CHAPTER 1

THE LINGUISTICS OF THE VOICE

Mladen Dolar, A Voice and Nothing More (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

The voice appears to be the most familiar thing. When I say "voice," when I use this word without further qualification, then the most immediate thing that comes to mind is no doubt the most usual one: the omnipresent use of the voice in our everyday communication. We use our voices, and we listen to voices, at every moment; all our social life is mediated by the voice, and situations where reading and writing actually take over as the medium of our sociability are, all things considered, much less common and limited (the Internet notwithstanding), even though, in a different and less tangible sense, our social being depends very much on the letter, the letter of the law—we will come back to that. We constantly inhabit the universe of voices, we are continuously bombarded by voices, we have to make our daily way through a jungle of voices, and we have to use all kinds of machetes and compasses so as not to get lost. There are the voices of other people, the voices of music, the voices of media,[1] our own voice intermingled with the lot. All those voices are shouting, whispering, crying, caressing, threatening, imploring, seducing, commanding, pleading, praying, hypnotizing, confessing, terrorizing, declaring . . .—we can immediately see a difficulty into which any treatment of the voice runs: namely, that the vocabulary is inadequate. The vocabulary may well distinguish nuances of meaning, but words fail us when we are faced with the infinite shades of the voice, which infinitely exceed meaning. It is not that our vocabulary is scanty and its deficiency should be remedied: faced with the voice, words structurally fail.

All those voices rise over the multitude of sounds and noises, another even wilder and wider jungle: sounds of nature, sounds of machines and technology. Civilization announces its progress by a lot of noise, and the more it progresses the noisier it gets. The dividing line between the two—voice and noise as well as nature and culture—is often elusive and uncertain. We have already seen in the Introduction that the voice can be produced by machines, so that there opens a zone of undecidability, of a between-the-two, an intermediacy, which will be, as we shall see, one of the paramount features of the voice.

Another dividing line separates voice from silence. The absence of voices and sounds is hard to endure; complete silence is immediately

uncanny, it is like death, while the voice is the first sign of life. And that division as well, the one between the voice and silence, is perhaps more elusive than it seems—not all voices are heard, and perhaps the most intrusive and compelling are the unheard voices, and the most deafening thing can be silence. In isolation, in solitude, in complete loneliness, away from the madding crowd, we are not simply free of the voice—it can be that this is when another kind of voice appears, more intrusive and compelling than the usual mumbo-jumbo: the internal voice, a voice which cannot be silenced. As if the voice were the very epitome of a society that we carry with us and cannot get away from. We are social beings by the voice and through the voice; it seems that the voice stands at the axis of our social bonds, and that voices are the very texture of the social, as well as the intimate kernel of subjectivity.

THE VOICE AND THE SIGNIFIER

Let us start by considering the voice as it appears in this most common use and in its most quotidian presence: the voice which functions as the bearer of an utterance, the support of a word, a sentence, a discourse, any kind of linguistic expression. So let us first approach our object through the linguistics of the voice—if such a thing exists.

The moment we start looking at it more closely, we can see that even this most commonplace and ordinary use is full of pitfalls and paradoxes. What singles out the voice against the vast ocean of sounds and noises, what defines the voice as special among the infinite array of acoustic phenomena, is its inner relationship with meaning. The voice is something which points toward meaning, it is as if there is an arrow in it which raises the expectation of meaning, the voice is an opening toward meaning. No doubt we can ascribe meaning to all kinds of sounds, yet they seem to be deprived of it "in themselves," independent of our ascription, while the voice has an intimate connection with meaning, it is a sound which appears to be endowed in itself with the will to "say something," with an inner intentionality. We can make various other sounds with the intention of signifying something, but there the intention is external to those sounds themselves, or they function as a stand-in, a metaphoric substitute for the voice. Only the voice implies a subjectivity which "expresses itself" and itself inhabits the means of expression.[2] But if the voice is thus the quasi-natural bearer of the production of meaning, it also proves to be strangely recalcitrant to it. If we speak in order to "make sense," to signify, to convey something, then the voice is the material support of bringing about meaning, yet it does not contribute to it itself. It is, rather, something like the vanishing mediator (to use the term made famous by Fredric Jameson for a different purpose)—it makes the utterance possible, but it disappears in it, it goes up in smoke in the meaning being produced. Even on the most banal level of daily experience, when we listen to someone speak, we may at first be very much aware of his or her voice and its particular qualities, its color and accent, but soon we accommodate to it and concentrate only on the meaning that is conveyed. The voice itself is like the Wittgensteinian ladder to be discarded when we have successfully climbed to the top—that is, when we have made our ascent to the peak of meaning. The voice is the instrument, the vehicle, the medium, and the meaning is the goal. This gives rise to a spontaneous opposition where voice appears as materiality opposed to the ideality of meaning. The ideality of meaning can emerge only through the materiality of the means, but the means does not seem to contribute to meaning.

