



The Speaking of Home

Anne Winning

Past Graduate

Department of Secondary Education

University of Alberta

My interest in the project of phenomenology arose after reading for my Master of Education degree a paper written by Max van Manen. I pursued the initial interest by travelling from Australia to Canada to undertake doctoral studies at the University of Alberta, with Max van Manen as my supervisor.

My doctoral thesis explored the lived meaning of home and language for immigrants who had to learn English as a result of leaving their home country. The study investigated the extent to which language can be considered our "home" and the ways in which home has its own language for us.

Since returning to Australia I have been working at the University of Central Queensland and have been collaborating on the development of graduate courses. I have been able to incorporate into our new courses much of the work of Van Manen, in particular the notion of pedagogical tact and the project of hermeneutic phenomenology.

My current research addresses the rhetoric of "skilling for change," which prevails in much of Australia's present educational discourse. I am interested in the lived meaning of change in the lives of people, and I question the notion that we can be "skilled" to live with continual change. I am inclined to think that what is being overlooked in the talk of change is a fundamental human need for a sense of place.

Ling was a member of my class of 12 adult students who had come to the school to learn English. I asked her a question pertaining to the language point I was teaching at that moment. She struggled with her answer momentarily and then broke down in tears. I was taken aback, as were the other students. Ling sobbed for a few minutes as I tried to assure her that I would help her with her work at lunch time and asked her if she would like to leave the room. She shook her head and said, "I just am so unhappy. I miss my home." The other 10 foreign students expressed a reaction such as "Ah" and nodded their heads in understanding. I agreed that it was sometimes a terrible feeling to be so far from home and proceeded to tell the class how often I had cried when I first moved to Australia. Later, at the coffee break, I stayed with Ling and we spoke about being away from home, sharing our experiences.

Reflecting on the reactions of the students to Ling's reference to missing home, I wondered how it was that we could all have a nodding under-

standing of Ling's feelings. And what was it about home that she was missing? Did she mean the home country? Or was she acutely missing the people of home? Could it simply have been her own house that she was missing? Or, because she was in the middle of the stressful experience of language learning, could it have been the language of her home that she missed? Some philosophers have referred to language as our dwelling place or home (Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1973). So could Ling have missed, in a deeper sense, the "home" of language? There are many questions concerning missing home which at the time no one in the class considered. We all felt we knew what Ling meant.

Immigrants come to a new country and in many cases they need to learn the language of their new living place. Our governments provide English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction for the adults who need to learn English in order to obtain employment and to be integrated in the new community. The prevailing attitude in the field of ESL is that teachers can give their students a working knowledge of the language so that they can function more comfortably in the English-speaking environment. Inherent in this understanding of the teaching of language is a technocratic approach that assumes that one linguistic code can be replaced by another. But is there some other aspect of language that is thus overlooked? Is there a way of being with language that defies instruction, yet is significant to a sense of comfort and feeling of ease in a particular place? Does the event of learning a second language sometimes serve to underline what is missed of the home country? Should the practice of ESL teaching take into consideration that there may be a more fundamental aspect of language—an aspect which pervades our way of being in the world? These questions beg an understanding of our way of being with language. So to what extent are home and language intertwined?

At home people speak to each other in a particular way

Leszek, who had been in Canada for seven months, said,

I find differences in the way to talk to people. Different kind of sense of humor. I cannot explain but I see. For instance in my country when I know a woman I can say "How are you girls?" This is nice. But not here. If I say that here I can be in trouble. Emancipation and all this. One day I said "Hello girls" to some friends and they said, "We know you and we know your sense of humor and we know that what you said is nice. We know about this. But don't say this to a woman in Canada." They explained that it is not accepted here. And many other things I ask about. I have friends here and I say, "Can I say this or do that?" I ask for advice. Because something else happened in New York when I was there. One day I was with my landlady and she was carrying two heavy bags. And I ask her if I can help, but she said, "I can do it." I said, "I know you can do it but I will do it because you are a woman." And she said, "Don't say things like this." We had a discussion but I don't understand this—the position of women in this society. In my thinking you're a woman, I have to open the door and lift heavy things because I'm stronger. This is true physically. And this is good

in this situation that man have to help the woman. And she said "Not here in North America. Here the woman will feel that you treat her as something worth less than the men." In my country I will feel bad if a woman is carrying two heavy things and I have nothing. And if she says "no" I will still feel bad because people don't know that she refused my help. They think "Oh this guy he doesn't help her carry this heavy stuff."

