1998

'About talk': The category of talk-reflexive words

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> Admittedly, reflection is already implicitly at work even in prereflective experience, for prereflective experience can never be severed from the continuing contribution of past reflected experience. But the prereflective moment of experience does not congeal as an explicating and discriminating focus of attention. In prereflective experience, discriminating determinations are latent; in reflective experience they move about freely and occasion the attentive focusing of experiencer, figure, and background as explicit themes. (Schrag 1969: 47)

Some thinkers have said that humans are unique in their ability to talk about talk.[2] Kenneth Burke (1966), for example, in delineating what is unique to the human condition, appeals to the qualitative differences of symbol systems. He writes,

> Symbol systems of that sort differ from intuitive signaling systems in that they have a second-level (or 'reflexive') aspect. That is to say: they can *talk* about themselves. Cicero could both orate and write a treatise on oratory. A dog can bark but he can't bark a tract on barking. (1966: 79; underlining mine)

These are bold and powerful statements, and they[3] need further unpacking and elucidation to show how thorough is this human capacity for self-reflexivity. The present essay explores this remarkable capacity to talk about talk, that is to 'metacommunicate' (cf. Ruesch and Bateson 1951; Leeds-Hurwitz 1989).

The present exploration, then, examines the everyday capability to talk about talk by considering mainly the use of a particular word-type, what I shall be calling 'about talk' words. As an important note, the reader of this text should observe that almost all the sentences within this paper

Semiotica 121–3/4 (1998), 193–212

0037–1998/98/0121–0193

(except for quotations) embody 'about talk'. But, rather than continue to distract the reader by underlining every instance, I shall highlight (i.e., underline) only within the first two paragraphs of this essay all of these definite references to the verbal order. As for the other sentences, paragraphs, and pages, the reader is strongly encouraged to look for all of the manifestations of this statement on words about words. Hopefully these brief preliminary statements provide an enticement to more serious considerations of this phenomenon.

As a further directive note, my discussion broadly tracks the development of modes of reflection within a general phenomenology of *discourse.* To achieve my goals as well as gain further conceptual clarity, this article is divided into two main sections: The first section, entitled, 'The prereflective/reflective distinction', presents a general overview of how the concept of reflection developed within contemporary phenomenology. Because conscious acts of reflection have received an abundance of systematic phenomenological investigation, this area of research provides excellent ground for clearly spelling out how we prereflectively talk, as well as how we consciously reflect upon talk. Thus, in section one, I begin with a review of the character of prereflective talk and further offer concepts which account for conscious reflection toward talk. The second section, '"Speech:" Reflection with and from', begins by reviewing two of Jakobson's language functions, and then formally introduces the notion of 'about talk', showing how these phenomena both advance and challenge the various phenomenological distinctions between reflection and prereflection. I thus generally discuss how this capacity for reflection via 'about talk' provides the ground for reflection, not simply on words or messages, but more generally, on discourse. The second section also gives consideration to the general ways that human relationships are coordinated, organized, and ultimately complicated (though not any pejorative sense) by 'about talk' words employed as empty intentions. In the end, this brief exploration into talk-reflexivity is a small beginning, but is hopefully a heuristic one.

The prereflective/reflective distinction

The distinction between prereflection and reflection is central to a great deal of phenomenological investigation, and yet, simply explaining and pointing out the actual phenomena-in-progress remains exceedingly difficult. The most constant obstacle is that *I* cannot catch myself in a prereflective moment. This is always so because if *I* am posited as present then it is already a reflective moment, (i.e., self-positional). Hence, there

is a great difficulty in simply (that is, consciously and explicitly) laying bare one's prereflective engagements. Consider, for example, acts of reading where one is engrossed in a vividly descriptive novel. Then, suddenly and spontaneously the thought appears: 'This is a great book that *I* am reading'. For the duration of this thought, reading itself is discontinued, and I am thetically positing myself as 'there along with' the reading; there is an I in addition to the reading, as opposed to simply consciousness (of) reading (Sartre, 1993). It even seems to be the case that this sense of 'I-ness' must be lost in order to resume the reading. Indeed, it appears that the presence of the I precludes the act of reading, whereas, when one is 'lost in a book' it is surely the 'I' which we are speaking of (i.e., the 'I' is lost, or nowhere to be found). Even though every attempt to catch myself in prereflective moments fails, I can still, upon examining retentional memory, reveal moments when there was only 'reading' and not the additional positing of 'I' along with the reading. It is, ultimately, these types of issues that need further exploration.