Hence we can put forward a provisional definition of the voice (in its linguistic aspect): it is *what does not contribute to making sense.*[3] It is the material element recalcitrant to meaning, and if we speak in order to say something, then the voice is precisely that which cannot be said. It is there, in the very act of saying, but it eludes any pinning down, to the point where we could maintain that it is the non-linguistic, the extralinguistic element which enables speech phenomena, but cannot itself be discerned by linguistics.

If there is an implicit teleology of the voice, then this teleology seems to conceal the dwarf of theology in its bosom, as in Benjamin's parable. There is a rather astounding theological interpretation of this in Saint Augustine. In one of his famous sermons (no. 288), he makes the following claim: John the Baptist is the voice and Christ is the word, *logos*. Indeed, this seems to follow textually from the beginning of St. John's Gospel: in the beginning was the Word, but in order for

the Word to manifest itself, there has to be a mediator, a precursor in the shape of John the Baptist, who identifies himself precisely as *vox clamantis in deserto*,[4] the voice crying in the desert, while Christ, in this paradigmatic opposition, is identified with the Word, *verbum, logos*.

> The voice precedes the Word and it makes possible its understanding. . . . What is the voice, what is the word? Examine what happens in you and form your own questions and answers. This voice which merely resonates and offers no sense, this sound which comes from the mouth of someone screaming, not speaking, we call it the voice, not the word. . . . But the word, if it is to earn its name, has to be endowed with sense and by offering the sound to the ear it offers at the same time something else to the intellect. . . . Now look closely at the meaning of this sentence: "He has to increase, I have to diminish" [John 3, 30]. How, for what reason, with what intent, why could the voice, i.e. John the Baptist, say, given the difference that we just established, "He has to increase, I have to diminish"? Why? Because the voices are being effaced as the Word grows. The voice gradually loses its function as the soul progresses to Christ. So Christ has to increase and John the Baptist has to be obliterated. (Augustine, quoted by Poizat 2001, p. 130)[5]

Thus the progression from the voice to meaning is the progression from a mere—albeit necessary—mediator to the true Word: there is only a small step from linguistics to theology. So if we are to isolate the voice as an object, an entity on its own, then we have to disentangle it from this spontaneous teleology, which goes hand in hand with a certain theology of the voice as the condition of revelation of the Word.[6] We have to make our way in the opposite direction, as it were: to make a descent from the height of meaning back to what appeared to be mere means; to catch the voice as a blind spot of making sense, or as a cast-off of sense. We have to establish another framework than that which spontaneously imposes itself with the link between a certain understanding of linguistics, teleology, and theology.

If voice is what does not contribute to meaning, a crucial antinomy follows, *a dichotomy of the voice and the signifier*. The signifier possesses a logic, it can be dissected, it can be pinned down and fixed—fixed in view of its repetition, for every signifier is a signifier by virtue of being repeatable, in view of its own iterability. The signifier is a creature that can exist only insofar as it can be cloned, but its genome cannot be fixed by any positive units, it can be fixed only by a web of differences, through differential oppositions, which enable it to produce meaning. It is a strange entity that possesses no identity of its own, for it is merely a bundle, a crossing of differences in relation to other signifiers, and *nothing else*. Its material support and its particular qualities are irrelevant—all that is needed is that it is different from other signifiers (following the famous Saussurean dictum that in language there are only differences without any positive terms, and another no less famous one that language is form and not substance).[7] The signifier is not endowed with any positivity, any quality definable on its own; its only existence is a negative one (that of being "different from other signifiers"), yet its mechanisms can be disentangled and explained in that very negativity, which produces positive effects of signification.

If we take Saussure as a provisional starting point—although this doxa of our times that "in the beginning was Saussure" (a very particular kind of Word) is rather dubious—then it is easy to see that the Saussurean turn has a lot to do with the voice. If we are to take seriously the negative nature of the linguistic sign, its purely differential and oppositive value, then the voice—as the supposedly natural soil of speech, its seemingly positive substance—has to be put into question. It has to be carefully discarded as the source of an imaginary blinding that has hitherto prevented linguistics from discovering the structural determinations which enable the tricky transubstantiation of voices into linguistic signs. The voice is the impeding element that we have to be rid of in order to initiate a new science of language. Beyond the sounds of language that traditional phonetics has painstakingly described—spending a great deal of time over the technology of their production, helplessly ensnared by their physical and physiological properties—lies a very different entity that the new linguistics has to unearth: *the phoneme*. Beyond the voice "with flesh and bones" (as Jakobson will say some decades later) lies the fleshless and boneless entity defined purely by its function—*the silent sound, the soundless voice*.