Many immigrants encounter differences in the accepted modes of address of the new language. Aside from difficulties with vocabulary, grammar, and intonation, they also encounter difference in the way they can speak to people and the things that can be said. The word, glance, or gesture of someone with whom we have a common bond can throw a different light on the experience of a situation. It is not so much the words of a loved one that are spoken but the person speaking them that can throw a glow over the world (Van den Berg, 1955, p. 49). Likewise, for the immigrants who have to learn a new language and also, as Leszek shows, a new way of speaking, it is not so much the words that count in the speaking to others, but what is disclosed about the speaker through the words.

Language is not primarily expression of meaning through sounds and words. The essence of language is its propensity to bring the nature of things into the open: "In the absence of language there is no openness of being" (Peperzak, 1989, p. 15). Thus a person "reveals himself in the words" (Van den Berg, 1955, p. 49). In his homeland, Poland, Leszek's use of the word *girls* discloses a friendly, relaxed, fun-loving speaker. However, in a new country this may not be the case. In Canada, such a statement perhaps reveals someone who has a disdainful approach toward women. It is the understanding of the meaning of the things being referred to by two people that can endow particular words with particular meanings, and so the new language learner has to learn a new way of being with people. The language learners' revelation of themselves must learn a new way of being with others. Language learning involves coming together with people in understanding a new way of looking at things of the world.

The fellow man is not another isolated entity, standing beside me, pouring words into my ear; who, just as myself, would remain foreign to the things of the world. He is primarily one who is or is not "together" with me and the degree of this being together with me or not is no metaphysical abstraction, but a reality, visible in the things which he and I observe. (Van den Berg, 1955, p. 51).

The act of communication with others can create a nearness or a distance between speakers. More than that, another person can also create a nearness or distance between a person and the things of the world. A phenomenological perspective of the relationship between the human being and the world of things allows human beings to have an originary contact with the things of the world. It is possible for people involved in

crafts to become so used to their tools that they forget themselves in the tools. For example, the typist comes to know the position of the letters on the keyboard through the keyboard itself. The knowledge of the position of the letters comes to be known in the space where the fingers meet the keyboard (Merleau-Ponty, 1973). Communication between people is not a contact between two people without a world to meet in. Rather, communication comes about through a common understanding of the things of the world: "The relationship of man and man is embodied in the physiognomy of things, in the world's being far or near" (Van den Berg, 1955, p. 53). So Leszek finds himself distanced from the world he knows through his experience of the way to communicate with certain others he meets. Lam spoke of the continual talk of hockey that he encounters in the staff room of his workplace: "They are very into hockey, football and going to the bar and drinking. And staying away for the weekend. I can never adapt to that lifestyle."

It is significant that Lam uses the word *into* hockey. The Canadians that Lam encounters in work have a relationship, they are in touch with, something that Lam feels he can never get *into*. Hockey is one area of communication through things that has distanced him from his new country. Communication is always about something in the world and the newcomer has to find a common "thing" through which to meet the others of the new country. Communication is an aspect of being into the world.

At home there is more laughter

Marvin misses the laughter of home:

At home we have laughter. Here in Canada I sometimes wonder how it is that I can have just about anything material that I want to buy. I can go and use the VISA and get anything but still there is no laughter. In the Philippines you can only earn enough money to buy food but still there is laughter.

The homeness of language is evident in our relation to humor. Huy has difficulty with understanding jokes in English. It is one of his goals to be able to laugh along with others:

I cannot understand lots of jokes. People tell jokes and they laugh and I can't even laugh at the jokes. Some I can, but lots I don't know. I must learn more English so that I can understand why they are laughing.

But learning English need not result in understanding why people are laughing. Being in touch with the humor of a particular country is not only related to language. Rather, humor is an experience of language and its people that is learned in passing. Many Americans have trouble with British humor and vice versa. This is not so much a language problem, but an intimacy with the way of being of a particular group. No amount of language learning will succeed in making a person feel intimate with

the humor of a country. It is a way of being with language that defies teaching and learning.