The phenomena of reflection have been addressed by numerous distinctions within the writings of many thinkers. Consider Descartes's famous procedure of methodological doubt, and how reflection served in this idealist quest for clear and distinct ideas. This distinction also can be seen in Husserl's (1993) separating the 'natural attitude' from the various 'phenomenological reductions'. The early Heidegger not only explicitly discusses the critical role of reflection (1985: 90–101), but more generally, the prereflective/reflective distinction is embodied throughout *Being and Time* (1962) as between the manner in which signs implicitly operate in their readiness-to-hand, and the manner in which they become *explicitly* present-at-hand during moments of assertion or breakdown (cf. 1962: 257–269; also see Anton in press). Merleau-Ponty (1962) also suggests an important distinction between what he calls pre-thetic or 'operative intentionality' and the 'intentionality of judgment' or thetic intentionality. As he suggests, 'We found beneath the intentionality of acts, or thetic intentionality, another kind which is the condition of the former's possibility: namely an operative intentionality already at work before any positing or any judgment' (1962: 429). In Dewey's *Experience and Nature* (1988) as well as other texts, we can find the prereflective/reflective distinction embodied in his comparison between simply enduring or undergoing something and knowing something about that something. Likewise, this distinction can be found in Dewey's (1922) notions of 'knowing-about' and 'knowing-how', respectively. Ricoeur (1967) too well argues for a distinction between participation and distanciation, noting a critical need to accommodate for the insights of both Wittgenstein (i.e., sign *in use*) and Husserl (i.e., sign *as sign*). For the present purposes and

for the sake of brevity and clarity, I shall now further examine how this distinction is articulated in the writings of Sartre, Leder, and Schrag. Also, I give explicit attention to how this very complicated set of phenomena is related to our speech and our conscious reflection on it.

Sartre

We begin, as Sartre (1956) does, with Descartes's dictum: *Cogito ergo sum*; 'I think, therefore I am'. This famous statement was the point of departure for a great deal of modern philosophical thinking. By giving primacy to thematic reflection, Descartes sought to provide an Archimedean point, a foundation through which philosophy could be rigorously systematized. Unfortunately, an implication of his claim was that in order to *be*, (e.g., as an existing human), I must reflectively posit (be explicitly aware of) myself as being. It is against this primacy of self-reflection that Sartre's critique in *Being and Nothingness* (1956) takes its departure. Sartre claims that the cogito of Descartes is a reflective cogito (i.e., thetic or self-positional) and further that such a positional consciousness must be grounded more primarily in a prereflective (or pre-thetic) cogito. When engaged in some involving activity, reading, for example, I often am not explicitly and thematically aware of myself as engaged in the activity but am aware simply of the activity. There is not, at these moments, both an awareness of the world and an awareness of one's awareness of the world. Thus, although reflection is naturally given to the human condition, we nonetheless routinely attend to objects and events without reflectively positing ourselves as aware of ourselves attending to them.

We could argue then, as Sartre (1956: 100) does, that all consciousness is self-consciousness (i.e., operative), even though not all consciousness posits an accompanying ego (i.e., thetic). That is, the claim that all consciousness is self-consciousness refers to the fact of 'mineness' or 'intimacy' to one's experiences, but this does *not* imply that all consciousness must explicitly posit an 'I' in addition to that which consciousness intends (also see Gurwitsch 1966: 287–300). The very nature of consciousness, argues Sartre, is such that to be and to know itself are one and the same, and to help facilitate the unity of this distinction, he uses parentheses around the word 'of' when he describes a pre-thetic consciousness (of) oneself being aware of something.

But, and this should be made clear, Sartre does not deny the fact of thetic positionality. He simply wishes to show how the prereflective cogito is the ground from which the reflective cogito emerges. It is thus the *primacy* that Descartes gives to reflection which Sartre challenges, not the

fact that reflection is indigenous to human existence. Said otherwise, although the human condition is given the possibility of critical self-reflection, humans are not continuously engaged in self-reflection (i.e., thetic/positional self-consciousness).

Although the present discussion of Sartre (1956) has been mainly concerned with the nature of consciousness, we might further appropriate his concepts for their serviceability in a theory of human symbolism. Just as consciousness is such that it always intends some *meant* object, so symbols operate by being toward something else. Further, just as we can be conscious of the world without being conscious of our being conscious of the world, so we can use symbols which reveal and demarcate aspects of the world without making specific or explicit reference to the symbols used in the revealing and demarcating. As Sartre (1956) suggests, 'the sign is that which is surpassed toward meaning, that which is neglected for the sake of meaning, that which is never apprehended for itself, that beyond which the look is perpetually directed' (1956: 330). Just as I may thetically posit myself in addition to an awareness of the world, so I may make explicit reference to the symbols themselves in addition to what they mean (e.g., I may simply repeat something already said, holding it in retentional memory in the attempt to reflect upon it). The implications for our study of speech about speech are that although we can, and often do, become explicitly aware of our speech as an object of consciousness, Sartre's point might be taken to suggest that we, more commonly, spontaneously deal with words prereflectively (i.e., we are not positing 'words' as such in addition to the meanings they convey).

Leder

I now turn attention to the way the reflective/prereflective distinction is taken up in Drew Leder's (1990) provocative work, *The Absent Body*. Leder discusses the human body's sensorimotor powers as a network of intentional (i.e., ecstatically directional) structures. My senses, as intentional arcs, are always directed away from themselves and out toward the world, accomplishing and revealing various world profiles. These intentional arcs are characterized by what Leder (1990), using Polanyi's terms of 'from-to', calls a *from* pole and a *to* pole; each sense attends away *from* itself and out *to* the different profiles of the world. In their everyday functioning my senses do not explicitly or thematically posit themselves; they do not draw attention to themselves. Rather, they 'focally disappear' (1990: 26) so that they can be the revealing presence of some aspect of the world. Thus, the senses, according to Leder, routinely presence what

they themselves are not while simultaneously neglecting or forgetting themselves. This concept can be furthermore fruitfully traced to Merleau-Ponty's discussion of 'aseity' and 'ipseity'. He (1962: 233) suggests that 'The aseity of the thing, its unchallengeable presence and the perpetual absence into which it withdraws, are two inseparable aspects of transcendence', whereas the 'ipseity' of the thing refers to the unity of the perceived object's horizons. And so, the fullness and unending depth of our world is continuously proved because the ipseity is ultimately 'never *reached*'.