The new object demands a new science: instead of traditional phonetics, high hopes are now vested in phonology. The question of how different sounds are produced is seen as obsolete; what counts are the differential oppositions of phonemes, their purely relational nature, their reduction to distinctive features. They are isolated by their ability to distinguish the units of signification, but in such a way that the specific signifying distinctions are irrelevant, their only importance being *that* they take place, not what they might be. Phonemes lack substance, they are completely reducible to form, and they lack any signification of their own. They are just senseless quasi-algebraic elements in a formal matrix of combinations.

It is true that Saussure's *Course* has caused some confusion, since it is not in the part explicitly dealing with phonology that his novelty is to be found. We have to look elsewhere:

> In any case, it is impossible that sound, as the material element, should in itself be part of the language. Sound is merely something ancillary, a material that language uses. . . . Linguistic signals [signifiers] are not in essence phonetic. They are not physical in any way. They are constituted solely by differences which distinguish one such sound pattern from another. . . . What characterizes [the phonemes] is not, as might be thought, the specific positive properties of each; but simply the fact that they cannot be mistaken for one another. Speech sounds are first and foremost entities which are contrastive, relative and negative. (Saussure 1998, pp. 116–117)

If we take Saussure's definition in all its stringency, it turns out that it ultimately fully applies only to phonemes (such will be Jakobson's later criticism of Saussure): they are the only stratum of language which is made entirely of purely negative quantities; their identity is "a pure alterity" (Jakobson 1963, pp. 111, 116). They are the senseless atoms that, in combination, "make sense."

Phonology, defined in such a way, was destined to take a preeminent place in structural linguistics, soon turning into its showcase, the paramount demonstration of its abilities and explanatory strength. Some decades had to elapse for it to reach its fully developed form in Troubetzkoy's *Grundzüge der Phonologie* (1939) and in Jakobson's *Fundamentals of Language* (1956). Some criticism had to be made of the Saussurean presuppositions (for example, Jakobson's critique of Saussure's dogma about the linear nature of the signifier), some respect had to be duly paid to its other predecessors (Baudouin de Courtenay, Henry Sweet, and others), but its course was secure. All the sounds of a language could be described in a purely logical way; they could be placed into a logical table based simply on the presence or absence of minimal distinctive features, ruled entirely by one elementary key, the binary code. In this way, most of the oppositions of traditional phonetics could eventually be reproduced (voiced/voiceless, nasal/oral, compact/diffuse, grave/acute, labial/dental, and so on), but all those were now re-created as functions of logical oppositions, the conceptual deduction of the empirical, not as an empirical description of sounds found. As the ultimate exhibit, one could present the phonological triangle (Jakobson 1963, p. 138) as the simple deductive matrix of all phonemes and their "elementary structures of kinship," a device that would achieve some notoriety in the heyday of structuralism. Having dismantled the sounds into mere bundles of differential oppositions, phonology could then also account for the surplus that is necessarily added to purely phonemic distinctive features—the prosody, the intonation and the accent, the melody, the redundant elements, the variations, and so forth. Bones, flesh, and blood of the voice were diluted without remainder into a web of structural traits, a checklist of presences and absences.

The inaugural gesture of phonology was thus the total reduction of the voice as the substance of language. Phonology, true to its apocryphal etymology, was after killing the voice—its name is, of course, derived from the Greek *phone*, voice, but in it one can also quite appropriately hear *phonos*, murder. Phonology stabs the voice with the signifying dagger; it does away with its living presence, with its flesh and blood. This leads us to a provisional *facit*: there is no linguistics of the voice. There is only phonology, the paradigm of the linguistics of the signifier.

The phoneme is the way in which the signifier has seized and molded the voice. To be sure, its logic is pretty tricky and itself full of pitfalls and traps, it can never quite be tamed into the simple transparent

matrix of differential oppositions that Saussure (and Lévi-Strauss and many others) dreamed about—that was the paramount dream of the early structuralist generation. Yet it is a logic whose mechanisms can be explored and laid down, it is a logic with which we can make sense, or, more modestly, with which we can make do in making sense (or at least nonsense). In order to speak, one has to produce the sounds of a language in such a way as to satisfy its differential matrix; the phoneme is the voice caught in the matrix, which behaves quite a bit like the Matrix from the movie. The signifier needs the voice as its support, just as the Matrix needs the poor subjects and their fantasies, but it has no materiality in itself, it just uses the voice to constitute our common "virtual reality." But the problem is that this operation always produces a remainder which cannot be made a signifier or disappear in meaning; the remainder that doesn't make sense, a leftover, a cast-off—shall we say an excrement of the signifier? The matrix silences the voice, but not quite.

