Listening to Language in Gadamer's Hermeneutics

Sanda Tomuletiu

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LISTENING TO LANGUAGE IN GADAMER’S HERMENEUTICS

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Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2012
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“Listening to Language in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics”

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LISTENING TO LANGUAGE IN GADAMER’S HERMENEUTICS

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Subscribing to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s belief that human beings are called to be insightful and discerning, this dissertation explores Gadamer’s idea and practice of listening to language in order to understand the relationship between a constitutive theory of language and a life of wisdom. As Gadamer’s texts reveal, the hermeneutic practice of listening to language is a reflective engagement of language that is theoretically grounded in a constitutive view of language. First, we need to listen to language because language, not consciousness, is the critical element in understanding. Second, the ontological priority of language over subjectivity comes with the nature of our primary relationship to language—we belong to it. Language is the medium in which we think and live, which makes us human. This means that our primary and most consequential relationship to language is as hearers, not users, of language. Third, the nature of language is both binding and expansive; hence the problems that come with its binding nature can be
attended to from within language itself, by engaging its expansive nature. In other words, Gadamer does not believe in linguistic determinism.

The first chapter explores the conversation between Gadamer and communication studies by surveying what communication scholars have found significant for communication theory and practice in Gadamer’s thought. The next three chapters examine Gadamer’s idea and practice of listening to language through a close interpretive reading of Gadamer’s texts. This reading reveals three key relationships that define the hermeneutic practice of listening to language: the relationship between ordinary language and conceptual thought (chapter two); the relationship between hearing and understanding (chapter three); and the relationship between language and reason (chapter four). The last chapter takes the conversation between Gadamer and communication studies further by considering some ways in which the hermeneutic practice of listening to language can assist communication scholars and practitioners in becoming discerning and insightful.
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CHAPTER ONE

ENTERING THE CONVERSATION: GADAMER AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES

_I do not believe that the full potential that lies in language, and that enables language to keep pace with reason, has been properly considered._

(Gadamer, “Boundaries of Language” 10)

INTRODUCTION

In his 1978 review of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, John Angus Campbell introduced Gadamer’s seminal book to communication scholars by saying that this text was too important to be left to its target audience—the philosophers (101). However, as John Arthos notes, despite the fact that Gadamer makes communication the center, he is misunderstood by communication scholars. Arthos aims to correct some of these misunderstandings through in-depth explorations of the intellectual traditions that influenced Gadamer’s thought. It is these traditions that Stanley Deetz credits with the appeal as well as difficulty of Gadamer’s reception in American communication studies ("Conceptualizing Human Understanding" 12). This ambivalence towards Gadamer may also be explained by the fact that his ideas constitute a paradigm shift that calls into question “some of Western humanity’s most entrenched and cherished beliefs” (Stewart, “One Philosophical Dimension” 343). Campbell, Arthos, Deetz, Stewart, and others agree that this paradigm shift places the discipline of communication on higher ground, granting it deeper, greater significance.
This chapter explores the conversation between Gadamer and communication studies by surveying what communication scholars have found significant for communication theory and practice in Gadamer’s thought. This literature survey has five sections, corresponding to five topics that are essential to philosophical hermeneutics and that have captured the attention of communication scholars: understanding, rhetoric, conversation, language, and listening. These topics are also central to the question that drives this dissertation project, namely, *What is the relationship between a constitutive theory of language and a life of wisdom?* In order to understand how a constitutive view of language can help us become insightful and discerning thinkers and speakers, this dissertation explores Gadamer’s idea and practice of listening to language.

Gadamer’s view of understanding has captured the attention of communication scholars because it constitutes a paradigm shift from a reproductive and psychological view of understanding to a productive and ontological view. Unlike the idea of understanding in traditional American communication studies, which is circumscribed by empathy, correctness, and statements, Gadamer’s idea of understanding focuses on the content of messages, is concerned with the incompleteness of meaning, and is driven by questions. Scholars have found that, because of its ontological ground, Gadamer’s view of understanding promises to connect communication research with practice, hence leads to a genuine understanding of communication phenomena—something that has been needed in the field.

Dissatisfied with the presumption that the ground of the discipline must be scientific, some scholars have found an alternative theoretical ground in Gadamer’s broad, humanist view of rhetoric. His grounding of rhetoric in *logos* grants rhetoric an
epistemic role. Communication scholars have also found Gadamer’s efforts to articulate
the differences between scientific and prudential reasoning significant towards extending
and deepening traditional rhetorical theory.

As communication scholars have observed, the conversation that lies at the heart
of Gadamer’s hermeneutics accounts for his broad, dialogic view of rhetoric. Scholars
have found Gadamer’s idea of conversation particularly helpful in addressing the
problems raised by modernity, such as Enlightenment rationalism, Cartesian dualism, and
scientific objectivism. The centrality of the subject matter (die Sache) to Gadamer’s view
of conversation has captured the scholars’ attention in particular because it brings a
reversal of emphasis from traditional American communication studies, namely, from the
author of a discourse to the content of that discourse.

Gadamer’s focus on the subject matter is grounded in his ontology of language.
Communication scholars turned to Gadamer’s ontological view of language as
constitutive because they found it intellectually compelling, offering solutions to
problems caused by Cartesian thinking, and representing a more encompassing view of
language than the representational-instrumental view. Gadamer’s view of language has
also provided our field with the ontological and phenomenological ground for a critique
of an instrumental-representational theory of language.

Gadamer’s view of listening has received much less attention in our discipline
than the other ideas surveyed in this chapter. However, a few communication scholars
have acknowledged the centrality of listening to Gadamer’s productive view of
understanding, his idea of conversation, dialogic view of rhetoric, and constitutive theory
of language. This dissertation project explores Gadamer’s view of listening in the
framework of his ontology of language and the hermeneutic practice of listening to language.

**Understanding**

**The objective consciousness of communication studies**

This section deals primarily with the self-understanding of the communication field. Deetz is a leading communication scholar who has developed in more depth than others the relevance of Gadamer’s view of understanding to the self-understanding of the field. Therefore, this section will rely substantially on his work. The main problem identified early on by communication scholars who turned to Gadamer’s texts was the scientific ground of the discipline—in Deetz’ words, “the ‘objective consciousness’ which dominates the field” ("Conceptualizing Human Understanding” 15). In 1978 Deetz mentioned communication scholars’ disillusionment with the results of research in the previous twenty-five years (12). Deetz identified the lack of historical self-awareness of the discipline as the cause; Michael J. Hyde blamed the disciplinary situatedness “outside the experience where the communication scientist can maintain a distanced, ‘objective’ point of view” (81). Stewart, Arthos, and Jeffery Bineham concur with Deetz and Hyde.