The body's prereflective propensity (i.e., that the body itself is commonly neglected for the sake of the world's presence), can be further unpacked by considering cases of engrossment. For example, my eyes are commonly looked past and forgotten as I am prereflectively absorbed into a beautiful sunset. These cases might be characterized not by saying, '*I* was looking at a sunset' but rather 'there is a sunset'. But this bodily 'disappearance' for the sake of the world's presence should not be taken as a diminishment to our body's capacity to reflect upon itself. The body has extended powers to objectify itself for the sake of thematic analysis. Because it is a *network* of intentional arcs, I can attend *to* one sense *from* another: I can use one hand to touch the other, thereby reflectively attending *to* what I had been attending *from*. Returning to the example of the sunset: 'mindlessly absorbed' into the view, I suddenly pull back from immersion, coming back to myself as I believe I see a bizarre object in the sky. Blinking several times and then rubbing my eyes, I give critical reflection *to* what I had previously been attending *from*. Therefore, each sense attends away from itself, and so, the *from* pole, by which we attend to a given profiles of the world at any given moment, may be shifted. So, what is now attended *to* can be that which was previously attended *from*.

In discussing the primacy of prereflection to the body's intentional structures (i.e., their routine and 'normal' disappearance), Leder further argues that moments of breakdown or dysfunction bring that which was previously absent into explicit consideration. That is, a bodily sense draws explicit attention to itself in moments of 'intentional' failure. For example, difficulties with my vision may lead my eyes to actually see themselves or 'spots' of themselves in their visual fields; ears may ring when something is wrong with their functioning. Here reflection is explicitly motivated by or the product of disruptions in normal, 'transparent', functioning, and this refers to what Leder has aptly called 'dys-appearance' (1990: 69–99).

Leder's insights to the lived body also may be fruitfully applied to the phenomena of human symbolism. Thus, speech too can be understood as one of the body's intentional structures, one of the ecstatical arcs by which Being-in-the-world is constituted and managed (Leder 1990; Anton 1997). Speech is an intentional structure; we routinely and commonly attend not

to speech but simply *from* it. That is, when we listen with one another in our everyday encounters, we routinely listen *from* our speech *to* the thought so intended. Inversely, when a foreign tongue is used, a language we are unable to transcend, we explicitly attend *to* the speech itself. In Leder's terminology, moments of breakdown manifest speech's 'dys-appearance'.

Reconsider the case of reading a novel: I may be engrossed in the story, simply attending *from* the sentences to the story, but then, a misspelled word, a foreign word, or perhaps a too-recondite one appears. Now, I consciously and explicitly reflect *to* the word (i.e., I experience an opacity which was previously absent). Consider, as a further example, acts of proofreading. Such activity exemplifies the attempt to ride back-and-forth between attending *from* the words and attending *to* them. Further, overlooked errors might be a testament of the propensity of simply looking *from* them, in which case the words themselves pass through explicit awareness (i.e., they 'disappear'). Speech, then, is routinely an absent body, an intentional arc which disappears for the sake of the meaning so intended.

Schrag

My final discussion of the prereflective/reflective distinction turns to the work of Calvin O. Schrag. In his landmark *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity*, (1986) Schrag describes 'communicative praxis', which, in addition to giving tandem regard to discourse and action, incorporates a distinction between what he calls 'expressive meaning' and 'signitive meaning'. I shall focus specifically upon Schrag's discussion of discourse, arguing that his 'expressive meaning' broadly refers to speech in its concrete and prereflective accomplishment, while his term, 'signitive meaning', refers to the idealities of reflection upon speech already accomplished.

The term expression is traditionally understood as a vehicle for rendering external what was previously internal. Said most simply, speech is commonly depicted as a garment for clothing inner thought (cf. Schrag 1969). To counter these overly simplistic notions, Schrag (1986) reveals how speech, as expressive meaning, is a prereflective (i.e., preobjective and presubjective) layer of communicative praxis whereby the subject is concretely stitched (absorbed) into the texture of everyday life. This means that expression is not, as the Cartesian or Husserlian would have it, the employment of words to signify something like interior mental contents or states. As Schrag argues,

> it is at this juncture that the distinction between Heidegger's notion of *Aufzeigen* and Husserl's notion of *Anzeigen* becomes instructive. Husserlian *Anzeigen* is an

> indicating, a picking out, a pointing to a signified content somehow present at hand ... Heidegger's notion of *Aufzeigen*, on the other hand, is a showing and letting be seen, not within the epistemological/semiotic matrix of representation and signification but rather within the context of for-having (*Vorhabe*) that comports a praxis-oriented intentionality ensconced in the practical projects of *Dasein*. (1994: 164)

