

**Voice and silence:
aspects of Derrida's critique of
phonocentrism**

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Certificate

I certify that this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being submitted as part of my candidature for any other degree.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me and that any help that I have received in preparing this thesis, and all sources have been acknowledged.

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Abstract

This thesis examines aspects of the critique, undertaken by Jacques Derrida, of phonocentrism in western thought. Its initial focus is Derrida's early work on the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl and the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Both thinkers, Derrida argues, demonstrate their commitment to metaphysics through their reliance on a notion of (silent) voice intimately aligned to intellection. In Derrida's reading, Saussure and Husserl reduce to varying degrees sounded voice and writing, considering them irreducibly exterior to the unity of inner voice and thought. The thesis next argues *vis-à-vis* this critique that Derrida himself reduces voice to silence, and mobilises, as a key facet of his program, a trope of silent inscription. Guided by a range of critiques of Derrida, the thesis asserts that the early Derrida remains, in this aspect of his work, intra-metaphysical. Against Derrida, the thesis posits a sonorous voice incommensurable with the silent voice which is both the object and outcome of Derrida's polemic against phonocentrism. The thesis also notes the complicity of metaphors of vision with the phonocentric bent in Western thought. In closing, the thesis speculatively asserts, again by adducing a number of critiques of Derridean thought, that Derrida (1) arguably relies for his anti-phonocentric critique on the oclarcentrism which he contends is concomitant with phonocentrism in western thought and (2) aporetically recognises the inadequacy of the trope of silence as a response to the aggrandisement of the *phonè* in metaphysics.

Figures

Figures 1-4

From Emil Behnke, *The mechanism of the human voice*, London: J Curwen and Sons Ltd., 1880.

Figure 5

From Mark C Taylor, *Altarity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

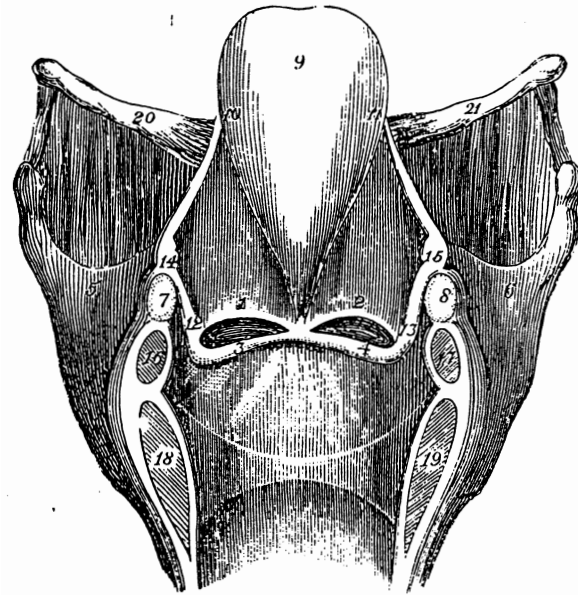


PLATE XII.

VIEW OF THE VOICEBOX, OR LARYNX, WHICH HAS BEEN CUT OPEN FROM BEHIND.

- 1, 2. POCRET LIGAMENTS (FALSE VOCAL CORDS).
- 3, 4. VOCAL LIGAMENTS (VOCAL CORDS).
- 5, 6. SHIELD (THYROID) CARTILAGE.
- 7, 8. CARTILAGES OF SANTORINI.
- 9. LID (EPIGLOTTIS).
- 14, 10 & 15, 11. FOLDS OF MUCOUS MEMBRANE (ARYTENO-EPIGLOTTIC FOLDS).
- 12, 13. WEDGES (CUNEIFORM CARTILAGES).
- 14, 15. CARTILAGES OF WRISBERG.
- 16, 17. PYRAMID MUSCLE (ARYTENOIDEUS TRANSVERSUS).
- 18, 19. RING (CRICOID) CARTILAGE.
- 20, 21. TONGUE (HYOID) BONE.