According to Deetz, the negative outcomes of the fact that the field of communication is “largely unaware of its own prejudices” (i.e., it lacks historical self-awareness) are the following: concepts and methods “dominate experience without responsibility”; communication research has not increased understanding of communication phenomena, leading, instead, to the reification of experience; and, the discipline is unable to separate appropriate from inappropriate prejudices ("Conceptualizing Human Understanding” 14, 15, 22; “Negation” 436). The situatedness
of communication studies outside experience is seen to have led to objectification, to not tackling the “essential nature” of human communication as “a lived-through experience (Erlebnis)” (Hyde 81), and to the reproduction of “past intentions and perceptions of the world,” thus failing “to come to grips with the originary moves in experience and understanding—with truth itself” (Deetz, “Negation” 435). This cluster of problems motivated communication scholars to explore alternative theoretical grounds for the discipline, and so they turned to continental philosophers such as Heidegger, Gadamer, Buber, and Ricoeur. This work of exploration began with questioning the presuppositions of a scientific ground for communication studies and continued with a work of reconceptualization of basic concepts, theories, and presuppositions.

**Gadamer’s alternative**

In addressing the problem of the scientific ground of the study of communication, scholars have found Gadamer helpful because he discusses the problem of grounding the humanities in science and provides a “philosophy of inquiry” as an alternative to contemporary social science (Stewart, “Philosophy of Qualitative Inquiry” 118). Insofar as the problem is concerned, Robert L. Scott points out that Gadamer showed how “the typical attitudes of science leave experience incompletely understood” (“On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic: Ten Years Later” 263) and Deetz mentions that Gadamer warned against the human tendency “to subjectivize (psychologize) the nature of experience and understanding” (“Negation” 435). As for the alternative provided by Gadamer, it addresses the problems identified with an objective consciousness, provides the discipline with a historical self-awareness, and grants it greater significance.
Deetz points out that Gadamer’s philosophy of inquiry provides a way to think outside of dichotomies such as “subjectivity and objectivity” and “idealism and empiricism” which are central to the objective consciousness that characterizes the communication field (“Conceptualizing Human Understanding” 12). Bineham and Stewart reach the same conclusion as they discuss Gadamer’s views of language and conversation. Also, as Stewart and Deetz point out when they discuss Gadamer’s relevance to interpersonal communication and organizational communication, and Arthos to rhetoric, by providing the intellectual history of concepts central to communication studies, Gadamer responds to the particular disciplinary need for historical self-awareness (Stewart, “One Philosophical Dimension” 343). Moreover, Campbell and Deetz urge communication scholars to consider the questions Gadamer asks because they are more appropriate to the nature of communication than those asked by American communication studies and they also place the discipline on higher ground. Gadamer’s questions are concerned with “the process rather than the results of interaction” (Campbell 101; Deetz, “Conceptualizing Human Understanding” 20). Stewart says that Gadamer’s view of understanding as a process instead of product makes it “ontologically not just epistemologically significant” (“Philosophy of Qualitative Inquiry” 119). Finally, Arthos credits Gadamer with “the inestimable service of returning the culture of inquiry to its rightful home in the *studia humanitatis*” in a way that runs counter to the interpretation of “rhetorical humanism as sophistry” that has followed under Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s influence (“Hermeneutic Version” 77).
Towards a disciplinary hermeneutic consciousness

The concept of understanding is central to this exploration of alternative theoretical grounds for communication studies and can help us understand Deetz’s commitment to “the development of a ‘hermeneutic consciousness’” in the discipline (“Conceptualizing Human Understanding” 15). In order to understand the need for a hermeneutic consciousness in our discipline, we need to understand the idea of understanding as traditionally understood in American communication studies. According to Deetz, the traditional American communication studies view of understanding is summed up by three words: empathy, correctness, and statement (15, 17). As Deetz notes, as long as understanding is viewed as empathy, the primary communicative task is “to build bridges or remove barriers so the self can get into the other and recreate [the other’s] subjective experience or see the world as [the other] sees it” (16). Deetz also finds fault with “the desire for the correct understanding” in American scholarship because it transforms “the communicant” into a scientist by expecting him or her “to give up prejudices and deny his/her own role as actor” (17). Furthermore, Deetz remarks, the underlying assumption that sameness makes understanding easier leads to the reification of concepts and the psychologization of the elements of the communication process. As a result, the statement becomes the “unit of meaning most under consideration” (16-17).

Deetz notes that Gadamer’s view of understanding constitutes “a reversal in emphasis from most American communication studies” because for Gadamer “understanding fundamentally is a problem of understanding messages rather than

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1 The English translations of Gadamer’s texts indicate that Gadamer uses the words concept and idea interchangeably, unless the context or the topic being discussed calls for one or the other. This project follows this usage pattern.
people” (“Conceptualizing Human Understanding” 18). He also points out that Gadamer argued against the idea of a perfect or correct understanding (18). When understanding is fundamentally related to messages, the concern becomes incompleteness, and not misunderstanding. In contrast to the idea of correctness that defines the American communication studies view of understanding, Gadamer’s understanding is dialectical and prejudiced, i.e., it is productive, not reproductive of meaning. A dialectical view sees understanding as always exceeding each participant’s understanding; thus, it has “a speculative character forming and exceeding itself with every movement” (19). A productive view of understanding also makes the question replace the statement as the fundamental unit of meaning. Deetz points out the significance of this reversal, saying that “Gadamer’s strength is in demonstrating the primacy of the question over the assertion in the development of human thought” (“Negation” 437). Arthos shows the link between the question and hermeneutic consciousness: “Gadamer appears to be saying that the closure of the Enlightenment individualism is the absence of a question, and the openness of the hermeneutic person is the cultivation of the question” (“Humanity of the Word” 489). The other idea that is essential to Gadamer’s dialectical, productive view of understanding is difference or otherness. Deetz mentions the central function of otherness in questioning prejudices and thus allowing the subject matter to emerge (“Negation” 437). Arthos also mentions the productivity of Gadamer’s idea of difference when he writes that “Gadamer’s difference is always a productive relation” (“Who Are We” 32).

