

Spoken Word, Written Word: Rethinking the Representation of Speech in Literature

AN INTRODUCTION

Vered Karti Shemtov, Anat Weisman and Amir Eshel

What was left was like a field.
Shut your eyes, and you can feel it for miles around.

—John Ashbery, “What Is Poetry?”

Forests of the book.
Talking before you and talking after you

—Zali Gurevitch, *Pshat*

OUR CONTEMPORARY WORLD, with its diverse and innovative means of communication, has created many new written and spoken genres and an abundance of texts. This challenges our thinking and raises many new questions such as: How does the emergence of endless written conversations in real time change the way we read and write literature? How does literature react to the contemporary clear awareness that any text is just a drop in a wide, vast field of written words? How can we rethink the ways in which speech was represented in the past in light of our contemporary thinking? How does our current world shape and reshape the dividing lines between our multifaceted verbal activities? What do the ethics of speech and the ethics of silence mean in these new contexts? And finally, what do listening, attention, and attentive or close reading mean today?

We posed these questions to a group of scholars working in the fields of Hebrew, Yiddish, English, German, and comparative literature and invited them to join us on February 2015 for an intensive two days of presentations and discussions. Many of the talks centered on three “cultural climates”: multilingualism, pluralism, and (to use Renana Keydar’s concept) Big Data in literature. The questions posed for the speakers were developed further into a discussion of where these three climates conjugate, where they contradict each other, the limits of each one of them,

and how they help us navigate the tensions between the Spoken and the Written. In this process old concepts were reexamined and sometimes replaced.

Marjorie Perloff opened the conference with a lecture that was devoted to tracing the representation of speech in American Conceptual poetry. She looked at the imitation of the speech act in Frank O'Hara and the New York School, moved to the collage that combines the speaker's voice and citations in Charles Bernstein and Language poetry, continued to Kenneth Goldsmith and Conceptualist poetry, where "the entire composition is taken from external sources," and concluded with a recent poem by Craig Dworkin that seems to take us "full circle to the writerly text one associates with poeticity." But, as she argues, "it is writerly with a difference: the digital age demands a more collaborative poetry, in this case one where both author and reader turn to the Internet to look things up and thus create meanings."

In this introduction we will briefly refer to each one of the papers and add some insights from the conference discussions. We would like, however, to take a moment here to look more closely at Perloff's analysis of Goldsmith's poem in order to present some of the main challenges we are facing today and the way literature addresses them. In her analysis of Goldsmith's "World Trade Center," Perloff describes the way in which the poet "condenses roughly nine hours of broadcasting ... into less than an hour's worth of actual reading time (twenty-seven pages) but keeps the exact wording and broken rhythm of the original." The poet, she writes, "has not invented a single word. But he has selected his text fragments very carefully. We thus have the sensation of witnessing the event *as it happens* and as it is mediated; we are *there*, knowing no more than what the broadcast teams can tell us." Through selecting the fragments and placing them in a linear manner, the poem provides us with an opportunity to relive the experience in a way that is quite impossible through the actual Big Data of sources from and about the event: "Part parody ode, part satire, part science fiction, and part reportage, the speech reproduced in 'World Trade Center' is nothing if not *moving*. You, dear reader (or listener), are there, living through the events. The poet need not comment in his own person for you to experience the uncertainty, fear, and horror." When the TV or the radio or any other medium floods us with reports and comments about horrifying events, the language becomes empty. We can hear but not grasp, hear but not really listen, and as Uri Cohen commented in the discussion, "it is sort of a minor miracle" that literature can restore the feeling, the experience, and the meaning to the language of the media.

Big Data and ethics are at the center of Renana Keydar's article on rethinking plurality. Keydar brings into literary studies the concept of Big Data and defines it as a "metaphor with which to probe the condition of plurality that characterizes humanity's current response to mass atrocity ... and to probe its underlying ethical assumptions." Her work focuses on the way legal and cultural institutions confront mass atrocities by creating Big Data. Her examples refer to the Eichmann trial (1961) and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995). Keydar argues, "Recent attempts to grapple with mass atrocity indicate a shift of the weight from the once-singular, authoritative voice of the Storyteller, with a capital S, to a choir comprising a multitude of narrators and narratives." If Goldsmith's poem allowed us to create a relived experience out of the Big Data, Keydar's work focuses on the refusal of cultural and legal systems to turn the many into one.

In the article "Code-Switching, Code-Stitching: A Macaronic Poetics?" Jahan Ramazani borrows a term from communication technology and looks at the aesthetic function of a wide range of different poems that include "code-switching." He argues, "Because code-switching in

poetry often seems to hover between speech and writing, we might look to it to resolve ongoing debates over whether to emphasize the scribal or the oral dimensions of poetry, its textuality or its performativity.” Ramazani’s categorization and analysis of code-switching poetry allow us to expand the poetic code. This poetry, he writes, “often points in two opposite directions at once: by virtue of breaking with monologic literariness, it highlights poetry’s speech-effect, its seeming orality; and yet by virtue of its pattern-rich code-stitching, it also signals poetry’s literariness, its bending back of reference on to itself, its insistence on the materiality and sonic texture of words that resonate even across languages.”