How can we pursue this dimension of the voice? Let us first look at three different modes in which, in the most common experience, we stumble on the voice which is seemingly recalcitrant to the signifier: the accent, the intonation, and the timbre. We can have some inkling of the voice if we listen to someone with an accent.[8] Accent—*ad cantum*—is something which brings the voice into the vicinity of singing, and a heavy accent suddenly makes us aware of the material support of the voice which we tend immediately to discard. It appears as a distraction, or even an obstacle, to the smooth flow of signifiers and to the hermeneutics of understanding. Still, the regional accent can easily be dealt with, it can be described and codified. After all, it is a norm which differs from the ruling norm—this is what makes it an accent, and this is what makes it obtrusive, what makes it sing—and it can be described in the same way as the ruling norm. The ruling norm is but an accent which has been declared a non-accent in a gesture which always carries heavy social and political connotations. The official language is deeply wrought by the class division; there is a constant "linguistic class struggle" which underlies its constitution, and we need only remember Shaw's *Pygmalion* for an egregious demonstration.

Intonation is another way in which we can be aware of the voice, for the particular tone of the voice, its particular melody and modulation, its cadence and inflection, can decide the meaning. Intonation can turn the meaning of a sentence upside down; it can transform it into its opposite. A slight note of irony, and a serious meaning comes tumbling down; a note of distress, and the joke will backfire. Linguistic competence crucially includes not only phonology, but also the ability to cope with intonation and its multiple uses. Still, intonation is not as elusive as it may seem; it can be linguistically described and empirically verified. Jakobson tells the following story:

> A former actor of Stanislavskij's Moscow Theatre told me how at his audition he was asked by the famous director to make forty different messages from the phrase *Segodnja večerom*, "This evening," by diversifying its expressive tint. He made a list of some forty emotional situations, then emitted the given phrase in accordance with each of these situations, which his audience had to recognize only from the changes in the sound shape of the same two words. For our research work in the description and analysis of contemporary Standard Russian (under the auspices of the Rockefeller Foundation) this actor was asked to repeat Stanislavskij's test. He wrote down some fifty situations framing the same elliptic sentence and made of it fifty corresponding messages for a tape recorder. Most of the messages were correctly and circumstantially decoded by Moscovite listeners. May I add that all such emotive cues easily undergo linguistic analysis. (Jakobson 1960, pp. 354–355)

So all the shades of intonation which critically contribute to meaning, far from being an ineffable abyss, present no great problem to linguistic analysis; intonation can be submitted to the same treatment as all other linguistic phenomena. It requires some additional notation, but this is just the mark of a more complex and ramified code, an extension of phonological analysis. It can be empirically tested—with the help of Rockefeller (I love this detail)—that is to say, objectively and impartially.[9] It is no coincidence that the "subject" of this experiment was an actor, since theater is the ultimate practical laboratory of endowing the same text with the shades of intonation and thereby bringing it to life, empirically testing this every evening with the audience.

Another way to be aware of the voice is through its individuality. We can almost unfailingly identify a person by the voice, the particular individual timbre, resonance, pitch, cadence, melody, the peculiar way of pronouncing certain sounds. The voice is like a fingerprint, instantly recognizable and identifiable. This fingerprint quality of the voice is something that does not contribute to meaning, nor can it be linguistically described, for its features are as a rule not linguistically relevant, they are the slight fluctuations and variations which do not violate the norm—rather, the norm itself cannot be implemented without some "personal touch," the slight trespassing which is the mark of individuality. The impersonal voice, the mechanically produced voice (answering machines, computer voices, and so on) always has a touch of the uncanny, like the voice of the mechanical creature Olympia in Hoffmann's "The Sandman," this prototype of the uncanny, whose singing was just a bit too exact.[10] Or remember the immortal Hal 2000 meeting its death in Kubrick's 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, that archetypal scene of a machine pleading for its life and regressing to childhood in a completely mechanical way. The mechanical voice reproduces the pure norm without any side effects; therefore it seems that it actually subverts the norm by giving it raw. The voice without side-effects ceases to be a "normal" voice, it is deprived of the human touch that the voice adds to the arid machinery of the signifier, threatening that humanity itself will merge with the mechanical iterability, and thus lose its footing. But if those side-effects cannot be linguistically described, they are nevertheless susceptible to physical description: we can measure their frequency and amplitude, we can take their sonogram, while on the practical level they can easily enter the realm of recognition and identification, and become the matter of (dis)liking. Paradoxically, it is the mechanical voice which confronts us with the object voice, its disturbing and uncanny nature, whereas the human touch helps us keep it at bay. The obstacle it appears to present actually enhances the sense-making effect; the seeming distraction contributes to the better fulfillment of the goal.