Thus, expressive meaning refers to the layers of participations whereby individuals act and are inscribed into their world involvements. It is a mode of pre-predicative understanding which antedates the explicit and reflective division between speech and thought as well as the distinction between sign and meaning. This also implies that expression is always etched into a complex and ongoing social and historical unfolding wherein individual intentions within acts of speech are overflowing with tacit and repressed meanings. As such, expression is always already situated in a horizon including others and historically sedimented institutions. For these reasons Schrag argues that 'Expressive action should thus not be restricted to the deliverance of meaning through conscious motivation and reflective, deliberate acts' (1986: 39). In general, Schrag's notion of 'expressive meaning' refers to prereflective operations which precede the division of inner and outer and which further always operate against a largely taken-for-granted background of sedimented myths, meanings, and practices. Moreover, it must be remembered that the surplus of sedimented meanings which can and does come into play both explicitly and implicitly within a given concrete expression is, prereflectively, independent of an individual's reflective and deliberate intentions.

In addition to this layer of 'expressive meaning', Schrag, drawing mainly off of Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty, accounts for the moment of reflection in which the implicating participation of expressive speech is set off at a distance, becoming a theme for analysis and explanation. To account for this, Schrag discusses 'signitive meaning', referring specifically to the manner in which expressive meaning can be folded-over on itself. Speech, in its mode as signitive meaning, thus offers a critical disengagement whereby expressed meaning is objectified and further detailed in thematic analysis. In fact, it is due to signitive meaning (i.e., meaning rendered through thetic intentionality) that we can ascertain certain expressive actions as somehow the *same* as others. Schrag writes:

> We have encountered the requirement to move beyond expressive meaning so as to provide a posture of critical understanding and reflective assessment of the facticity of our involvement. This move beyond expressive meaning we have named the move to meaning in the mode of signification, attended by a new emphasis on the hermeneutical functioning of the 'sign' as a mediator between the retentionality and protentionality of historical experience. The mantle of

idealities in signitive meaning allows for the repeatability of meanings that issue from expressive discourse and action and in turn legitimates talk of their sameness within the history of communicative praxis. (1986: 67)

In general, it is only in reflection that we have both meaning and messages. For example, someone can say something I have already said, and we can both know this. Signitive meaning thus refers to a reflective distanciation toward expressive meaning which, in making the sign itself thematically present, offers the ground upon which questions of whether or not a given expression is 'the same' as others can be made.

Giving due space for signitive meaning (e.g., analytical predications), Schrag ultimately locates the field of ideality and the means of distanciation as emergent from pre-theoretical and practical involvements, rather than from eternal noemata or transcendental essences. He writes, 'Through distanciation expressive meaning slides into signitive meaning as communicative praxis folds over, becomes reflexive, in such a way that a repeatability of sense is occasioned' (1986: 72). Thus, Schrag's project is to be viewed as a holistic space of communicative praxis in which both 'expressive meaning' and 'signitive meaning' are twin moments (1986: 54). By giving recognition to speech as not only a moment of concrete participation but also as a theoretical act of reflection upon such practical engrossment, Schrag (1986) accounts for both meaning expressed and meaning signified.

Summary

What emerges across the phenomenology literature is a distinction between speech when it operates implicitly and speech when it itself is an explicit object of reflection. First, we find manners in which speech is employed without giving any direct or explicit regard to itself.[4] Indeed, it is often the case that we are expressively speaking to ourselves and yet this fact passes transparently by our attention; we simply attend *from* the speech to that which it makes possible (Anton 1995). We routinely dwell in the meaning horizon provided by and through speech without in any way attending *to* the words themselves; they routinely undergo a 'disappearance' during the unfolding accomplishment of 'expressive meaning'.

Second, there are instances when we consciously and directly attend *to* our words. Moreover, words themselves commonly become explicitly reflected upon in two different sets or types of circumstances: On the one hand, they are reflected upon explicitly in moments of communicative

breakdown or dys-function (i.e., in misspellings, mispronunciation, or perhaps the employment of foreign words, words too unfamiliar, or words too recondite). On the other hand, words themselves are explicitly reflected upon during moments of signification. That is, when speakers offer what is to pass as an 'assertion', the words themselves become thematically present-at-hand, allowing the statement to be explicitly compared to the state-of-affairs about which it was made (Heidegger 1962). Therefore, in addition to simply attending *from* speech, we can and often do consciously attend *to* it, thereby making it appear as an absence of absence (e.g., in an assertion), or as a dys-appearance (e.g., in a communicative dysfunction).

But, there is yet a third possibility, a *transversal* capacity to be both from and to at the same time. Words and phrases such as '"words" and "phrases"' can be both on the *from* side of speech's intentional arc yet can also enable us to reflect upon speech, language, and discourse. Said otherwise, discourse itself can be reflected upon without stepping outside of a message's prereflective operations. It is these phenomena that need further elucidation.

