a shared language, as a result of historical, political, but also technological developments now provide living spaces for a vast plurality of people, representing countless ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups. The otherness or unfamiliarity, which was thought to be distinct and alien, belongs inextricably to our lived reality –but we are hardly prepared for it.

There is no question that we need joint effort to add to the philosophical treatment of migration practices, and in the course of this article I mentioned some philosophers who have already done so. My contribution engages with a topic that has not yet gained a significant philosophical attention. I chose phenomenological theories because I am convinced of their fruitfulness

when it comes to studying experience(s). The practices of speaking and not speaking, as I argued, are vital to most stories of enforced, but also voluntary migration. Because of the major worldly relevance of practices of international mobility and migration, and the simultaneous aggravation of political situation in many places, where populists reinforce xenophobic sentiments, the attention must be paid to a better understanding of what migration is and what it is not; who migrants are and who they are not. As Veronica Vasterling (2013, 213) notes: «Even though the world is thoroughly permeated by sedimented meanings, the individual's specific passage through the world cannot but inflect the meaning of what s/he sees and understands». This points towards a continuous opening for the world inspiring new thoughts, which can be expressed in a new way, contributing to a better understanding of a phenomenon. Critical thinking, the domain of philosophy, is an indispensable means in approaching this aim.

In our world today, speaking practices, their varieties, conditions and implications have profound political meaning: they are, as Merleau-Ponty remind us, «many ways of singing the world». Every national state has at least one official language. Assuming that a person does not know it (or any of them), her abilities of connecting to the structures of the institutional political space she inhabits are limited or absent. Hence, engagement of an intermediary is necessary for making the verbal-vocal-audible communication possible, where the voice of a speechless subject is being made comprehensible and possible to hear or reified in writing and possible to read. Hence, the practices of mediation and translation provided by attentive, supporting others, which I outlined in this paper, are existentially and politically significant.

REFERENCES

- AHMED, Sara. *Strange Encounters. Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. London & New York: Routledge, 2000.
- ANZALDÚA, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
- ARENDT, Hannah. «We Refugees». In *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile*, ed. Marc Robinson 110-119. London: Faber & Faber, 1994a.
- ARENDT, Hannah. «“What Remains? The Language Remains”: An Interview with Gunther Gauss». In *Hannah Arendt, Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, 1-23. New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1994b.
- ARENDT, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. New York: Verso, 1964.
- ARENDT, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

- BAUBÖCK, Rainer, Julia MOURÃO Permoser & Martin RUHS. «The Ethics of Migration Policy Dilemmas». *Migration Studies* 10, 3 (2022): 427-441.
- CAHILL, Ann J. & Christine HAMEL. *Sounding Bodies: Identity, Injustice, and the Voice*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2021.
- CARENS, Joseph. «Aliens and Citizens: The Case for Open Borders». *The Review of Politics* 49, 2 (1987): 251-273.
- CARENS, Joseph. *The Ethics of Immigration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- CAVARERO, Adriana. *For More than One Voice: Towards a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.
- DI CESARE, Donatella. *Resident Foreigners: A Philosophy of Migration*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020.
- DUMITRU, Speranta. «The Ethics of Immigration: How Biased is the Field?» *Migration Studies* 11, 1 (2023): 1-22.
- FANON, Franz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 2008.
- GÜNDOĞDU, Ayten. *Rightlessness in the Age of Rights*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- HARGIS, Jill. «Hannah Arendt's Turn to the Self and Environmental Responses to Climate Change Paralysis». *Environmental Politics* 25, 3 (2016): 475-93.
- HOSEIN, Adam. *The Ethics of Migration: An Introduction*. London & New York: Routledge, 2019.
- HYVÖNEN, Ari-Elmeri. «Labor as Action: The Human Condition in the Anthropocene». *Research in Phenomenology* 50, 2 (2020): 240-60.
- HYVÖNEN, Ari-Elmeri. «Amor Tellus? For a Material Culture of Care». *Hannah Arendt.Net* 11 (2021): 96-114.
- LAPINA, Linda. «Recruited into Danishness? Affective autoethnography of passing as Danish». *European Journal of Women's Studies* 25, 1 (2018): 56-70.
- LUGONES, María. «Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception». *Hypatia* 2, 2 (1987): 3-19.
- MILLER, David. «Our Responsibilities to Refugees». In *Proceedings of the 2018 ZiF Workshop: Studying Migration Policies at the Interface Between Empirical Research and Normative Analysis*, eds. Matthias Hoesch & Lena Laube, 36-49. Publikationsserver der Universität Münster, 2019. Retrieved on 10.06.2024 from <https://miami.uni-muenster.de/Record/ccad3cca-4913-49f1-9406-ed42a03dbdf4>.
- ROBASZKIEWICZ, Maria & Michael WEINMAN. *Hannah Arendt and Politics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023.
- ROKEM, Na'ama. «Hannah Arendt and Yiddish». *Amor Mundi*, Annandale on Hudson, 18.02.2013. Retrieved on 01.06.2024 from <https://hac.bard.edu/amor-mundi/hannah-arendt-and-yiddish-2013-02-18>.
- SAGER, Alex. *Toward a Cosmopolitan Ethics of Mobility: The Migrant's-Eye View of the World*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- SINGER, Peter. *Practical Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

- URBAN COYNE, Margaret. «Merleau-Ponty on Language: An Interrupted Journey towards a Phenomenology of Speaking». *International Philosophical Quarterly* 20, 3 (1980): 307-326.
- VASTERLING, Veronica. «Body and Language: Butler, Merleau-Ponty and Lyotard on the Speaking Embodied Subject». *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 11, 2 (2003): 205-223.
- WALZER, Michael. *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.
- YOUNG- BRUEHL, Elisabeth. *For Love of the World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982.