But if the voice does not coincide with any material modality of its presence in speech, then we could perhaps come closer to our goal if we conceived of it as coinciding with the very process of enunciation: it epitomizes something that cannot be found anywhere in the statement, in the spoken speech and its string of signifiers, nor can it be identified with their material support. In this sense the voice as the agent of enunciation sustains the signifiers and constitutes the string, as it were, that holds them together, although it is invisible because of the beads concealing it. If signifiers form a chain, then the voice may well be what fastens them into a signifying chain. And if the process of enunciation points at the locus of subjectivity in language, then voice also sustains an intimate link with the very notion of the subject. But what is the texture of this voice, this immaterial string, and what is the nature of the subject implied in it? We will come back to that.

THE LINGUISTICS OF THE NON-VOICE

After accent, intonation, and timbre, qualities that pertain to the voice in speech, we can briefly consider, on our way to the object voice, manifestations of the voice outside speech. In a somewhat academic manner, we could classify them into "prelinguistic" and "postlinguistic" phenomena, the voices beneath and beyond the signifier (following, for example, Parret 2002, p. 28). Presignifying voices comprise the physiological manifestations such as coughing and hiccups, which appear to tie the human voice to an animal nature. Thus we can read in Aristotle:

> Voice then is the impact of the inbreathed air against the "windpipe," and the agent that produces the impact is the soul resident in these parts of the body. Not every sound, as we said, made by an animal is voice (even with the tongue we may merely make a sound which is not voice, or without the tongue as in coughing); what produces the impact must have soul in it and must be accompanied by an act of imagination, for voice is a sound *with a meaning*, and is not *merely* the result of any impact of the breath as in coughing; in voice the breath in the windpipe is used as an instrument to knock with against the walls of the windpipe. (Aristotle 2001, *De anima*, 420b 28–37)

If voice is a sound "of what has soul in it" (420b 6), then coughing is a soulless voice which ceases to be voice proper. Both coughing and hiccups emerge without the intention of the utterer and against his or her will, they represent a break in speech, a disruption of the ascent toward meaning, an intrusion of physiology into structure. But an intriguing reversal takes place here: those voices, somatic and unattractive as they may be, are hardly ever simply external to the structure—quite the opposite, they may well enter into its core or become its double. We can easily see that there is a whole "semiotics of coughing": one coughs while preparing to speak, one uses coughing as Jakobson's phatic communication, establishing a channel for communication proper; one can use coughing as bidding for time for reflection, or as an ironic commentary which jeopardizes the sense of the utterance; as a notification of one's presence; as an interruption of a difficult silence; as part of the pragmatics of telephone communication (see Parret 2002, p. 32). There may be no linguistic features, no binary oppositions, no distinctive traits, except for the overriding one: the non-articulate itself becomes a mode of the articulate; the presymbolic acquires its value only through opposition to the symbolic, and is thus itself laden with signification precisely by virtue of being non-signifying. Physiological and inarticulate as it may be, it cannot escape the structure. It can, by its very inarticulate nature, even become the embodiment of the highest sense.

One example will suffice as the most spectacular proof: the most famous hiccups in the history of philosophy, namely those by which Aristophanes is suddenly seized in Plato's *Symposium* at the very moment when it was his turn to deliver a speech in praise of love:

> When Pausanias finally came to a pause (I've learned this sort of fine figure from our clever rhetoreticians),[11] it was Aristophanes' turn, according to Aristodemus. But he had such a bad case of the hiccups—he'd probably stuffed himself again, although, of course, it could have been anything—that making a speech was totally out of the question. So he turned to the doctor, Eryximachus, who was next in line, and said to him: "Eryximachus, it's up to you—as well it should be. Cure me or take my turn." "As a matter of fact," Eryximachus replied, "I shall do both. I shall take your turn—you can speak in my place as soon as you feel better—and I shall also cure you. While I am giving my speech, you should hold your breath for as long as you possibly can. This may well eliminate your hiccups. If it fails, the best remedy is a thorough gargle. And if even this has no effect, then tickle your nose with a feather. A sneeze or two will cure even the most persistent case. (Plato 1997, 185c–e)

The hiccups were so persistent that Aristophanes had to employ all Eryximachus' advices, and the talented Doctor Eryximachus came into history as what his name indicates: the fighter against hiccups.