Roy Greenwald’s article presents us with one kind of code-switching in Jewish literatures, that of “mistaking” a “signifier because of its phonic identity or proximity to a signifier in another language.” Through examples from rabbinic literature, modern Yiddish culture, and Israeli Hebrew literature, Greenwald demonstrates the creative and interpretative power of this multilingual ambiguity. Reading words and expressions in texts as representing more than one language, one meaning, one context, or one set of references blurs the opposition between written and spoken, between read and heard, and exposes us to the complexity of diglossia.

This focus on how we hear texts and on the way that written and heard texts are interpreted, on this new kind of “difference” or of “traces” that Greenwald describes, brings us to Hans Gumbrecht’s presentation “The Original Sin of Metaphysics? Derrida’s Thesis about the Emergence of Logo-phonocentrism in Its Historical Context.” For Derrida, according to Gumbrecht, real reading along the lines of *différance* and *trace* is only one layer, or 50 percent of real reading. “The real reading, the basic reading, the inevitable reading,” always includes acts of synthesis, retrospectively and prospectively. Gumbrecht suggested in his talk that we “do something completely prohibited by Deconstruction, namely to apply the intuition that is in the concept of *différance* to speech, to oral texts.” He ended his talk with a fragment from Heinrich von Kleist’s “On the Gradual Construction of Thoughts during Speech.” Kleist describes how when we start speaking we have a vague intention and we “stumble forward,” in a way that is equivalent to Derrida’s “vague centrifugal clouds,” to use Gumbrecht’s metaphor. We then, retrospectively and prospectively, engage in synthesis, and by so doing we end up making sense of our own speech, “as opposed to having a conception and then executing this conception. Kleist opens this process to something that Derrida unfortunately never had thought about, and this is dialogue.” In this sense, as we see it, speaking becomes very similar to writing, and the cultural priority we give to writing, as described by Derrida, is questioned.

Naomi Seidman’s article, “Talking Sex: The Distinctive Speech of Modern Jews,” also suggests a rethinking of previous concepts and work. Looking at a selection of texts out of the enormous corpus of relevant works, Seidman conducts a comparative study of the use of profane language in Jewish and non-Jewish texts in order to “draw a Jewish countergenealogy to the one traced in Michel Foucault’s famous *History of Sexuality*, volume 1, to account for Jewish-Christian tensions unexplored within Foucault’s history. Foucault suggests a connection between Christian pastoral confession and the imperative to tell ‘everything concerning . . . sex’ in psychoanalysis.” She “argues that the outsider status of Jews in relation to this imperative helps account for the distinctively Jewish contributions to the discourse around sex in the modern West.” Seidman’s article is a fascinating study of the interplay between speaking, writing, and silencing when it comes to “talking sex” in literature and culture.

Questions of speech and identity are at the center of Russell Berman's "Mimicry and Denial: Proliferating Identities in Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question*." Berman suggests that Jacobson's *The Finkler Question* "examines anti-Semitism in the contemporary United Kingdom, in particular Jewish life besieged by anti-Zionist antagonists." He argues that the novel explores the "specific character of a postmodern anti-Semitism. In a society of fluid identities and self-reinvention, archaic prejudices reassert themselves tenaciously."

Uri S. Cohen's article, "*Lagersprache*: Primo Levi and the Language of Survival," shifts our attention to the limits of language in extreme situations. "The language of survival," Cohen argues, "determines that all are an enemy of all under conditions of deprivation, scarcity, and violence unimagined by theory." The result is an inability to communicate and the inability of language to fully represent the experience. Primo Levi's mastery is in his ability to create "a coded layer of the text that allows access through interpretation to this dark side of experience and the inability to contain it in everyday language. Figurative reading and the language of commerce are shown to be ways to overcome the distance between the language of survival and the language of everyday."

The conference itself was an interesting study case for the spoken/written categories: written lectures were "read" or presented as oral texts with the understanding that they would be collected and published as articles. And indeed, the conference ended with a heated debate over the prime status of written language in literature conferences today, and in disputing the benefits of reading talks in a place that is created for lively communication. The responses to talks are often not included in conference proceedings (unless the editors decide to incorporate some of the comments into the work), and much of the most important knowledge created at these events is lost. This introduction, and the links to recordings of the conference, are our way of addressing this matter and of including the written and the spoken in the online issue.

One of the most interesting discussions that took place in these two days but is not represented in the papers published here focused on literary representations of specific kinds of speech acts. Giddon Ticotsky talked about incorporating speeches in modern Hebrew literature and distinguished this form from long monologue. Chana Kronfeld referred to the Jewish Responsa literature (*She'elot u-Teshuvot*) in contrast to representations of dialogues. In another panel, Dan Miron drew our attention to the centrality of the "spoken/written" opposition in Jewish literatures and its role in shaping these literatures and the way they were perceived.