Leszek feels that his language is improving because he is now able to understand some of the humor on television:

When I came to USA I spent much time watching television, especially stand-up comedies because it's my idea that if I can understand humor it means my English is better. And this is true because first weeks I understood very little and people were laughing and I don't know why. But right now I can say that it is much better, I can watch television and I can understand more. And this is proof that my English is better. Because when you understand humor in foreign language this is good.

Laughter adds lightness to life. The experience of contending with a new language and new lifestyle, finding a job, making friends, and generally dealing with uprootedness is a stressful time for many people. It is serious business. Therefore, at a time in one's life when laughter is most needed it is sometimes difficult to laugh. A person may not have the linguistic capacity either to make a joke or to understand another person's joke. With a quick rejoinder or one-liner a speaker or listener has a burden or worry lifted momentarily. Through jokes, individual people or even a nation of people can laugh at themselves. A joke allows an opportunity to stand back from the seriousness of life and look at it differently.

A tension exists in the lived experience of dwelling, the tension between the realms of the mundane and the festive. The activity of inhabitation moves between these two poles. The festive becomes a source of delight, and the mundane becomes the dependable, task-oriented everydayness of living (Jager, 1985). Language too moves between these poles: "And our language which in the festive mode trails off the beaten path and stirs the earth and approaches music—this 'same' language becomes in the world of daily work a tool of transmitting messages" (p. 223). For immigrants for whom there is little or no laughter, a certain way of being in the world, a certain form of inhabiting, of being at home is lacking.

The jokes that people tell in social situations speak a way of knowing that can leave some people feeling closer to the group. They are binding in their way of regarding the aspect of life to which they refer. But sometimes jokes exclude people.

I try to join in the general hilarity, as somebody tells the latest elephant joke. Then—it's always a mistake to try too hard—I decide to show my goodwill by telling a joke myself. Finding some interruption in which to insert my uncertain voice, I launch into a translation of some slightly off-color anecdote I'd heard my father tell in Polish, no doubt hoping to get points for being risqué as well as a good sport. But as I hear my choked-up voice straining to assert itself, as I hear myself missing every beat and rhythm that would say "funny" and "punch line," I feel a hot flush of em-

barrassment. I come to a lame ending. There's a silence. (Hoffman, 1989, p. 118)

When a joke falls flat, communication is lost. Communication is a feature of living with others, accomplished through the things of the world. It is through the things of the world that human beings can meet each other. For a joke to be understood, there must be a meeting ground.

The use of spatially oriented words has arisen in the above anecdotes. In the use of words that relate to the world being near or far, of being into the things, there is the indication of the dialectics of home and horizon, centre and reach. There is a feature of "openness and enclosure in at-homeness" (Buckley, 1971, p. 207). Without a "certain genuine openness, it is not possible to let reality in, 'to let it be', 'to be in touch'" (p. 207). And there is the indication of the need for embodied existence in order to feel at home in the language. Through communication there is the possibility of both nearness to the world or distance from it. It appears that language and communication are aspects of being at home in that they serve to accomplish embodied inhabitation which is not only enclosure in the world that one knows, but openness to the others of the world.

An accent comes from somewhere else

Huy spoke about the difficulties he had because of his accent:

When I speak to Canadians I have to speak English and when I speak to Vietnamese I speak Vietnamese. When I speak English I have to change my accent. When I speak Vietnamese I have to change my accent too. It's quite different in accent and intonation. So it took me long time to learn the intonation and the accent in English. I have to think about that, not only the words but I have to make the voice, the intonation, the accent, otherwise people don't understand me. First of all I was really frustrated when I say something and people don't understand and I have to try the other way to say it. I think the same thing when English people try to speak Vietnamese. We have to listen very carefully in order to understand.

Home may be recognized through accent and intonation. Although pronunciation and intonation are recognized in the domain of second language teaching, they are usually given more consideration in the intermediate and advanced courses. Nevertheless, even at these levels the emphasis is placed on intelligibility of the spoken word; teachers are often advised not to correct pronunciation too much. It is recognized that it is almost impossible for adult language learners ever to speak without a trace of accent (Krashen, 1981; Halliday, 1976). But maybe what has not been recognized is that one's accent has something to do with being at home in a language.