Deetz writes that in Gadamer’s view understanding “is always prejudiced” (“Conceptualizing Human Understanding” 18). Therefore, the communicative task for the communication researcher is, he says, not to “give up prejudices and deny his or her
role as actor,” but to enhance his or her “ability to distinguish productive from unproductive prejudices” (18). The peculiar centrality of prejudice to Gadamer’s view of understanding is captured by Deetz with insightful clarity when he says, “Prejudices are necessary to prepare understanding but are denied in the very process of understanding” (“Negation” 436). Deetz, Stewart, and Bineham mention Gadamer’s restoration of prejudice—as a condition necessary for understanding and characteristic of the human condition (“Negation” 436; “Interpretive Listening” 383; “Hermeneutic Medium” 9). In 1983 Stewart expressed regret that this new understanding of prejudice had had no impact on communication textbooks (“Interpretive Listening” 383). Bineham tries to correct a common misunderstanding of prejudice (i.e., read through modern lens) by noting that, to Gadamer, “prejudices are not individual or subjective character traits,” but are social in nature (“Hermeneutic Medium” 6-7). Bineham explains: “Within this perspective, true subjectivity is impossible. From the moment of experience one is already biased, one already assumes certain basic agreements about what the world is like—politically, morally, ontologically. One does not subjectively assent to these agreements” (6-7). Deetz also points out the centrality of prejudice to Gadamer’s idea of conversation which, unlike Habermas’ ‘ideal speech situation’ “does not seek to escape from prejudices but to speak out of them in the most thorough and committed form” (“Keeping the Conversation Going” 275). Deetz explains how prejudice defines Gadamer’s productive view of understanding by redefining the idea of openness as “the willingness to put one’s expressions to the test rather than an empathic understanding of another as held in the liberal ideas. Understanding is, thus, conceptualized as a productive fusion of prejudice” (276).
As these communication scholars have observed, not only does Gadamer provide a critique of the scientific ground of the human sciences, but he also offers an alternative ground: rhetoric. It is Gadamer’s rhetoric as taken up in communication scholarship that will be the focus of the next section.

**Rhetoric**

The contribution that Gadamer’s conception of rhetoric brings to rhetorical studies, as acknowledged in our field so far, can be summed up as follows: along with *praxis*, rhetoric provides the ground for the human sciences, whose distinctive mode of knowledge is *phronesis* (practical knowledge).

**Gadamer’s humanist rhetoric**

Arthos’ commitment to the task of describing “hermeneutics as the depth dimension of rhetoric” and his familiarity with Gadamer’s texts and his intellectual traditions enable him to see Gadamer’s contributions to rhetoric in an unprecedented fashion. He writes that

in spite of the obliqueness of his attention to rhetoric, [Gadamer] made extraordinary contributions to many facets of the canon that are somewhat camouflaged by the tack he took toward civic humanism. He advances with inestimable depth and originality a number of rhetorical cruces—to name a few, the structure of deliberative judgment (*phronesis, krisis*), the nature of issues (*res, Sache*), the function of starting points (*topoi, loci, sensus communis*), the role of audience, the definition of *praxis*, the location of agency. The lacuna for which he felt some responsibility was
less a deficit of attention as a question of framing. (“Hermeneutic Version” 77)

Gadamer’s conception of rhetoric developed by Arthos more fully in the 2000’s had been already mentioned by Hyde and Smith, and Scott in the 70’s—by Hyde and Smith in their seminal article “Hermeneutics and Rhetoric: A Seen but Unobserved Relationship,” and by Scott in his article “On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic: Ten Years Later” (266). Arthos explains that Gadamer’s view of rhetoric is as broad as “all discourse that seeks a shared understanding and builds community,” limited only by the fact that “it does not depend on separate proof to make its truth self-evident” (“Hermeneutic Version” 71). Arthos presents Gadamer’s idea of rhetoric in stark contrast to modern rhetoric. If the latter is the kind encountered in handbooks and is defined by “instrumental agency and persuasive stratagems,” Gadamer’s view fits the emerging definition in rhetorical studies, which Arthos describes as “dialogic, attendant on listening as much as speaking, grounded existentially, resistant to the dichotomy of meaning and style, and as broad in scope as living speech” (“Hermeneutic Version” 70, 71).

Although a “humbler path” which departs from the “royal road of Western philosophy”—as Arthos calls Gadamer’s view of rhetoric—this view is of significant importance. Arthos writes, “Rhetoric’s notorious problem of persuasive deception is replaced by language’s function of showing and concealing as the constitutive truth of human being” (“Hermeneutic Version” 71). After exploring Gadamer’s contribution to epistemic rhetoric, Hyde and Smith wrote in 1979: “rhetoric is far more inherent, far more pervasive, and far more instrumental in the epistemic function than most scholars have supposed. Once the proper place of rhetoric is recognized, theories of
communication, and particularly rhetorical criticism, will become deeper, more important, and more enduring” (363).

Interested in Gadamer’s “extraordinary contributions” to the rhetorical canon, Arthos traces Gadamer’s view of rhetoric back to “the ‘indirect’ or ‘unwritten’ tradition of Greek thought” and sees it as “a conscious and unconscious appropriation of Heidegger’s Aristotle” (“Hermeneutic Version” 77, 71). He believes that Gadamer read Aristotle “against Aristotle’s manifest intention, because Gadamer understood the key insight of ancient rhetoric to be that reason is embodied, that logos is thinking and speaking, that rhetoric is the locus of social discursivity” (73). Arthos’ particular contributions in presenting Gadamer’s thought to communication scholars come with his explorations of Gadamer’s humanism. He believes that “Gadamer owes much to the humanism Heidegger rejected” (“Humanity of the Word” 491) and that he was more able to understand humanism than we are with “our Enlightenment eyes” (484). Arthos claims that Gadamer’s hermeneutical project is an effort “to rejoin what [Gadamer] called the ‘unbroken tradition of rhetorical and humanist culture’ to its own thought” (477). He sees that Gadamer tries “to place the metaphysical tradition under the sign of a humanist rhetoric, tracing an unbroken line from Socrates to Vico” (“Hermeneutic Version” 73). Gadamer’s appropriation of the humanist tradition and his turn to Vico in *Truth and Method* had been earlier mentioned, if only briefly, by Jost and Hyde (11).

**Praxis and phronesis**

Communication scholars have also recognized the significance for rhetorical studies of Gadamer’s grounding of philosophical hermeneutics in *praxis* and *phronesis*. If Jost and Hyde appreciate that the contemporary hermeneutic (philosophic) reflections on
Michael Calvin McGee remarks that Gadamer locates the difference between hermeneutics and social science in Aristotle’s distinctions between the different kinds of knowledge, and Bineham notes how Gadamer’s appropriation of *praxis* and *phronesis* brings the two disciplines, hermeneutics and rhetoric, together (“Displacing Descartes” 309). As for Gadamer’s view of *phronesis*, McGee sees Gadamer’s practical philosophy as grounded in a theory of the ideal person—the *phronimos*, which “can be taken as the key not only to *Truth and Method*, but to all of Gadamer’s projects since 1960” (20). In response to McGee’s treatment of Gadamer’s *phronesis*, Arthos clarifies a potential misunderstanding, namely, that *phronesis*, at its best, is not “an individual’s possession,” i.e., “not the ideal of the isolated reflective subject,” but rather “the transit point where experience is transformed into judgment and judgment replenishes the store of knowledge” (“Humanity of the Word” 478; “Who Are We” 23).