There were many moments in which we felt gaps in the conversations simply because the participating scholars come from different literary and cultural backgrounds. At some point, one of the participants claimed that promoting multilingualism in scholarship is the only way to create a non-Anglocentric conversation within the field of comparative literature. There were, however, also moments in which we found similarities in experiences and felt that a dialogue might be difficult but possible. One such moment was when Gabriella Safran suggested that many of the talks seemed to counter the perceived naturalness of oral speech and seemed to be impatient, in one way or another, with Derridean anti-logo-phocentrism. The talks created an overall sense that there is never a naturalism, that speech is always very much constructed for a certain audience and a very specific moment, and that this audience is always skeptical and the speaker is always hesitant and self-censoring.

We invited the Israeli poet and scholar Zali Gurevitch to the conference and have included some of his poems in this first issue of *Dibur*. The human conversation is at the center of his work,

which also focuses on the sensory experience and on the filling and emptying of language in the process of reading and of writing. His poetry is Conceptual and essentialist, dealing with the relations between mind and body, man and place, language and silence, thought and action, space and time, poetry and matter, but at the same time, it is wild, associative, and playful. Alongside its (poetic) language that strives for simplicity, clarity, and musicality, this poetry demands from the reader an acute attention to the winding interplays that it sets up between contexts and cultural, poetical, and philosophical arguments. The poems read in the conference took us from the European Dada movement to Gurevitch's Israeli "Baba" poetry, from the empty speech of infants to a speech that combines the young and the old, the meaningless together with the speech that refers to endless meanings. His poetry is a reflection on speech, on the representations of speech and on the speaking/writing subject, and as such, it serves as a perfect example of how poetry can add a different kind of knowledge to our investigations. We have included a link to the introduction and to the reading of the poems.

To conclude, focusing in this first issue on rethinking the representation of speech in literature seems appropriate, given the name of the journal. The Hebrew word *dibur* means "speech"; the more colloquial meaning is "conversation," "understanding," as in the Hebrew expression *yesh li dibur itchem* (either "I have something to tell you" or "You understand me very well"). Our goal in this first issue was to revisit the complex affinities between literature and speech as they manifest themselves in stylistic, ethical, and ideological contexts. As can be seen from this introduction, the articles presented here are not a unified body of work but a dynamic conversation that—to refer to Gumbrecht—started with an intention but grew through centrifugal clouds, which this introduction attempted, quite helplessly, to synthesize. 

ABOUT *Dibur*

Many of you are familiar with the experience of sitting in a public place and speaking with a friend or a colleague in a language that you believe no one else understands. You speak in a normal voice, yet your words are a secret to everyone else. Your conversation is part of the sounds of the place, but at the same time it is a separate linguistic unit—voiced, yet not comprehended. You have the freedom to speak about other people around you or to express views that you might not express otherwise; you can also bring in pieces of information, ways of thinking, from what you hear around you and assume that your conversational partner will be familiar with them. Yet none of your phrases can be understood or quoted by others. You are part of a private and isolated conversation in a public space.

To some extent, we see Hebrew literature and now also Hebrew scholarship as representing this kind of secret conversation. They are a speech that is not hidden in any way, it is not whispered, and it often takes place in a global setting: international conferences, the MLA, we even had several conferences on Hebrew literature here at Stanford, and Hebrew books are translated and read in many places around the world. But all in all, the conversation in the field can still be largely defined by the fact that it is shared by a relatively small community. In our period of so much connectivity and of rapid globalization, one would expect to find more interactions between different geographical and cultural centers. This new connectivity allows us to create new “salons,” new “global public spaces,” and provides us with more opportunities for conversations between different communities. Yet, we argue that despite this welcome change, the discourse in Israel and among Hebrew scholars continues to be isolated, and at times it feels that it is even more isolated than it used to be. The field, so to speak, still finds itself alone with a lot of ideas that could be shared and exchanged but in practice are not.

It was this realization that made us feel that there is a need to join the online public spaces in a new way. We decided to establish a journal that will not stand alone but will be located at *Arcade*, one of the leading and bustling open academic publishing spaces for discussions on literatures and cultures. We are not looking for a way to find common denominators between Hebrew and other literatures and cultures, and also not for anecdotes, or exemplary moments, that would be interesting for the other. What we would like to create instead is a space that will allow us to continuously stay engaged and open. Our goal is to be translating and translating again and again our conversations to the point that they are not just heard but also understood. The need for more inclusive conversation is, of course, not specific to Hebrew or Yiddish, but maybe what we publish here in this new journal can serve as a model for more discussions across different private tables.

In the conversations published here and in the others that took place at the conference, the juxtaposition of comparative literature with Hebrew and other world literatures was both productive and at times also frustrating. Hebrew was for many years mainly a written language. Yiddish, on the other hand, was mainly spoken. Both of these Jewish languages changed their roles in complex ways that reshaped again and again the way speech was represented.

In *Dibur*, we strive to juxtapose works of Hebrew and Jewish literature from around the world with works of scholars engaging with other literatures or literary theory in a way that will allow comparative literature scholars to be exposed in depth to the questions asked and the methodology used in Hebrew and Jewish literature and will require the scholars of Hebrew and Jewish literature to imagine a different audience and to expand their engagement with other world literatures.