What do Aristophanes' hiccups mean? This unintentional intrusion of an uncontrolled voice, which changed the order of speakers in the highly structured dramaturgy of the dialogue? Can hiccups be a philosophical statement? What does it mean that Aristophanes' speech, the most famous of all Plato's texts, the Freudian parable of the missing halves, is shifted because of the hiccups? Interpreters have been scratching their heads for more than two thousand years; some thought it was just Plato's realistic depiction of the gastronomic-philosophical feast (an instance of Pantagruelism, as Taylor put it); some thought it was a comical intermezzo introducing the comical poet by his trademark; but mostly they surmised that it cannot be so innocent, and must possess some hidden meaning. Lacan undertook a detailed reading of *Symposium* in the course of his seminar on transference (1960/61), and at some critical point he decided to consult his philosophical mentor, Alexandre Kojève. At the end of their exchange, as he was leaving, Kojève gave him this advice for further reflection: "'You will certainly not be able to interpret *Symposium* if you don't know why Aristophanes has hiccups'" (Lacan 1991, p. 78). Kojève himself did not divulge the secret; he left Lacan rather perplexed, but he spoke in such a way that ultimately the entire interpretation depends on understanding this unintelligible voice, for which one can only propose the formula: *it means that it means*. This involuntary voice rising from the body's entrails can be read as Plato's version of mana: the condensation of a senseless sound and the elusive highest meaning,

something which can ultimately decide the sense of the whole. This precultural, non-cultural voice can be seen as the zero-point of signification, the incidence of meaning, itself not meaning anything, the point around which other—meaningful—voices can be ordered, as if the hiccups stood at the very focus of the structure. The voice presents a short circuit between nature and culture, between physiology and structure; its vulgar nature is mysteriously transubstantiated into meaning *tout court*.[12]

By definition, the presymbolic use of the voice is epitomized by the infant's babbling. This term, in its technical meaning, covers all the modalities of children's experimenting with their voice before they learn to use it in the standard and codified way. This is the voice which pertains to the infant by its very name—*in-fans*, the one who can't speak. Many linguists and child psychologists (most famously Piaget) have scrutinized this at some length, since what is at stake is the linguistically most crucial step linking the voice and the signifier, and the developmentally most delicate transition between the infant and the speaking being. They have seen in it "the unintentional egocentric soliloquy of the child," "a biologically conditioned 'linguistic delirium,'" and so on (see Jakobson 1968, pp. 24 ff. for a good overview), a chaotic voice-production which gradually becomes guided by a will to communicate and a disciplinatory assumption of the code. But if we think that here we will catch the voice prior to speech in its solipsistic and quasi-biological form, then we are prey to an illusion. Lacan stops to consider it for a moment in *Seminar XI*:

> The Piagetic error—for those who might think that this is a neologism, I would stress that I am referring to Mr. Piaget—is an error that lies in the notion of what is called the *egocentric* discourse of the child, defined as the stage at which he lacks . . . reciprocity. . . . The child, in this discourse, which may be tape-recorded, does not speak for himself, as one says. No doubt, he does not address the other, if one uses here the theoretical distinction derived from the function of the *I* and the *you*. But there must be others there . . . —they don't speak to a particular person, they just speak, if you'll pardon the expression, *à la cantonade*. This egocentric discourse is a case of *hail to the good listener!* (Lacan 1979, p. 208)

Infants do not babble just like that. They do not address a definite interlocutor at hand, but their solipsism is nevertheless caught into the structure of address; they address someone behind the scenes, *à la cantonade*, as French theater lingo has it; they speak *à la cantonade*—in short, *à Lacan*, to someone who can hear them, to the good listener to whom they can send a greeting (*à bon entendeur salut*). So this voice, although it does not say anything discernible, is already captured in a discourse, it displays the structure of address—Jakobson himself talks about sound gestures (1968, p. 25), meaningless sounds as gestures of address, and of "dummy dialogue," where no information is transmitted and where children most often do not imitate adults—rather the opposite: adults imitate children, they resort to babbling in what is no doubt a more successful dialogue than most. So here again, on a different level (ontogeny, if such a thing exists), we see that the voice is already caught in the structural web, that there is no voice without the other.