Despite their recognition of Gadamer’s contribution to a philosophical and rhetorical understanding of *phronesis* and *praxis*, various communication scholars see Gadamer’s restoration of *praxis* and engagement of *phronesis* as insufficiently helpful for social and political theory. Arthos and Hariman find Gadamer politically naïve and see Gadamer’s approach to *praxis* and *phronesis* too bourgeois to be able to respond to the complexities of modern political societies (Arthos, “Who Are We” 18; Hariman 291). While Arthos grounds his critique in the intellectual traditions behind Gadamer’s thought, Hariman blames it on philosophy.

Despite Gadamer’s not being able, to use Deetz’ words, “to offer social and political guidance” (“Keeping the Conversation Going” 277), Arthos acknowledges
Gadamer’s contribution as being that of transforming the ontological turn into a social phenomenon: “In so far as the ontological turn had taken direction from its subjectivist roots, sociality was subordinate. Gadamer has attempted to restore the majesty of its claim to the being who we are . . . Out of the traditions of the self he has tried to extract a tradition of community coming to be in the ongoing conversation that we are” (“Who Are We” 32). Hariman sums up Gadamer’s contribution (despite its limitations) as follows:

Although Gadamer allows the political register of prudence to be wholly obscured while he highlights ethical and rhetorical concerns, he brings out the full significance of the contrast between scientific and prudential reasoning. In addition, by elevating prudence to the stature of a philosophical vocabulary capable of encompassing the problems of hermeneutics, Gadamer in a single stroke clarifies the relationships between various modes of knowledge, valorizes practical experience and ordinary language, identifies how understanding occurs through application, provides a means for understanding various realms of practice while still recognizing their relative autonomy, and posits a theoretical succession from the tradition of practical philosophy to philosophical hermeneutics. (290-291)

Since “Gadamer claims for himself the distinctive role of discovering the basis of *phronesis* in dialogue rather than virtue,” as Arthos writes, and since he replaces the intentionality and instrumentalism of modern rhetoric with what Arthos calls the “ideal speech community,” the next section will tackle Gadamer’s idea of conversation (“Hermeneutic Version” 71, 72).
Communication scholars have found that Gadamer’s view of conversation helps with the problems raised by Enlightenment rationalism, Cartesian dualism, and scientific objectivism in the field of communication. Stewart and Deetz have shown the significance of Gadamer’s conversation for communication research, interpersonal communication, and communication ethics, while Bineham and Arthos have done the same for rhetoric.

Arthos sees dialogue and community as “the absolute center” of Gadamer’s thought and “his most innovative departure from Heidegger” (“Who Are We” 18). He places “the conversational community which lies at the heart of [Gadamer’s] thought” in the historical context of the intellectual traditions that shaped his views (15). Arthos further notes that the fact that ”the ontological event of being is apart from subjective origins, and in its deepest nature communal” is central to Gadamer’s attack against Enlightenment rationalism, Cartesian dualism, Romantic subjectivism, and scientific objectivism (15).

Distance and fusion of horizons are two interrelated ideas that define Gadamer’s conversation and have often been misunderstood by communication scholars. Deetz explains the central role played by distance in Gadamer’s view of conversation:

Distance between human traditions, rather than needing bridging in communication, makes both self and other more understandable since that which is normally taken for granted in an unaware sense is now brought into inspection. Conversations out of the same historic traditions may flow smoothly and transmit information but leave un-understood the total
matrix of experience which led the information to mean what it did and the array of possibilities the information might have had for experience and existence. ("Conceptualizing Human Understanding" 18)

Arthos answers the frequent misunderstanding of Gadamer’s fusion of horizons when he writes that “distance is constitutive of the history of who ‘we’ are” because by fusion of horizons Gadamer does not mean “the utopian desideratum of organic wholeness, but an unfolding conversation of an infinite finitude . . . the reading as it unfolds” (“Who Are We” 31). In a voice similar to Arthos and informed by his commitment to identity formation, Deetz explains Gadamer’s fusion of horizons (consensus) as being “reached in the formation of new integrative concepts rather than by the force of the better argument” ("Keeping the Conversation Going" 275-276). Stewart brings up Gadamer’s fusion of horizons in his discussion of hermeneutic listening, where he says, “Differences still remain, and one critical aspect of hermeneutic consciousness is acceptance and even celebration of the tension between irreconcilable horizons” (“Interpretive Listening” 388).

Stewart offers a helpful description of Gadamer’s view of conversation, saying that a genuine conversation has five characteristics:

1) The informed and thoughtful pursuit of substantive, consequential questions. . . . the subject matter (die Sache) is focal; . . . the point is that the topic is larger than the subjectivities of the interlocutors. 2) A commitment to increased insight rather than self-glorification or self-defense. The point is not to ‘win,’ ‘excel,’ or defend one’s position but to further one’s ability to articulate a problematic. 3) An interest not only in
the otherness of the other but also in his or her strongest case. . . . (4) An
acknowledgment that every outcome, no matter how resolved it may
appear, is necessarily unfinished and incomplete, and (5) The willingness
to persevere through dissension and apparent irreconciliabilities.

(“Dialogue and Deconstruction” 262-263)

Regarding the second point in Stewart’s description, Hyde muses: “Perhaps Gadamer,
like Plato in the Thaetetus (167e), equates argumentation with ‘debate’—that inauthentic
way of examining Being when contrasted with the dialectical inquiry of ‘conversation’”
(96). And Deetz puts it best: “The concern is not with supporting one’s claims but finding
the key questions” (“Conceptualizing Human Understanding” 20).

**The subject matter**

Gadamer’s focus on the subject matter (*die Sache*), which is essential to his view
of conversation (as Stewart’s description makes clear), has captured the attention of
communication scholars. Campbell puts it concisely and beautifully: “All genuine
meeting, from Gadamer’s perspective, is over something” (347); Hyde refers to the
subject matter as the “object” that distinguishes, for Gadamer, between “hermeneutical
conversation” and “therapeutic” conversation (97); and Arthos clarifies the meaning of
the “hermeneutic ‘object’” by grounding it historically: “a rather misleading synonym for
affair, issue or matter-at-hand that harkens back more to the Roman *res* or *causa* than to
our conventional notions of empirical ‘object’” (“Humanity of the Word” 487). Deetz
explains Gadamer’s emphasis on the subject matter with the natural dynamics of a
genuine conversation, which we have all experienced: “The driving force of a genuine
conversation is not the participants but the subject matter. . . . As the conversation
develops it takes on a life of its own; it becomes difficult, if not irrelevant, to determine who said what” ("Negation" 437). And here Gadamer’s approach is, again, a reversal of the customary view in communication studies, as Deetz points out: “while most in communication studies turn to consider what each person has to say about the subject matter, Gadamer focuses on what the subject matter ‘says’ to each” ("Reclaiming the Subject Matter" 232). Perhaps Deetz sums up best the rhetorical and ethical significance of the shift from subjectivity to the subject matter in Gadamer’s view of conversation when he says, “It is not the insides of the other or the self that is to be understood for either would be covering up the objective demand of the subject matter with one’s subjective reaction;” and also: “to the extent that the object or other is silenced by the success, the capacity to engage in conceptual expansion and reach open consensus on the subject matter is limited” (232). As Deetz remarks, because of its focus on the subject matter, Gadamer’s conversation “has the character of progressively opening the prejudicial certainty of each individual to question” (232).

