

## Voice-song

I imagine a de-technologised/hyper-linguistic future world in which communication develops into new forms following technological and environmental collapse. States and cities have mostly disappeared, and an itinerant way of life is the only choice for almost everyone. People must frequently migrate long distances to chase unpredictable resources. A new kind of globally understandable language is slowly developing from the grassroots up. Let's call it *voice-song*. Its basic lexicon is cannibalised from many of the world's existing languages, in a seemingly chaotic mix of words that is configured according to a pidgin-like grammar. In this 'base layer', words and grammar continue to carry meaning, but they now apply to little more than physical objects and simple actions. Above it sits a new 'language superstructure' that has radically augmented and in many ways surpassed existing language. It comprises of gesture, melody, rhythm and tone; all aspects of the paralinguistic which work in synthesis to express the subtleties and depths of *subjective* meaning (more on this below). In existing languages the paralinguistic also carries important information, but it occupies a fuzzy, semi-semantic zone where the relationship between signifier-signified is loose and highly context-dependent. Comprehension of the paralinguistic hovers between the universal, the local, and the purely subjective. In voice-song one does use words, but also coughs, clicks, grunts, sighs, snorts, sniffs, whistles and countless other vocal sounds which are ordered and modulated by speed, rhythm, tone and volume. These phenomena are no longer paralinguistic, they now form the locus of meaning.

In his essay *The Grain of the Voice*, Roland Barthes analyses the voices of two 20th century opera singers, Dietrich Fischer-Diskau and Charles Panzéra. Barthes contrasts them as respective exemplars of what he terms *pheno-song* and *geno-song*. The *pheno-song* is defined as "everything [...] in the service of communication, representation and expression" while the *geno-song* is "the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue".<sup>(1)</sup> Voice-song consists of what Barthes calls the 'grain', or materiality, of each voice. But unlike in Barthes' formulation, the grain is no longer 'outside' meaning or excessive to it. Instead, it is the materiality of a voice that carries much of the meaning. To listen to voice-song is to grasp the subjective in the universal (or the full range of the human voice), in a way that was not possible before. It is formed much more by the voices that use it, by all their subjective

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice" in *Image Music Text*, selected and translated by Stephen Heath, (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 179-189.

qualities encountered in full, than by its lexicon and grammar. The boundary between *pheno-song* and *geno-song* has collapsed with the emergence of *voice-song*.

Barthes employs his terms in respect to opera, a form in which music and language play equal roles in transmitting semantic and emotional meaning. According to archaeologist Steven Mithen, language and music were part of a single communication system used by precursors to homo sapiens, such as the Neanderthals, before they diverged into separate realms when cognitively modern humans began using ‘compositional language’.<sup>(2)</sup> I think of voice-song as a re-convergence of the emotional/musical and informational/verbal modes of communication that Mithen describes. But it is no step backwards to the ancient past. Voice-song is as compositional as any existing language, then more so. Its speakers are free to compose at the grammatical and phonological levels, creating sounds, and relationships between them, which carry semantic meaning similar to the way that singing carries emotional meaning. As voice-song develops, users gradually learn to parse meaning from the unique qualities of individual voices. In this world it is listening that has taken the biggest leap forward.

An example from back in the present: we have a conversation and you utter the sound ‘hmm...’ a few times. Each one refers to something different. I say a few ‘hmm...’s of my own, and each of mine has still other referents. Though we share a mutual understanding of what a ‘hmm...’ could mean, this understanding is not precise, and always context-dependent. Such utterances are, conceptually speaking, placeholders for meaning — subjective and malleable — just like blank tiles in a game of Scrabble. But unlike blank Scrabble tiles (whose meaning must be unambiguously declared before use), the significance of a ‘hmm...’ is (mis)understood via a live interplay between speaker, listener and context. A ‘hmm...’ can be highly specific and/or loaded with significance, or vague and suggestive, or pass by almost unnoticed, little more than vocal polyfiller. If on the other hand one of us uses the word ‘cat’, we both know what is being referred to, even though my *cat-concept*, my total inner understanding of what a cat is, might be very different to yours. I might love, loathe or fear cats, or be indifferent to them. I might have a long history with them, or no experience at all. My cat-concept could be fixed by a specific, vivid memory, or be vague and generalised, or perhaps be undergoing rapid change. The word ‘cat’ denotes a cat-concept that is both everybody’s and nobody’s. Everybody’s, because