'Speech:' Reflection with and from

In order to ease the transition from the phenomenological notions of reflection to the various modes of reflection by and through discourse, I need to briefly review Holenstein's (1976) classic treatment of Roman Jakobson's framework for understanding different 'language functions'. Given present purposes, I shall limit my discussion to only two different language functions, and shall also employ Holenstein's technical terms of 'message' and 'code' (see Lanigan's [1992: 229–236] provocative summary and critical appropriations of some of Jakobson's key concepts). Although varying in degrees of co-presence and dominance, each language function refers to a different manner that messages can fulfill themselves by making explicit reference to the linguistic (verbal) order.

First, the *phatic function* refers to 'those linguistic messages whose primary purpose lies in establishing, prolonging, checking out, confirming, or dis-continuing the communication' (Holenstein 1976: 155). Most generally, this function addresses and accommodates for the physical and psychological 'contact' between the interactants. Thus, the phatic function basically refers to messages whose content addresses the fact of discourse itself, and is perhaps exemplified in 'hmm' and other means of prolonging communication or maintaining open communication lines.

Common examples of messages serving the 'phatic function' arise in the spontaneous regulation of everyday conversation. A speaker in these cases can reflect upon the flow of conversation itself, turning it into part

of the discussion. Consider how the flow of conversation can abruptly change tone and direction as a conversational partner states, 'What?' or perhaps, 'I don't follow you'. Moreover, speakers, given the centrifugal thrust of speech (parole), can construct an indefinite number of messages which could be employed to reflect upon the conversation. For example, 'What's that?'; 'A bit louder please'; 'Come again?'; 'One more time'; 'I didn't get that'; and even 'hun?' Thus, speakers can govern and regulate the conversation by taking a second-level step and reflectively producing messages to attend to others' messages. Such reflection by and with messages in communication facilitates the clarification, re-direction, and ultimately the reinterpretation, of previous messages.

Second, the *metalinguistic function* specifically denotes the presence of a *metalanguage* and thus refers to 'discourse about entities of a linguistic nature' (1976: 159). Thus most generally, I must stress, as Holenstein states, 'The fundament of language corresponding to the metalinguistic function is the code' (1976: 160), which basically implies that metalanguage always already refers to language *as language*. This function is most often associated with the sciences, for example, in their maintaining a vigilance over the distinction between 'object language' and 'metalanguage'. Hence, in scientific discourse we always need to carefully define key terms, that is, to use messages to refer to the code (e.g., '*Pup* means a young dog' [1976: 163]). But the metalinguistic function should not be reduced to its strictly definitional applications in scientific discourse. Indeed, this function runs in and throughout everyday discourse. Holenstein moreover suggests that 'not all references of language to language itself, are references of the message to the code. The message and the code can each function both as an object to (referent) and as an object used (sign)' (1976: 162). Furthermore, unpacking two types of metalinguistic reference, Holenstein discusses four possible relationships: two relations of circularity (i.e., message referring to message, or code referring to code), and two relations of overlapping (i.e., message referring to code, or code referring to message).

Consider the capacity to use messages in overlapping references to codes. If we could not, in any way, refer to our codes (langue), we, in trying to change (or fix) the meaning of a given 'word', would simply add more meaning, and more, and then more, *ad infinitum.* Yet, this would not change (or fix) the meaning of the 'word', for that would beg the question! Because we can make the code itself thematically 'visible' by way of code-reflective messages, we can offer *definitional* messages. Moreover, to offer messages about our codes, we must, on one level or another, know that the word (i.e., code) is not the thing it represents (i.e., is not its referent or 'context'). And, to know that the word is not the thing is to loosen its connection, its mythical bond, to that which it 'represents'

(cf. Bakhtin 1981). Therefore, it is the same capacity which allows us to define the meaning of a given 'word' that also enables a given 'word' to be transcended by a plurality of meanings.

Before finally advancing to the category of 'about talk' words, I also need to touch upon the use and operation of quotation marks. Any time persons use quotation marks, they are making explicit reference to a message. That is, when I claim that 'so and so goes "..."', I introduce a reflection upon the fact of the message. By using quotation marks as a 'circular reference' of message to message (Holenstein 1976: 162), I can note something that was said by someone other than me (although I am saying 'it' now). Hence, a wide range for reflection upon communicational content (message or code) is given through the use of quotation marks. Indeed, it would be foolish to deny that we can employ our reflective abilities without the actual use of any 'about talk' words (as is demonstrated widely in the phenomenology literature and in both of Holenstein's functions). Still, this is not yet the specific case of 'about talk', and thus, the specifically discourse-reflexive nature of speech employing 'about talk' words still warrants special consideration.

'About talk'

In his highly intriguing article, 'What are the signs of what?', Burke (1966: 359–380) presents four terministic pyramids pertaining to the realms of: natural order, verbal order, sociopolitical order, and the supernatural order. He states that the verbal order includes, 'words for the verbal realm itself, the sensation of grammar, rhetoric, poetics, logic, dialectic, philology, etymology, semantics, symbolism, etc.' (1966: 374), and then goes on to say,

> For our purposes, from the standpoint of sheer words, the second (or linguistic) pyramid is foremost among the equals. For though all four pyramids are orders of words, this one is an order of words about words. And of all situations having to do with language, the only time when something can be discussed wholly in terms of itself, is when we are using words about words. (1966: 375)

This is, unfortunately, the extent of his comments. Although quite brief, they still do lead us in provocative directions. Burke's erudite statements become clearer if we re-consider the fact that in order to talk about talk, one would, *de facto*, have to know that the word is not the thing. Yet, and this is most ironic, when one is talking about talk the word is the thing (e.g., in an overlapping reference of message to code). More will be

said on this point as our exploration continues, but most generally, Burke's thinking directs our attention to the self-referential capacities given to the codes themselves. That is, he specifically addresses not cases of persons directly and consciously attending *to* their messages or their codes, but of language itself having specific words which enable us to speak about and refer to the verbal order (discourse). He thus turns our attention to *metalanguage* as such within everyday discourse.