Deetz sees the centrality of the subject matter to Gadamer’s conversation as a valid ground for an interpersonal system ethics, a subject-matter-focused communication ethic. The problem identified by Deetz in interpersonal ethics is its foundation—Enlightenment rationalism. He finds that the 18th-century concepts of language, experience, communication, and the individual are seriously flawed because they start from the individual standpoint, hence lead to a concern with expression and representation ("Reclaiming the Subject Matter" 228). Because of his interest in identity formation, Deetz finds that the liberal traditions of ethics do not address concerns such as the suppression of open formation of opinion, beyond those already possessed, i.e., they
do not answer ethical questions such as *How can interests be ethically produced rather than how are they appropriately represented?* This is why he sees stoppages in an interaction system as the clearest measure of an unethical communication system (232). Therefore, Deetz’s ethical principle inspired by Gadamer’s view of conversation is, *Keep the conversation going!* This means that “the communicative act should be responsive to the subject matter of the conversation and at the same time establish the conditions for future unrestrained formation of experience” (232).

Gadamer’s hermeneutical and rhetorical emphasis on the subject matter is grounded ontologically in *logos*. In his review of *Truth and Method* Campbell writes that the “surprising thing” about Gadamer’s view of conversation is its ontological ground, *logos*: “From Gadamer’s standpoint, every dyad is a triad. That is, when two are gathered together the *logos*, the word, the ideality of language is there too. And the great play begins again. One falls into a genuine conversation and in the play of language, which is after all the only game in town” (345). Gadamer’s constitutive view of language helps explain why Gadamer finds conversation paradigmatic for the nature of language. His view of language makes the topic of the next section.

**LANGUAGE**

Communication scholars familiar with Gadamer’s view of language have provided several reasons for exploring it: it is intellectually compelling, it offers solutions to problems caused by Cartesian thinking, and various communication research programs have already argued for it. Also, Gadamer’s view of language constitutes a more encompassing view than the representational-instrumental view; hence it provides a
higher ground for the communication discipline. Finally, contemporary society calls for it.

In his 1973 article “Words without Things: Toward a Social Phenomenology of Language” Deetz introduces communication scholars to Gadamer’s view of language and provides them with a couple of reasons for exploring it. These reasons are still valid today, almost four decades later: “This view of language is not totally new and perhaps even now its time has not properly come. Yet the view seems intellectually compelling even though specific potential implications of the view are only partially apparent. Further, present day society seems to demand a new view of language” (51). Bineham and Stewart concur with Deetz that, despite the fact that Gadamer’s view of language is not new, it demands the attention of communication scholars: Bineham sees Gadamer’s approach as unique (“Hermeneutic Medium” 3) and Stewart finds it the best articulation of a post-semiotic view of language. While Gadamer’s constitutive view of language challenges some communication research programs, as Stewart notes in his review of *Dialogue and Deconstruction* (262), he also remarks that the view has already received recognition in our field—research areas such as epistemic rhetoric, rhetoric of science, ethnographic communication research and pragmatics have already “argued for the primary as contrasted with the secondary or derived significance of speech” (“Speech and Human Being” 55). Finally, there is unanimous consent among the communication scholars familiar with Gadamer’s view of language that “by positing linguisticality as the ontological ground of human being,” Gadamer “restores communication scholarship to a position of even more importance than rhetoric enjoyed in the Middle Ages” (Stewart, “Philosophy of Qualitative Inquiry” 120, emphasis removed).
Communication scholars develop several ideas that are essential to understanding Gadamer’s constitutive view of language. These are the primacy of its revealing function over its signifying function, the concepts of world and medium, its unreflective and social nature, and the paradox of the subject matter inherent in it. An idea foregrounded in these discussions is how Gadamer’s constitutive view of language grounds his efforts towards “removing the privilege attendant on the subjective self enshrined in Western thought” (Arthos, *Inner Word* 159).

**The self-revelation of the subject matter**

Deetz describes Gadamer’s constitutive view of language by explicating what it means to say that the primary mode of being of language is to reveal, not to signify. The revelatory dimension of language—the fact that “words have no *raison d'être* other than to reveal what they bring to language”—stems from its ontological relationship to human experience: “an experience is not first wordless and then subsumed under the generality of a word through naming” (“Words without Things” 47). Arthos captures the primary revealing function of language beautifully: the word is “a conceptual point of access to the real” because “Reality is the cooperation of intellectual act with material possibility, and there is never no cooperation” (*Inner Word* 148).

Deetz also introduces communication scholars to the paradox of the subject matter (*)die Sache*) that is intrinsic to Gadamer’s constitutive view of language: “Each word ‘discloses’ or brings into perspective its subject matter in a particular dimension. Language makes possible the meaningfulness of things by disclosing the life-world and by developing the projective stance from which the subject matter’s implications arise or are revealed” (“Words without Things” 48). Deetz refers to Richard Palmer’s example of
the sentence *The tree is green* to explain how the paradox of the *Sache* corrects the representational view of language centered in the speaking subject: “The tree is green’ does not designate a perception or a mental concept but the subject matter itself disclosed in a certain light: the tree is disclosed in its greenness” (47). Arthos’ book-length exploration of Gadamer’s reflections on the inner word in *Truth and Method* explicates the intellectual background of Gadamer’s non-reflective view of language: “In his appropriation of the Thomistic doctrine of the inner word, Gadamer cautions that the word is not the reflection of the mind (and we hear here again the constant fear of a return to subjectivism), but of the subject matter to which language is addressed” (“Who Are We” 21).