Bogdan said that he felt that he would always be an immigrant in Canada because of his accent and that this would forever prevent him from feeling other than an immigrant:

As soon as I speak they want to know where I come from. This is always the thing. So every time I open my mouth I remember that I'm an immigrant and that this is not my home country. I think this will always be the way. Some Canadians told me because of my English, one guy told me that if you speak perfect English but you have still the accent, for many people born here you know nothing. Because you have different accent then you cannot know. But if I don't open my mouth they don't know that I'm different from them.

Accent would seem to be a superficial feature of language but it appears that it has to do with the homelike experience of language and of being who you are. When one is at home one does not have an accent. People don't think of themselves as having an accent until they find themselves away from home. A Canadian friend of mine, when trying to describe the voice of a person who had telephoned for me, said, "Well, he didn't have an accent." I retorted, "So you mean he had a Canadian accent!"

I recall an incident when I was trying to make myself understood and someone kept asking me to repeat myself. A person standing nearby made a joke about my Australian accent. I suddenly wanted to go home because I was tired of sounding different and I wanted to be back where I belong in the "accent community." An accent identifies a person as coming from one place rather than another. In Australia, Canada, and the United States there are many people who have made their home in their second country in that they feel that they belong there and that they could not live in the country of their birth. Yet their accent identifies them as coming from elsewhere. Therefore, the question of where they come from never escapes them. Their identity is always twofold in that where they come from and where they now belong are two different places.

When away from home we hear the sound of words

When one is new to a country the sounds of that language besiege one. I recall paying almost as much attention to the sounds of the Canadian accent as to the words that were being spoken to me. On one occasion I had unwittingly been talking on the phone to an Australian for a minute or two before I realized that I was listening to this person in a different way from the way I listen to a Canadian. I was not listening to the different sounds of words. I was listening to the person and hearing through his words.

Eva said that when she turns the television on she is constantly reminded of being an immigrant because she "hears only English." It seems that she hears the sound of English rather than hears the meaning of the language; the sounds predominate and become as an object which has to be passed beyond in order to be forgotten.

Inhabitation means to withdraw the limits of bodily existence to include the place. When one touches something, the hand itself withdraws or

becomes transparent, thus revealing the texture of the object. This can also be seen in regard to language in that the "sound of words or the sight of letters can effectively withdraw so that a clearing is created in which we can come to contemplate the sights and sounds of past and present worlds" (Jager, 1985, p. 220). When one is at home in a language the sounds withdraw leaving a space for the meaning to disclose itself. When this happens, the accent is no longer heard. When we are with another, both of us speaking and listening to the thing in question and absorbed in the conversation that unites us, we go beyond the sounds that are produced in order to reach the object to which the word refers us.

There is an "essential self-forgetfulness" to language (Gadamer, 1976, p. 64). In speaking as a native speaker in the everyday attitude, one is not conscious of the structure, grammar, and syntax of the language. However, this self-forgetfulness is not a feature for those learning to speak in a new language. Leszek often asks for guidance from others concerning what he can and cannot say: "I many times ask my friends, 'Can I say like this?' or, 'Is it okay to use this word?' All the time I have to think if it is okay, what I am saying."

He cannot forget himself in the language, so speaking the second language can be an event that, with its necessity for continual alertness, may be quite stressful. Eva said, "It is extremely difficult for me. I find always stress. I'm often afraid to open my mouth because I'm scared I could say something wrong and then it makes them smile."

The need for immigrants in the early stages of learning a language to constantly think about the grammar is an unnatural way to speak and it prevents them from feeling at home.

The actual operation of language lets grammar vanish entirely behind what is said in it at any given time ... The more language is a living operation, the less we are aware of it. Thus it follows from the self-forgetfulness of language that its real being consists in what is said in it. (Gadamer, 1976, p. 65)

If language is given together with the world, "dialect reveals environment ... Dialect holds together local environment and mother tongue, place and local language" (Mugerauer, 1985, p. 62). Dialect means more than an accent or local language. Rather, "its interpretation of the environment is what makes possible a coherent, meaningful and valued way of life for those who share the dialect" (p. 63). The manner in which we make contact with the world is the manner in which it reveals itself to us. If dialect can be said to have such significance for the inhabitants of a particular place in that it calls forth a particular way of living with their environment, perhaps there is indication that the same can be said for the language of one's home country; it does not only have different sounding words, but it calls forth a different world.