Consider the distinction between the following two cases: Rebutting an insult, someone retorts with an even stronger insult, and then further trails it up with: Case #1 'I didn't mean *that*' or Case #2 'I didn't mean what I *said*'. These two messages can in fact be referring to the same speech event, but more specifically, they are distinct in that the latter sentence contains code (i.e., metalanguage) that explicitly announces the fact of the verbal order (e.g., the previous insult). Case #1 is a reflection to messages granted mainly by diachronic relations, that is, by a localized act of speech production. Sentence #2, on the other hand, accomplishes the reflection by producing a message that draws off of specific resources in the linguistic code, specifically employing the 'about talk' word '*said*'. Perhaps a brief, heuristic, and clearly inexhaustive list of those words in English (i.e., metalanguage) which could be easily recognized as 'about talk' might be useful:

Definitions, terminology, messages, language, sentences, quotations, words, secrets, symbols, talk, comments, communication, discussion, descriptions, paragraphs, remarks, insults, questions, answers, said, commands, speak, say, spoke, whisper, lies, assertions, pledges, terms, promises, requests, poems, stories, fables, diction, patios, discusses, phrases, linguistic, parole, langue, expressions, statements, prevarication, rebuttals, threats, disquisitions, truths, claims, names, retorts, orate, oratory, repartee, banter, joke, synonym, homonym, antonyms, nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, conjunctions, articles, gerunds, told, tell, utterances, contracts, books, vow, footnotes, news, address, speech, tract, 'etc'.

It can be seen that all of these words, by their paradigmatic relations, refer to the fact of the verbal order (i.e., discourse). Once taken within concrete embodied acts of speaking (i.e., parole), this type of word enables a reflection not only to messages, as displayed in case #2. But moreover, it offers the possibilities for 'empty reflection' upon discourse.

'About talk' as empty intentions

'About talk' words are a fleshy embodiment of discourse-reflection stitched into the prereflective practices of everyday communication. But how can it

be said, the reader might ask, that 'about talk' can be a kind of reflection if someone is not thematically attending *to* either the message or the code? That is, how can speech pre-thetically reflect upon discourse? Someone asking this line of questioning might even appeal to Sartre's suggestion that we can say of both the body and of language that 'Either it is a thing among other things, or else it is that by which things are revealed to me. But it can not be both at the same time' (1956: 304). Can it be the case that 'about talk' words, within discourse-reflexive messages, are not, first and foremost, themselves reflected upon (i.e., attended *to*)? To enter this issue, let us first quickly compare our brief phenomenological review with our brief review of Holenstein's observations by considering Hofstadter's playful and paradoxical sentence: 'Thit sentence is not self-referential because "thit" is not a word' (1985: 12). In that sentence, the word(s) which were incorrectly spelled may have, to use Leder's terminology, 'dys-appeared', and hence, they may have become explicitly present as attention was directed *to* them.[5] Yet, in that same sentence the words 'sentence' and 'word', both instances of 'about talk', may not have been likewise explicitly attended *to*, but rather, they more likely remained on the *from* side of the message's intentional arc. Hence, taken within the intentional arc of *messages* (i.e., diachronic relations), 'about talk' *words* (i.e., synchronic relations) are prereflectively operative and yet also enable a form of reflection on *discourse*. It is these phenomena that I now attempt to further elucidate.

When we are attending *from* a particular 'about talk' word within a discourse-reflexive message, the reader might ask, what is it, *if not a message or code*, that is intended? That is, what is it we attend *to* when we attend *from* an instance of 'about talk' in our speech? As to those questions, 'about talk' often does not *say*. Said simply, 'about talk' words, functioning within speech practices, mainly operate by keeping their intended objects empty. Ricoeur well notes this where he states, 'the sign as sign presupposes the break with life, activity, and nature which Husserl has symbolized in the reduction and which is represented in each sign by its emptiness, or its negative relation to reality' (1967: 216). Thus, within a message's intentional arc, it is the emptiness of such words that enables a form of reflection on discourse. We might phrase the manner this way: Just as reflection *to* words is a way of consciously *negating* the routine and transparent flight *from* them *to* their intended meaning, so likewise, 'about talk' can be a way of communicatively *negating* the flight toward a word's intended meaning by remaining basically empty (i.e., as of yet unfulfilled).