**World and medium**

Bineham introduces communication scholars to Gadamer’s view of language as the medium in which we live as human beings. He explains how Gadamer’s view of language as a medium corrects the modern subject-object dichotomy inherent in the instrumental view of language: “Language brings both humans and the human world into being. It is the point at which human reality is generated. . . . The possibilities of an objective world or a subjective observer are extinguished, for all that is experienced and all who experience are shaped by the medium” (“Hermeneutic Medium” 6, 12). Along with Deetz, and Hyde and Smith, Stewart explains Gadamer’s concept of world, which is foundational to an understanding of language as constitutive: the human world is “a world not of things but of meaning” (*Language as Articulate Contact* 116). Stewart gives the example of a neighborhood and explains that what makes it a neighborhood is “not its number of persons per block but one’s comfort or discomfort, preference or resistance,
enjoyment or distress” (116). Finally, as Deetz and others remark, for Gadamer, the world that is revealed in language is a social world, namely, “the cumulative experience of a society” (Deetz, “Words without Things” 48). One implication for communication studies, as Stewart notes, is that language ceases to be merely an instrument used to reach communication because “the traditional distinction between language and communication is materially altered, or even effaced” (Language as Articulate Contact 112). Understanding the nature of language as a medium, not a tool, also helps us understand why Gadamer views conversation as defining the nature of language: “features of human worlds do not first exist and then get spoken or written of; they come into being in talk” (Stewart, Language as Articulate Contact 113). Stewart coins terms such as “languaging,” “worlding,” and “articulate contact” in order to emphasize the ontological, social, and communicative nature of Gadamer’s constitutive view of language, as opposed to a monologic, psychological, and individual view (119). Arthos acknowledges this shift in Gadamer’s view of language from the individual mind to a social world too:

For Gadamer, language has its constitutive role for human being precisely because it ‘is not a creation of reflexive thinking’ . . . There is no world over here and language over there, but a world that emerges out of our being creatures of language. He associates reflexivity with the Cartesian isolation of the mind and the ascendancy of the subject. . . . language is the medium of our being together, that which links us to each other and our common concerns. . . . So Gadamer’s polemical insistence on the unreflective character of the word is about the organic, or at least holistic,
relation of reason and speech, history, culture, tradition, and community.

(*Inner Word* 136)

The fact that language constitutes the medium in which we think and live does not mean, to Gadamer, that language is a prison for thought. Deetz and Bineham point that out clearly. Deetz writes that Gadamer’s view of language “has the nature of an open-ended social institution, i.e., words are already meaningful but with multiple implications,” making possible both “exact designation” and “creative authentic communication” (“Words without Things” 51). Bineham clarifies the particularity of the human world shaped by language, as understood by Gadamer:

> [T]hough people live within a medium, they are not totally captive to one particular manner of interpretation, understanding, and experience. . . . People live within a medium that *does* exhibit preferred understandings and interpretations, but other often unnoticed possibilities do exist within the medium and can be embraced and cultivated. ("Hermeneutic Medium" 13)

Arthos connects Gadamer’s unreflective idea of language to his productive view of understanding—as an increase in Being: “the word is not reflective because it is not a rebounding back upon itself or the speaker, but rather it is an emanation into the world that works to constitute that world. It does not come back to the sender like the sound waves off a flat surface, but with additions, in the response of another” (*Inner Word* 160).

**Constitutive and/or representational**

Communication scholars have found that Gadamer’s approach to language addresses problems associated with representational views of language. Deetz identifies a
couppl of these problems, which are captured by Bineham under the umbrella of “Cartesian problems traditionally associated with the Western linguistic heritage” (“Displacing Descartes” 305). In Deetz’s view, “the derivative, representational, functional views” of language “seem unnecessarily limited and have undesirable ramifications” (“Words without Things” 41). Among these undesirable ramifications is the fact that the representational views of language “tend toward abstractionism” because they objectify language. By this Deetz means that they destroy the “identity” between language, experience and meaning (41, 47). In other words, the representational views of language cover over the constitutive view, which is grounded in the ontological relationship between language and experience.

Second, Deetz writes that the objectification of language that comes with “the formalistic, nominalistic, derivative conceptions of language” leads to a view of communication that is intimately connected to control—a view that seems fit for “a technological society intent on controlling the environment and mankind and for transmitting facts rather than generating insight” (“Words without Things” 51). And Deetz continues, “If we wish to understand the possibilities and implications of what another says rather than merely know what he says,” we would need to embrace a constitutive view of language like Gadamer’s (51). By granting language “only the ability to order and transmit that which is already possessed by both speaker and listener” Deetz believes that a representational view of language is “inadequate to describe the formative human experiences of coming to see a thing in a new way or our understanding of the dissimilar experiences of another made available in language” (41). Finally, Deetz captures Gadamer’s critique of the representational view of language when he writes that
“the scientific ideal for signs of exact designation and unambiguous concepts narrows the human World, robs natural words of their fundamental formative power, and allows words to be seen as separate from the being of the thing that is thought” (47).

The question of compatibility between the representational and the constitutive view is answered both affirmatively and negatively by communication scholars. Deetz and Bineham see the constitutive view as primary and encompassing the representational view. Bineham writes: “Any ‘objects’ of reference exist within a linguistic medium and, consequently, are ontologically constituted by language before any specific acts of reference occur. While language does operate referentially, it always does so within a linguistic medium that generates the referents” (“Hermeneutic Medium” 6). Deetz believes that “the most apparent” advantage of the constitutive view of language is that “it can encompass most or all other views without reduction, for it stands as a background or source for derivative views” (“Words without Things” 50).

Stewart brings up the core problem behind the question of compatibility, as mentioned by Heidegger and Gadamer, namely, that the constitutive dimension of language “is covered over by the semiotic assumption” (“Speech and Human Being” 66-7). Deetz and Bineham agree with Stewart’s reading. If in his 1986 article “Speech and Human Being” Stewart sees the two views as compatible—human speech being “a phenomenon that not only signifies or symbolizes but that also (perhaps primordially)reveals, constitutes, or embodies ‘world’ between persons”—in his book-length study of language published nine years later, he sees the constitutive and the representational-instrumental views as “incommensurable” (61, 113). Through an in-depth analysis of the conceptuality used in communication scholarship, Stewart identifies
five commitments of the semiotic view of language. He points out that scholars’ use of the vocabulary of sign/symbol brings them close to embracing the representational model (Language as Articulate Contact 12). Stewart’s exploration leads him to the following conclusion: “the same phenomena cannot be both constitutive and representational or instrumental. Language cannot be coherently treated as simultaneously a world-constituting, characteristically human way of being, and as a system that is instrumentally employed by already-constituted humans to represent aspects of their worlds and accomplish their goals” (113). Stewart believes that “one cannot make instrumental use of the constitutive mode of one’s being-in-the-world” (114).

As this dissertation project will show, Gadamer’s constitutive view of language grounds his view of listening. Although Gadamer’s view of listening is not as developed in communication studies as the other topics discussed so far, the work that has been done needs to be acknowledged because it points out the need for further exploration.

LISTENING

Gadamer’s view of listening, or the centrality listening occupies in his hermeneutics, has been mentioned by communication scholars in three contexts: the discussion of empathic listening, the relationship between listening and communication ethics, and Gadamer’s dialogic, humanist rhetoric. However, apart from Stewart’s development of a hermeneutic approach to listening based on ideas central to Gadamer’s hermeneutics, the discussion of Gadamer’s view of listening in our field is still in an exploratory stage.