The talk of home is different

Even the talk is different. In Poland we would go to cafés and talk about important things, everybody is interested in politics and we talk about things happening in the world. Here everybody is so disinterested. They are just interested in their own little life. They don't care. I feel sometimes lost, I can't understand it. The whole underground life, I miss. The life of discussions. (Bogdan)

In a new country where one is learning the language it may be difficult to talk about certain topics. One simply does not have the linguistic ability to do so. People first learn what is known as survival language in the ESL domain. With this sort of linguistic ability people who have been used to philosophical or political talk in their own country may find it difficult to get accustomed to small talk, as Bogdan implied: "What I miss is the cafés where we all used to go and sit for hours and talk about important things. We have beautiful cafés where it is common for many intellectual people to meet to discuss things. The cafés here are so different."

So in missing the actual event of these discussions the environment, the space in which such discussions occur is also missed. The talk is missed not only in itself, but also in the environment, the memories of which are called forth in the talk. In everyday experience we might say to ourselves "Now, who was telling me that, where did I hear that?" At such times we find that we must recall the place where we heard the words in order to recall the person who said them. The speaker and the words seem to be tied to the place. Bogdan's experience of the cafés is not only of the talk of the cafés, but of the meaning of the space of the cafés themselves. An ontological aspect of language is "the being or reality of environment—whether natural or cultural" and "language enables the environment to come forward into experience" (Mugerauer, 1985, pp. 67-68).

There is a way of living in a language that somehow defies the confines of the linguistic structure of language. People become used to "speaking to each other in a particular way," "there is more laughter," the accent does not "come from somewhere else," they do not "listen to the sound of words," and there the "talk of home" is familiar. These experiences come together to suggest that a feature of home is in the way we speak, as is the way we speak a feature of home. The language of home means not only knowing that, but also knowing how. Given that there is such a homelike quality to language, what can be attended to in the ESL classroom to foster a more homelike feeling in the second language?

Teachers of adult immigrants are not teaching new language learners. Everybody in the class has already learned a language and a way of being with language. They now have to learn a new way of being with language. But the ground for this understanding remains the first language. It is the first language that allows the second language to come to being. Rather than attempt to teach English through a monocultural perspective, perhaps more attention should be directed toward the comparison of

the languages. An openness to the culture that nourishes the second language could foster more understanding of the source of the differences and possible misunderstandings. Learners could come to see the way their first language has shaped them. The intention of the ESL programs should not be that immigrants subordinate either language to the framework of the other. Rather than ask immigrants to alter their relationship to the world, we should aim to "enrich and extend it through the world of the foreign language" (Aoki, 1987, p. 42). Perhaps through reflection on the comparisons of the language world views there is the possibility of better coming to know both homes. Immigration is a possibility for "re-reading the world" (Freire, 1987, p. 35).

For immigrants, learning the second language should be considered to be more than learning another linguistic code. To learn the language is a mode of cultural empowerment and development of self-identity. It is through language that immigrants will come to understand their new world. It is the new language that will help them to know how best to become what they may become in the new country.

References

- Aoki, T. (1987, May). The dialectic of mother language and second language: A curriculum exploration. *Canadian Literature Supplement*, 38-47.
- Buckley, F. (1971). An approach to a phenomenology of at-homeness. In A. Giorgi, W. Fischer, & R. Von Eckartsberg (Eds.), *Duquesne studies in phenomenological psychology: Volume 1* (pp. 198-211). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Jarvey.
- Gadamer, H. (1976). *Philosophical hermeneutics*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1976). *Learning how to mean*. New York: Elsevier.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Hoffman, E. (1989). *Lost in translation*. New York: Dutton.
- Jager, B. (1985). Body, house and city. In D. Seamon & R. Mugerauer (Eds.), *Dwelling, place and environment* (pp. 215-225). The Hague: Nijhoff.
- Krashen, S. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1973). *The prose of the world*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Mugerauer, R. (1985). Language and the emergence of environment. In D. Seamon & R. Mugerauer (Eds.), *Dwelling, place and environment* (pp. 51-70). The Hague: Nijhoff.
- Peperzak, A. (1989). From intentionality to responsibility: On Levinas's philosophy of language. In A. Dallery & C. Scott (Eds.), *The question of the other. Essays in contemporary continental philosophy* (pp. 3-21). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Van den Berg, J.H. (1955). *The phenomenological approach to psychiatry*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Springfield.