Said in phenomenological terms, 'about talk' words may operate communicatively as 'empty intentions', their emptiness allowing for the

apprehension of a 'meaning potential'. Thus, 'about talk' words often are used not merely to reflectively *attend to* an actual communication content, either code or message. Rather, 'about talk' words are commonly used to refer to messages without those messages having to be actually known or otherwise elaborated. For example, if I tell you that 'Someone said something about you', you are aware of a meaning potential which could be defined and concretized with an elaboration of the specific details of what the other person actually said. Or I may use a more *orienting* 'about talk' word, (i.e., one which remains empty yet points to the horizon of its own fulfillment): I tell you: 'Someone lied about you', or perhaps, 'I heard someone praise you'. Here again, although orienting you toward the horizon of possible further details, you still remain with only a 'yet-to-be-elaborated' general meaning potential. In general then, 'about talk' words, within acts of speech, can easily bespeak a 'meaning potential' by maintaining themselves as 'contentless' or 'empty' intentionalities.

Note also that 'about talk' words, as components of *language*, also allow us to say what another person has said without we ourselves being taken as the sponsor for the particular message stated. Said otherwise, I can have my message spoken by another person, and yet, through the use of 'about talk' that other person can make clear that it was originally someone else's. Inversely, if one does not use any 'about talk' it is exceedingly difficult to refer to what another person has said without assuming responsibility as the original 'principal' (cf. Goffman's distinctions among 'animator', 'author', and 'principal' [1981: 226]). Take the simple message: 'Yolanda said she likes you'. Try to convey the meaning of that sentence without using an 'about talk' word. You might attempt by simply saying, 'I believe Yolanda likes you', or perhaps, 'I have the evidence that Yolanda likes you'. But then you might be asked as to how you know, to which you could not respond, 'she said so', for that would defeat the attempt. Indeed, how would such a feat be accomplished? This is not to imply that there are not also many diverse manners in which we can and do 'frame' and contextualize other's voices in our own, as the works of Bakhtin (1981), Bateson (1972), and Goffman (1974) generously show (e.g., embodied framing devices such as gestures, facial comportments, and intonation modulations within acts of mimicry, lampooning, and imitations, etc.). And yet still, most often, recourse is eventually made to 'about talk' (e.g., what another person 'said'). Hence, 'about talk' words should be understood as operating in conjunction with, rather than in opposition to, such embodied framing devices.

Within discourse (i.e., language modified by the intervening of parole) speakers can refer, not simply to messages nor codes but also, to those others whose messages are now being repeated (or not). Thus, this kind

of reflection on the verbal order already takes-for-granted the ability to refer to others' messages in an empty way. That is, this ability to use 'about talk' words as empty intentions functions communicatively by opening up our ability to specify and negotiate concrete relations between people. By being able to regulate where and when who says what to whom as well as noting to whom one is not to tell what, we can more explicitly manage particular relationships between individuals. Consider some simple and common examples:

Case One. A man approaches a boy who is riding a bicycle, and he roughly whispers, 'Hello. What's your name?' The boy, turning and riding away, states, 'I am not supposed to talk to strangers'. First, the word 'name' in this case illustrates the manner in which the 'about talk' word within this message is employed as an empty intention. In particular, the word 'name' is used to inquire about another word which appears, as of yet, unknown. Indeed, the practical use of 'about talk' is apparent: the man would not need to ask for it if he already knew the name, and yet, he can still, via 'about talk', reflect upon it, referring to it, without knowing what 'it' is. Second, the boy's rebuttal, that he is 'not supposed to talk to strangers', is both a way of saying that he is, in saying this, not really saying anything substantial as well as a way of remarking on that fact that there is much more still unsaid which will remain so. Thus, the boy is able to emptily refer to many other unsaid things (i.e., emptily reflect upon the fact of discourse) and to the fact that information is to be given only in accordance with 'proper relation' to the inquiring other.

Case Two. One man approaches another and asks, 'What did your wife say?' The other man states in return, 'Why should I tell you?' This case, perhaps more clearly than Case One, illustrates the way in which 'about talk' allows one to emptily reflect upon other messages unknown to one person and unspecified by the other. That is, 'about talk' here enables someone to emptily refer to another person's messages, acknowledging them and yet leaving them basically concealed. This case also suggests that such empty intentions fundamentally allow interactants to more clearly see, or even to finely articulate relationships according to, who has what level of access to what kind of information.

Case Three. Two women approach each other in a public building. The first one quietly asks, 'Is it safe for us to talk?' Here, it is obvious that the two are already talking, and so one might suggest that this message serves basically nothing more than a phatic function. And yet, by referring to further talk, specifically information which is for some persons and not

for others, speakers can maximize the particular 'for-whomness' of spoken (face-to-face) discourse. In each of these cases people can produce messages which draw upon 'about talk' words to reflect upon what is either still to be said or not to be said, all without having to say anything more at the moment.

To explore all of the diverse variations on this most incredible feature is beyond the scope of the present article, and yet, I can present perhaps one final example to illustrate how 'about talk' words enable us to construct relational particularities, and how they do so by operating as empty intentions (i.e., recognized meaning potentials). Allow me to construct a scenario to illustrate what is at issue here. As you read the following case, closely attend both to the way tensions are structured in accordance with employed 'about talk' words and to the extreme difficulty of articulating an equally comprehensible account without using any such discourse-reflective words (i.e., given only the localized reflection of parole).