In his review of Truth and Method Campbell contrasts Gadamer’s view of listening to empathic listening: “listening does not mean that fraudulent attending which
is merely empathic and which meets the standpoint of the other with no standpoint of its own. Listening here means that even if one says nothing, one is present to the discussion as a partner in it” (106). In his 1983 article, “Interpretive Listening: An Alternative to Empathy,” Stewart contrasts Gadamer’s interpretive listening with empathic listening, aiming to show how hermeneutic phenomenology is relevant to listening theory and practice (380). Informed by four of Gadamer’s ideas—openness, linguisticality, play, and the fusion of horizons—Stewart creates a model of hermeneutic listening that opposes empathic listening (“Interpretive Listening” 382). According to Stewart, “productive” or “interpretive listening” is first characterized by openness, in the sense that “the listener is open to the meanings that are being developed between oneself and one’s partner” (382, 384). Second, by recognizing “that each person’s speaking is functioning to disclose—in the Heideggerian sense—not just to represent or symbolize,” the listener focuses on “the present language-event that the communicators are bringing into being” instead of “listening ‘behind’ or ‘beyond’ the words for clues to covert intentions or psychological states” (386). Third, “interpretive listening follows the dynamic of play,” which means that the “structural to-and-fro that engages the interlocutors in a genuine conversation” is more important than “one’s intent, expectations, or attitudes” because of its potential for creative insight (387). Finally, Stewart conceptualizes interpretive listening as a fusion of horizons in order to “emphasize the global breadth of prejudices that always affect one’s interpreting, to highlight the open, fluid nature of those prejudices, and to underscore the fact that understanding is not a static state but a tensional event, a stasis defined by the contact of two lifeworlds” (388).
Discussing the role played by listening in communication ethics, Molly Stoltz brings in Gadamer as support for the role played by bias in defining and practicing ethical listening. Informed by Gadamer’s restoration of prejudice as the condition of all human understanding, and acknowledging the human tendency to bring our bias into what we hear and listen to, Stoltz sees any act of listening—whether to a person or a text—as a listening for something. Therefore, for Stoltz, choice lies at the core of ethical listening, namely, the choice to listen for something different from what we expect to hear (178).

Also concerned with the relationship between listening and communication ethics, Lisbeth Lipari acknowledges Gadamer as one of the sources of inspiration for her thought (“Listening Otherwise” 2). However, she seems to be departing from Gadamer when she claims that compassion, instead of understanding, should constitute the grounds of ethical listening, an idea that will be taken up in her 2010 article “Listening, Thinking, Being.”

Finally, Arthos mentions in passing the role played by listening in Gadamer’s humanist view of rhetoric, which is “attendant on listening as much as speaking” (“Hermeneutic Version” 70, 71) and in his view of human agency. Regarding the latter Arthos writes that, for Gadamer, “The privilege attendant on being human is not principally as the agent or initiator but as a being granted the capacity to hear and respond” (“Humanity of the Word” 487). In his discussion of Gadamer’s idea of the eminent text as “an audible phenomenon,” Stewart, too, refers briefly to Gadamer’s inner ear as “a crucial organ of interpretation and understanding” (“Speech and Human Being” 65).
CONCLUSIONS

This chapter identified five areas in Gadamer’s hermeneutics that communication scholars have found significant for the study of communication: his view of understanding, rhetoric, conversation, language, and listening. These areas are central to the question that drives this dissertation project, namely, *What is the relationship between a constitutive theory of language and a life of wisdom?* This project takes a first step towards answering this question by exploring Gadamer’s idea and practice of listening to language through a close interpretive reading of Gadamer’s texts.

In doing that, this dissertation engages the conversation between our field and Gadamer in several ways. By exploring the constitutive role played by everyday speech in conceptual thought (chapter two) and the role of hearing and listening in understanding (chapter three), this dissertation shows how the hermeneutic practice of listening to language can further develop a hermeneutic consciousness in our field. By exploring the relationship between language and reason that underlies Gadamer’s practice of listening to language (chapter four), this project shows the interdependence of hermeneutics and rhetoric, shedding light on the epistemic role of rhetoric. Finally, by looking into the rhetorical implications of our being hearers of language (chapter five), this project answers the call in our field for a more robust theorizing of listening as a rhetorical and ethical practice, while also hoping to provide an incentive for further conversation between Gadamer’s humanist rhetoric and rhetorical theory and practice.
CHAPTER TWO

BACK TO THE WORDS THEMSELVES

We should never underestimate what a word can tell us, for language represents the previous accomplishment of thought. (Gadamer, “Relevance of the Beautiful” 12)

What I taught above all was hermeneutic praxis. . . . In it what one has to exercise above all is the ear, the sensitivity for perceiving prior determinations, anticipations, and imprints that reside in concepts. (Gadamer, “Reflections” 17)

INTRODUCTION

When reading Gadamer, the reader comes across an interesting way of speaking about language as Gadamer delves into the exploration of particular philosophical questions. Here are some examples: “Generally we talk about the forms of communication of our time. Again, I wonder what is revealed by this expression. . . . the word communication as we use it today sounds somewhat odd” (“Culture and Media” 174-175); and also, “There is something we also can learn from the German word for measure” (“From Word to Concept” 7-8); finally, “Once more we have something to learn from a word. This time it is the word ‘modern’ which provides the key to the mystery. The Ancients did not feel that the latest thing was automatically the best” (“Western View” 36). In all these cases, and others like them, the reader encounters Gadamer’s work in the history of concepts. Words are hermeneutic keys that provide
Gadamer with the proper access to the subject matter he is exploring. He turns to language for guidance because, in his view, language “represents the previous accomplishment of thought” (“Relevance of the Beautiful” 12). This attitude towards language defines Gadamer’s idea and practice of listening to language.

As his texts amply testify, listening to language lies at the very core of Gadamer’s hermeneutic praxis. Gadamer’s practice of listening to language is a reflective (phenomenological) engagement of language that acknowledges the constitutive role played by ordinary language in conceptual thought. This theoretical acknowledgment translates into the hermeneutic practice of questioning our conceptuality and listening for its semantic field. Putting this in Gadamer’s terms, listening to language means listening to the concept for the word.