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<sup>2</sup> Steven Mithen, “A mystery explained but not diminished”, 276-283; diagram in “Origin of cognitive fluidity”, 263, both in *The Singing Neanderthals*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2007).

language demands that we agree on what the phonetic combination ‘cat’ (or local equivalent) stands for; and nobody’s because the word can never bend far enough to accommodate billions of cat-concepts, unique and true to each person. Whatever ‘cat’ signifies to me could never be transmitted in fullness to you by the word alone. To attempt that, I would need many, many other words, also bound by their fixed meanings and corralled by grammatical rules. We navigate our languages like rodents in a vast, complex maze. Certainly there are countless routes from place to place, but also walls and corners everywhere, ones that we must acknowledge or risk making no sense. The rodents with the best maps (or education) usually progress furthest and easiest in this maze; their advantage over the less knowledgeable is huge. Could voice-song dissolve the maze and allow us to encounter each other in an unbounded and equal space where all possible vocal sounds, understood as carriers of subjective meaning, are engaged in transmitting our inner and true cat-or-whatever concepts to one another?

Large, ugly industrial buildings flash by my window as the train ploughs on at high speed. I pause my thoughts and take in this scene, while letting the feel of the train’s weight and motion permeate my body. I start wondering how the condition of late capitalism, with its interconnectedness, its techno-industrial absurdities and its degradations, could give rise to voice-song. I imagine the trajectory, step by step: technological development accelerates during the early 21st century, advancing ever further into territory that was once exclusively human. It profoundly alters the parameters of language. Long-established conventions became less important, while pan-linguistic slang, text-speak, acronyms, emojis, voice commands and even brain wave sensing are all incorporated into communication. In time, the ability to convey and comprehend the psychic/emotional core of meaning become more important than the use of ‘correct’ words, pronunciation and grammar. At the same time, existing languages bleed into each other as a global ‘cross-talk’ emerges, based first on English, then increasingly many other languages. Cross-talk is a vernacular form, a pidgin with no governing body, and conventions that are far more flexible and change much quicker than those of most existing languages. It pushes creatively against the boundaries of the ‘correct’ within languages; and eventually of the linguistic itself. When a technological collapse occurs, humanity is already accustomed to a mixture of existing languages and cross-talk, to the point where almost everyone is at least bilingual. A return to language as it was is impossible. The techno-props that enabled texting, speech commands and brain wave sensing all disappear, while climate and resources become highly erratic. Frequent long migrations and encounters with distant strangers are the basic

condition of life globally. People fill the hole left by vanished technology through ‘reverting forward’ to what is already inside and available to them, the voice. The unpredictability of resources and lack of recognised states or legal systems force people to be cooperative, form shifting alliances, protect themselves from malicious others, move frequently, and successfully negotiate encounters with strangers. In short, intense societal and environmental pressures force language to radically develop its potential to transmit meaning. What began as a pidgin-like amalgamation of existing languages becomes the global communication system of voice-song.

Would voice-song eliminate misunderstandings? Could it promote empathy between culturally diverse peoples? Could it flatten out differences in class and education? Or deepen them? Would it undermine or assist authoritarian or corrupt systems of control? Artist and writer Shuddhabrata Sengupta invokes the figure of the ‘fearless listener’<sup>(3)</sup> — one who actually listens to, rather than simply hears spoken truths that challenge orthodoxies. How might voice-song encourage a fearless kind of listening? These and other questions swirl around my mind until finally I drift, allowing myself to ‘listen’ to voice-song. I imagine un-transcribable sounds: teeming, complex, cascades of vocalisation that defy current notions of language, but nonetheless feel ordered and subtly comprehensible. The train slows to another unexplained pause, as these speculations about a voice-song future provoke an old memory to surface.

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<sup>3</sup> Shuddhabrata Sengupta, “Listening to the World: The Gift of Voice and the Question of Silence”, *aCCeSsions*, No. 3, (March 2017), <https://accessions.org/article3/listening-to-the-world-the-gift-of-voice-and-the-question-of-silence> (accessed 12 January 2018).