I'll never forget when Rita first told me what Lenny had said. I also remember her warning me, saying that it was essential that I not tell anyone, especially Svene, at least until Lenny gave his statements to the public. To you, the reader who is imagining this case, keeping a secret such as this may not sound very difficult. I too, in fact, at first thought it would be easy to avoid telling what I had heard. But as more people questioned me, I welled with the desire to speak out with complete indifference to anyone who was listening. And yet, I must have been kidding myself, for I would have spoken out if I thought my words would circulate to all but Svene ...

... But then and by complete accident, during my weekly conversation with Eptuul, I said more than I should have. That's right, I hinted. Not only that, some unmentionables slipped right out. I stood dazed, listening in disbelief to their heavy echo. In a panic I immediately began to retell everything, going all the way back to the beginning. Starting there, I rapidly mixed loose lies and blurry recollections with a fair sprinkle of just enough half-truths. My tale left us both pretty confused. Yet I still suspected that too much was said, and so I waited. I don't know what Eptuul then told to Rita, but it must have gotten around because right now Svene is out looking for Lenny. I tell you this, dear reader, only because Svene came over to my lunch table, and he told me himself.

This brief hypothetical case attempts to illustrate how the complexity of relationships may be articulated through the use of 'about talk' words. We here have a dense collection of 'about talk' words all used to imply and deal with an incredibly complex network of varying personal relationships. And, we never needed to have the original information regarding the actual 'content' of what was first said: What did Rita tell me?

That is, what, specifically, was I supposed to keep from telling? Said still otherwise, what did I hint to Eptuul? These phenomena can be summed up by suggesting that 'about talk' words, within various acts of speech, have a remarkable capacity as empty intentions. Therefore, the ability to talk about talk, without saying what will (or will not) be said, fundamentally allows for the concrete instantiation of relational particularity.

Closing

Phenomenology has taught us that any word, any word at all, can be made an object for reflective consciousness, and so, I can, in a conscious act of reflection, *take* any sign *as a sign.* This implies that 'about talk' words, too, *can be* taken up in conscious and thematic reflection (i.e., can be explicitly attended *to* as objects of consciousness). Nevertheless, we also found that 'about talk' words, as always already metalinguistic, can remain prereflectively (i.e., pre-thetically) operative within the intentional arc of discourse-reflexive speech. That is, 'about talk' words are — more often than not — prereflective empty intentions which we attend *from* within the intentionality of spoken messages. Therefore, all of those words (langue) which are members of the category of 'about talk' contain within their very sedimentation a reference to the fact of the verbal order, and yet, within their common implementation within messages (parole), that reference mostly remains empty or unfulfilled. We can, therefore, say not only such things as '*Pup* means a young dog' (Holenstein 1976: 163), but even more provocatively, we can produce messages such as, 'I already said I can't tell you'. It is in all of these fundamental differences between signals and symbols that we find the functioning of 'about talk' words most fully elaborated. It is also here that we uncover the prowess of reflexivity not simply in an individual's 'conscious acts of reflection', but more globally and diffusely, within our everyday and prereflective communicative practices.

Notes

1. I wish to thank William L. McBride, Jacqueline M. Martinez, and an anonymous reviewer for their suggestive and useful comments and criticisms.
2. Although well beyond the scope of the present article, two noted scholars have offered challenges to the claim that self-reflection is unique to humans. Specifically, the works of Gregory Bateson (1972) and Douglas Hofstadter (1985) attempt to demonstrate that this capacity of self-reflexivity is indigenous to animal play and to artificial intelligence, respectively. Clearly Bateson's research on framing or metacommunication within

organic symbolic exchanges has done a great service. Also Hofstadter goes so far as to suggest, 'Self-reference is ubiquitous. It happens every time anyone says "I" or "me" or "word" or "speak" or "mouth". It happens every time a newspaper prints a story about reporters, every time someone writes a book about writing, designs a book about book design, makes a movie about movies, or writes an article about self-reference. Many systems have the capability to represent or refer to themselves somehow, to designate themselves (or elements of themselves) within the system of their own symbolism. Whenever this happens, it is an instance of self-reference' (1985: 7).

3. Note that in the present sentence the words 'these' and 'they' can be understood as illustrating the spontaneous development of talk about talk generated in the most localized acts of speaking (parole). For example, in the present case, 'these', and 'they' make explicit reference to the fact of the present 'statements', and yet, they themselves (i.e., the words 'these' and 'they') are not, strictly speaking, instances of 'about talk'.
4. The notion of prereflective speech engagements is still considerably distinct from Jakobson's discussion of 'object language' (Holenstein 1976: 159). Specifically, we are here referring not to the reflective structure of language toward itself, nor even to the ability to make messages about messages, but rather, are referring to the distinction between conscious acts of positing speech *as such* and the routine operations of pre-thetic speech operations.
5. It may well be the case that all written words began as primitive forms of 'about talk' in the sense that writing employs speech via a method of distanciation (Ricoeur 1967; Schrag 1986). Thus, even though it is the case that we can and often do read written texts in a pre-reflective, transparent, or absorptive manner, there is another sense in which a written text is always already a form of reflection on speech.

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