If we follow this logic to the end—that is, to the beginning—then we find at its source the most salient inarticulate presymbolic manifestation of the voice, which is the scream. Is the scream, notoriously the first sign of life, a form of speech? Is the infant's first scream already a greeting to the good listener? Lacan discusses this in the context of what he calls "the transformation of the scream into an appeal."[13] There might be something like the mythical primal scream, which stirred some spirits for some time,[14] but, on this account, the moment it emerges it is immediately seized by the other. The first scream may be caused by pain, by the need for food, by frustration and anxiety, but the moment the other hears it, the moment it assumes the place of its addressee, the moment the other is provoked and interpellated by it, the moment it responds to it, scream retroactively turns into appeal, it is interpreted, endowed with meaning, it is transformed into a speech addressed to the other, it assumes the first function of speech: to address the other and elicit an answer.[15] The

scream becomes an appeal to the other; it needs an interpretation and an answer, it demands satisfaction. There is a French pun that Lacan is fond of: *cri pur*, a pure scream, is turned into a *cri pour*, a scream for someone. If the elusive mythical scream was at the outset caused by a need, then it retroactively turns into a demand surpassing the need: it does not aim just at the satisfaction of a need, it is a call for attention, for a reaction, it is directed toward a point in the other which is beyond satisfaction of a need, it disentangles itself from the need, and ultimately desire is nothing but the surplus of demand over need.[16] So the voice is transformed into an appeal, a speech act, in the same moment as need is transformed into desire; it is caught in a drama of appeal, eliciting an answer, provocation, demand, love. The scream, unaffected as it is by phonological constraints, is nevertheless speech in its minimal function: an address and an enunciation. It is the bearer of an enunciation to which no discernible statement can be ascribed, it represents the pure process of enunciation before the infant is capable of any statement.

But the drama of the voice is twofold here: it is not only that the other is compelled to interpret infant's wishes and demands, it is also that the voice itself, the scream, is already an attempt at interpretation: the other can respond to the appeal or not, its answer depends on its whim, and the voice is something which tries to reach the other, provoke it, seduce it, plead with it; it makes assumptions about the other's desire, it tries to influence it, sway it, elicit its love. The voice is carried by an interpretation of the unfathomable other with which it tries to cope; it tries to present itself as an object of its desire, tame its inscrutability and whim. So there is a double movement in this initial drama, interpretation of the scream and scream as interpretation of the other, and both movements would thus find their intersection in Lacan's basic tenet that desire is the desire of the other.

The presymbolic uses of the voice have a feature in common: with physiological voices, with babbling and with the scream, it appears that we are dealing with a voice external to structure, yet this apparent exteriority hits the core of the structure: it epitomizes the signifying gesture precisely by not signifying anything in particular, it presents the speech in its minimal traits, which may later get obscured by articulation. The non-structured voice miraculously starts to represent the structure as such, the signifier in general. For the signifier in general, as such, is possible only as a non-signifier.

On the "postlinguistic" side there is the realm of the voice beyond language, the voice which requires a more sophisticated cultural conditioning than the acquisition of language. This is most spectacularly illustrated by singing, but first we must briefly consider another voice manifestation which is paradoxical: laughter. Its paradox lies in the fact that it is a physiological reaction which seems close to coughing and hiccups, or even more animal-like sounds (there is a whole array, from a mild smile to uncontrollable laughter), but on the other hand laughter is a cultural trait of which only humankind is capable. Indeed, there is an ancient proposal to define the human being as "the laughing animal" (on a par with "the speaking animal"?), to see in laughter the specificity of humankind, separating it from animality. There is again the amalgamation of the highest and the lowest, culture and physiology; the inarticulate quasi-animal sounds coincide with quintessential humanity—and, after all, can culture offer anything better than laughter? This is all the more enigmatic since laughter as a specifically cultural reaction often bursts out uncontrollably, against the will and intention of the hapless subject; it seizes him or her with an unstoppable force as a series of cramps and convulsions which irrepressibly shake the body and elicit inchoate cries which cannot be consciously contained. Laughter is different from the other phenomena considered above because it seems to exceed language in both directions at the same time, as both presymbolic and beyond symbolic; it is not merely a precultural voice seized by the structure, but at the same time a highly cultural product which looks like a regression to animality. Several philosophers have stopped to ponder on this paradox, and since I cannot deal with it any further here, I can only give two classical references: Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, paragraphs CXXIV–CXXVI; and Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, paragraph 54.

