



## ***Giving Them A Voice: A Soliloquy***

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### ***I. Chapter***

Linguists (others too) are often considered people doing good work because they are giving others a voice. Therefore, they often receive such encouraging replies as “Carry on with the good work!”, or “How admirable that you are giving them a voice.” This sounds really very nice, polite also, and somehow very appreciative. This is good work, not work one ever becomes estranged from. Because it involves us, our bodies and minds (involves the whole of us), this is us, and we might be inclined to think that this is what matters.

Yet, I wonder: what is this intended to mean? After all, what voice is there to give? Does one have a voice that one can give to another person? And what does this sound like?

Does the person to whom I give my voice sound like me then? Or, wait, it is not one person, it is them. I give my voice to them, don't I, and then there will be many people who will all sound like me, won't they, and the idea of an entire group of people, or maybe the masses, all sounding like me is a bit frightening. An echo, multiplied and out of control. This is not some kind of reflection, but an indefinite number of others to whom I gave my voice, and who may not even wish to return it to me, like money easily borrowed and never returned, or an umbrella, or a heart (Pasolini said *non aver paura di avere un cuore* [I owe this to my colleague Ingo Warnke], and he might have liked to say the same about a voice). So, just as the things that one gives away are afterwards used in all kinds of ways and in all kinds of places, so might a voice be treated in the same way. And like a stolen bicycle/heart/umbrella, it might be found somewhere, quite unexpectedly, and in bad shape. Or in a good shape.

Imagine: lacking this voice that has been given away, given to them, and suddenly hearing it again, spoken with by someone who says things we would not say ourselves. This has never occurred to me though, and therefore I assume that there is no voice that one can give to them. Perhaps they would not even want it. I have never been asked by anybody, or by the masses, to give my voice. Money, umbrella, yes, but not voice. Or maybe, yes: once, at a concert, the singer shouted at me (at us; we were many) and asked me (us) to give him a voice. And also to raise our hands. But I played dumb, and neither gave nor did what he requested.

Has anybody else asked us to give our voices, then? Not to my knowledge. Unless: people do sometimes ask for a voice, when they greet one another, for example.

Hi, how are you?

Fine.

Hallo hallo hallo.

Ja, hallo.

Where from.

He?

Wie geht's?

Gut.

Hier, Brille. Heute Muttertag in Afrika.

Hab schon. Wirklich!

Heute billig morgen teuer. Hier schau mal: andere Farbe neue Kollektion.

He wanted me to reply. Maybe not even to buy immediately (yes, to buy as well), but to speak, to say something that acknowledges me seeing him, taking notice of him as a person that is also present. And this is actually very important, as you will know. If one finds oneself in a position where one has to ask something from somebody else – asking for some help, for recognition, for a reply to a difficult question, for a reply to a greeting, a word that tells that one is there in the world and that one takes some space in it (as a body that is also present) and that one speaks in a particular – not just any – voice, then one appreciates a nod and a gaze and the sounding of another voice. There is nothing more terrible in this world, under this sky and sun, an old man who was begging for alms in front of a mosque in a West African town once told me, than to pass by a beggar without any reaction at all. One is well advised, therefore, to always carry some coins in one's pocket in order to give them – one by one – to those sitting there and waiting. If one runs out of these coins, one can still say something, spare a word. Giving a voice to them is therefore an act of humanity, a gesture of acknowledging our being there together, sharing places and time. Therefore, one is well-advised to always have enough time on one's hands to be able to greet and say something, to give one's voice, so to say.

But I suppose "giving them a voice" is not intended to describe this kind of encounter. It means something like "speaking on their behalf", claiming the voice of others. To speak on somebody's behalf is for example to explain another person, to name and define, to fix and map. "Giving them a voice" feels more like taking a voice from someone and making it one's own voice. Like spirits do: they mount bodies and speak through them. What an irony this is: the researcher who sets out to study the other becomes his/her own ultimate other by using other voices to speak through them, about otherness and difference. Taking the voices of others, turning them into book chapters and academic talks.

## II. Interruption

To give somebody a voice. This is to speak on a person's behalf, but also, and in an important way, to give someone the opportunity to speak; to let somebody have a word. One needs to have power here by the way – the power to give the word to another person, to include or exclude, to open up the dialogue or not. One can involve another person in a dialogue simply by making it obligatory, or by suggesting that participation is prestigious and important. But then one may not even lend an ear.



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As a consequence, the voice that is given becomes worthless, because that what is said seems not to be heard and not to be appreciated. The one who has given the voice to the Other could be appreciated though, as a wonderful generous person: heroic and revolutionary. And then, it is not the one who was given the voice that stands in the focus of attention, but the giver of the voice. The one who gives the voice to the Other is a (rather questionable) Robin Hood of the dialogue.

Whether the one who is permitted to speak is also heard is not easy to anticipate, and neither is it clear whether his or her voice has weight. However, this aspect of "giving voice" is not so important for the actual image that is created. It is a relevant question, of course, for the speaker, but the speaker might not be so relevant to the audience in the end. The gesture, or, rather, performance lasts, while the dialogue is ephemeral.

### III. Chapter

voice and power / the power of the voice / the voice of power / power and voice

Certainly, there are more hospitable ways to give a voice. Consider the chairs in the photograph below: they are of a warm, non-intrusive color, made of long-lasting wood (they are at least half a century old, some say almost twice that), with cushions made of a clean leather substitute. They offer little shelves just underneath the seat, where one can place folders and books. They are comfortably sized, and yet not isolating: they are more like a bench actually, so that one would sit close to another person. But the most interesting feature is not so much the comfortable closeness or the storage space these chairs provide, but the electrical sockets on the right side of each seat (on the top).



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These sockets were originally meant for headphones. Now, these old headphones are lost, or damaged, and the ones currently in use everywhere have completely different plugs. The man who worked as a guide in the Palace Museum in Zanzibar, where these chairs were kept, said they were used during official audiences of the Sultan and his court. During such occasions, foreign people from around the world sat on these chairs, one next another (an Indian official next to a European diplomat, who sat next to a Chinese merchant, and so on), and had their headphones on so that they could listen to what the Sultan said. Later, after the reign of the Sultan was over (after the revolution), the chairs were used for a while, he said, in meetings of the new government. The Swahili speeches given then were translated via the headphones of the attendants. Which languages were available, we asked. – What? – Which languages came out of the plugs of the chairs? – Any! Any language that was needed. When there was someone who spoke only Italian, he was given the Sultan's speech in an Italian voice, while next to him maybe someone only spoke Arabic and therefore were given the same speech in an Arabic voice. – These, we said, were amazing chairs. – Yes, he replied: this palace is full of amazing things.

Giving a voice as providing hospitality, what a wonderful idea. And more than this: imagine receiving such generosity along with a cup of sweet coffee, in a museum that suddenly turns into a kind of home where one can spend time and listen to each other's stories. If linguistics could be as hospitable as this, then "giving them a voice" as something that qualifies those who study languages of far-away places would sound like a good idea.

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