Figure 1

O mathematicians, shed light on error such as this! The spirit has no voice, because where there is voice, there is body.

Leonardo Da Vinci

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Preface

The voice, Jacques Derrida contends, is consciousness itself. It is complicit with the notions of being, temporal presence and conscious interiority which found western thought. And since Derrida's intention, as the deconstructive philosopher *par excellence*, is to question presence, and the privileging of voice which subtends ontology, the theme of the voice will organise Derrida's early polemical trajectory. In *Speech and Phenomena* and *Of Grammatology* Derrida will engage in a systematic deconstruction of the metaphysical conflation of voice and thought which he believes to be the *principium* of onto-theology. In the former text, Derrida deconstructs Husserl's notion of mute voice; in the latter, he turns his attention to, amongst others, Saussure. For Husserl and Saussure it is not in the sounded voice, with its ineffaceable connection to physical, embodied sonority, where an affinity with intellection will be found, but in the utterly silent *s'entendre parler*, the hearing-oneself-speak. And as Derrida's expositions unfold, it becomes clear that the critique of voice, or as Derrida puts it, the "neutralisation" of the *phonè*, relies on his key notion—*differance*—in its various tropes as writing (*écriture*), spacing, the *strace*, and the gram.

This thesis unfolds in three parts. Chapters One and Two attempt a close reading of Derrida's interpretation of phonocentrism in *Speech and Phenomena* and *Of Grammatology vis-à-vis* Husserl and Saussure respectively. Tracing the contours of Derrida's polemic on these thinkers lays the groundwork for a return to Derrida himself: it ultimately becomes possible to juxtapose Derrida's own arguments around phonocentrism with the paradoxical yield of his critique. The deconstructive confrontation with voice is itself arguably aporetic: there is an utter elision of aurality, including that of the sounded voice, in Derrida's early work. The paradigmatic instance of this effacement is the neologism at the wellspring of the Derridean project. The difference between difference and *differance*—the orthographic innovation which swaps an a for an e—can only be seen, and cannot be heard. *Differance* relies on a trope of mute inscription.

In one sense, this suppression of voice is entirely appropriate. Since Derrida wants to abrogate the phenomenological and structuralist privileging of the *phonè*, his cardinal neographism serves as a salient instance of the textual *practice* of anti-phonocentrism. It literally defers voice, irrevocably. On the other hand the assiduity

of Derrida's approach ends, not unproblematically, in silence. Against his own arguments that differance (as spacing) introduces the "body" and the "world" into the silence of ratiocination, Derrida himself renders voice aphonic, bifurcating the "body" of speech, its physical, "worldly" sonority, from its relationship to noesis. In the view of a number of the critiques adduced here, he reproduces the founding dichotomy between the sensible voice and the pure, transparent intelligibility of the silent *phonè* in western thought. Ultimately, his own critique falls back within the horizon of a philosophical axiology that sets a mute voice, and the silent letter, at the solipsistic centre of an intra-philosophical program. Chapter Three traces this problem, and attempts to explore the possibility of a 'deconstructed' yet sonorous voice, as theorised by various thinkers including the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

This thesis arises from a desire to think through the immensely enigmatic medium that is strangely fractured between, and co-implicated with, body and thought, alterity and identity, other and self—a question which ultimately goes begging in early Derrideanism, as voice fades away into an intractable aphonia. A more comprehensive attempt to confront sounded voice and its relation to corporeality, intellection and intersubjectivity—or indeed its relation to technologies of recording, reproduction and simulation—would be the subject of another work, undoubtedly less focused on the byzantine argumentation of the early Derrida. Nevertheless, I hope the question of embodied voice and, perhaps, the possibility of dialogue, reverberates in the margins of the final chapter, in which I attempt, possibly against the odds, to prise open Derridean solipsism. I have concluded really where I had desired to begin: at the point at which the question of the voice can be heard.