Singing represents a different stage: it brings the voice energetically to the forefront, on purpose, at the expense of meaning. Indeed, singing is bad communication; it prevents a clear understanding of the text (we need supertitles at the opera, which dispel the idea of an initiated elite and put the opera on the level of the cinema). The fact that singing blurs the word and makes it difficult to understand—in polyphony to the point of incomprehensibility—has served as the basis for a philosophical distrust for this flourishing of the voice at the expense of the text: for instance, for the constant efforts to regulate sacred music, all of which tried to secure an anchorage in the word, and banish fascination with the voice. Singing takes the distraction of the voice seriously, and turns the tables on the signifier; it reverses the hierarchy—let the voice take the upper hand, let the voice be the bearer of what cannot be expressed by words. *Wovon man nicht sprechen kann darüber kann man singen:* expression versus meaning, expression beyond meaning, expression which is more than meaning, yet expression which functions only in tension with meaning—it needs a signifier as the limit to transcend and to reveal its beyond. The voice appears as the surplus-meaning. The birth of the opera was accompanied by the dilemma of *prima la musica, e poi le parole,* or the other way round; the dramatic tension between the word and the voice was put into its cradle, and their impossible and problematic relationship presented its driving force. The entire history of opera, from Monteverdi to Strauss (*Capriccio*), can be written through the spyglass of this dilemma.[17]

Singing, by its massive concentration on the voice, introduces codes and standards of its own—more elusive than the linguistic ones, but nevertheless highly structured. Expression beyond language is another highly sophisticated language; its acquisition demands a long technical training, reserved for the happy few, although it has the power to affect everyone universally. Yet singing, by focusing on the voice, actually runs the risk of losing the very thing it tries to worship and revere: it turns it into a fetish object—we could say the highest rampart, the most formidable wall against the voice. The object voice that we are after cannot be dealt with by being turned into an object of immediate intense attention and of aesthetic pleasure. To put it in a formula: "If we make music and listen to it, . . . it is in order to silence what deserves to be called the voice as the object *a*" (Miller 1989, p. 184). So the fetish object is the very opposite of the voice as object *a*; but, I should hasten to add, this gesture is always ambivalent: music evokes the object voice and obfuscates it; it fetishizes it, but also opens the gap that cannot be filled. I will come back to this.

Bringing the voice from the background to the forefront entails a reversal, or a structural illusion: the voice appears to be the locus of true expression, the place where what cannot be said can nevertheless be conveyed. The voice is endowed with profundity: by not meaning anything, it appears to mean more than mere words, it becomes the bearer of some unfathomable originary meaning which, supposedly, got lost with language. It seems still to maintain the link with nature, on the one hand—the nature of a paradise lost—and on the other hand to transcend language, the cultural and symbolic barriers, in the opposite direction, as it were: it promises an ascent to divinity, an elevation above the empirical, the mediated, the limited, worldly human concerns. This illusion of transcendence accompanied the long history of the voice as the agent of the sacred, and the highly acclaimed role of music was based on its ambiguous link with both nature and divinity. When Orpheus, the emblematic and archetypal singer, sings, it is in order to tame wild beasts and bend gods; his true audience consists not of men, but of creatures beneath and above culture. Of course this promise of a state of some primordial fusion to which the voice should bear witness is always a retroactive construction. It should be stated clearly: it is only through language, via language, by the symbolic, that there is voice, and music exists only for a speaking being (see Baas 1998, p. 196). The voice as the bearer of a deeper sense, of some profound message, is a structural illusion, the core of a fantasy that the singing voice might cure the wound inflicted by culture, restore the loss that we suffered by the assumption of the symbolic order. This deceptive promise disavows the fact that the voice owes its fascination to this wound, and that its allegedly miraculous force stems from its being situated in this gap. If the psychoanalytic name for this gap is castration, then we can remember that

Freud's theory of fetishism is based precisely on the fetish materializing the disavowal of castration.[18]

If there is no linguistics of the voice, only the linguistics of the signifier, then the very notion of a linguistics of the non-voice would seem preposterous. Obviously all the non-voices, from coughing and hiccups to babbling, screaming, laughing, and singing, are not linguistic voices; they are not phonemes, yet they are not simply outside the linguistic structure: it is as if, by their very absence of articulation (or surplus-articulation in the case of singing), they were particularly apt to embody the structure as such, the structure at its minimal; or meaning as such, beyond the discernible meaning. If they are not submitted to phonology, they nevertheless embody its zero-point: the voice aiming at meaning, although neither the one nor the other can be articulated. So the paradoxical *facit* would be that there may be no linguistics of the voice, yet the non-voice which represents the voice untamed by structure is not external to linguistics. Neither is the object voice which we are pursuing.