Gadamer’s reasons for listening to language, which are developed in this chapter and the next two chapters, are as follows: First, we need to listen to language because language, not consciousness, is the critical element in understanding (“Text and Interpretation” 29; Truth and Method 473). Second, the ontological and hermeneutic primacy of language over subjectivity comes with the nature of our primary relationship to language—we belong to it (Truth and Method 474). Language is the medium in which we think and live, which makes us human (401). This makes us primarily hearers of language, instead of users (463). Third, language is an open medium that is binding as well as expansive (“Expressive Power” 349; Truth and Method 444, 448, 457; “Reflections” 37, “Boundaries of Language” 14). This means that the problems inherent in the binding nature of language as a medium can be attended to from within the medium itself, by acknowledging its expansive nature (“Text and Interpretation” 23;
“Culture and Media” 173). The expansive nature of language also renders it a tremendous resource for thought ("Boundaries of Language" 10; “Beginning and End of Philosophy” 23). In other words, Gadamer does not believe in linguistic determinism.

In what follows, I will provide a brief intellectual background for Gadamer’s idea and practice of listening to language. Then, I will explain the role played by the relationship between everyday speech and conceptual thought in Gadamer’s hermeneutic phenomenology and the practice of listening to language. The chapter will end with a look at the hermeneutic consciousness developed during the practice of listening to language.

**Heidegger’s Destruktion and Hermeneutic of Facticity**

As a phenomenological engagement of language, Gadamer’s practice of listening to language fits within the phenomenological turn towards language in continental philosophy at the beginning of the 20th century (“Reflections” 21). Jean Grondin points out the radicalness of the turn towards language at the time when he writes that “Gadamer tackled what was largely a philosophical terra incognita” (Philosophy of Gadamer 124). He adds that we cannot imagine the situation in Gadamer’s time because language has become so much a part of our philosophical landscape with all the varied forms of reflection on language following the 1960s. He mentions “the Oxford ordinary language philosophy, grammatical structuralism, psycho-analysis (Lacan), deconstruction, hermeneutics, and the last works of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty” (124).

Gadamer credits Heidegger with having made language the subject of continental philosophy by transforming Husserlian phenomenology ("Hermeneutics and
Logocentrism” 115, 122). Two interrelated ideas introduced by Heidegger that explain the shift from Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology to Heidegger’s existential or hermeneutic phenomenology, and also ground Gadamer’s idea and practice of listening to language, are *Destruktion* and hermeneutics of facticity. As Heidegger’s student, Gadamer was fascinated by his teacher’s interpretations of Aristotle. In his biography of Gadamer, Grondin writes that, although “Gadamer had acquired a good sense of the conceptual dimension of philosophy” from his other teachers, Hönigswald and Natorp, “with Heidegger the concepts came to speak again and sounded completely different [because] Heidegger’s concepts were no longer formal shells for arbitrary content; they were themselves bursting with an unheard-of phenomenal fullness” (*Hans-Georg Gadamer* 116). Behind Heidegger’s interpretations of Aristotle that captured his students’ attention lay his *Destruktion* of philosophical language. Heidegger’s phenomenological insights into Aristotle and Gadamer’s own philological work in Greek philosophy placed Gadamer on the way to his hermeneutic phenomenology.

Gadamer explains how Heidegger’s *Destruktion* transformed Husserlian phenomenology: “the task of ‘getting back to the things themselves’ took on an entirely new dimension: that of a history of the ancestry of terms” (“Reflections” 22). Aware of the possible misunderstanding of the German concept *Destruktion*, Gadamer writes that *Destruktion* never had for Heidegger’s students—and he adds significantly, “at least for those who at the time really had an ear for the German language”—“the negative tone of destruction that clings to the foreign usage of this word by the British, the French, and others” (“Hermeneutics and Logocentrism” 121). He clarifies that Heidegger’s *Destruktion* consisted in uncovering the historical layers of the meanings of a concept,
“not in order to destroy something but to set something free” (“Reflections” 22, 24). It is meaning that is set free from “dogmatic distortions”—“terminological solidifications”—that have accumulated with the conventionalization of language use (Gadamer, “History of Concepts” 6, 11).

Heidegger’s Destruktion and, by extension, Gadamer’s listening to language come with the recognition of a different relationship between language and thought than the relationship captured by an instrumental view of language. Gadamer writes that, unlike science, in philosophy, each term “contains a certain saying-power within itself” (“Reflections” 22). This means that, unlike signs “that point to something,” philosophical terms “tell something of their own origin and from this they form a horizon of meaning which is supposed to lead speaking and thinking beyond themselves to the thing meant” (22). Gadamer himself moved away from an instrumental view of language as a result of listening to Heidegger’s phenomenological interpretations of Aristotle (21).

The aim of Heidegger’s Destruktion was to gain a deeper access to the phenomenon, to the subject matter (die Sache) he was exploring. Brice R. Wachterhauser clarifies a possible misunderstanding of the phenomenological imperative ‘back to the things themselves’ when he writes that it was not a call to the things ‘in themselves,’ as if humans could ever shake off their historical nature and reach an ahistorical, presuppositionless encounter with reality; it was a call “to ‘deep’ interpretations as opposed to ‘superficial’ interpretations of things worked out in terms of ‘fancies and popular conceptions’” (“History and Language” 28). Finding the proper access to the subject matter was one of Heidegger’s main concerns with philosophy in his time and his response to (or rather, rejection of) the scientific ideal of objectivity. The proper access to
the subject matter will become Gadamer’s concern too, motivating his work in the history of concepts.

Heidegger’s *Destruktion* was grounded in his hermeneutic of facticity, which was the other idea that marked Heidegger’s response to the methodological crisis in philosophy at the time (i.e., the question of the proper access to the subject matter) (Risser, “From Concept to Word” 312). This is how Gadamer explains Heidegger’s hermeneutic of facticity as a radical move from previous conceptions of hermeneutics and Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology: “Before any differentiation of understanding into the various directions of pragmatic or theoretical interest, understanding is *Dasein*’s mode of being, . . . the original characteristic of the being of human life itself” (*Truth and Method* 259). Gadamer explains that Heidegger’s hermeneutic of facticity unfolded “the existential structure of understanding” (‘Reflections’ 26-27). Heidegger’s hermeneutics of facticity was part of his critique of Husserl by showing that “no freely chosen relation toward one’s own being can get behind the facticity of this being” (*Truth and Method* 264). Human existence cannot be transcended through reflection, including phenomenological reflection. And so, as Deetz notes, following Heidegger’s discovery that Husserl’s aim to suspend all presuppositions was impossible, phenomenology became existential or hermeneutic phenomenology (‘Interpretive Research’ 59). This meant that the object of phenomenological description became “a descriptive explication of modes of living or styles of being in the World” (59). Wachterhauser explains that “hermeneutical accounts differ from strict transcendental accounts in that they do not ground intelligibility in the private sphere of a pregiven, essentially changeless subject but in the public sphere of evolving,
linguistically mediated practice” (“History and Language” 6). The way Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology promised to provide the proper access to the subject matter was, as James Risser writes, as “an interpretive movement that will continually gain access to the subject matter without having to rely on conceptual determination” (“From Concept to Word” 313). Given the existential ground and nature of human understanding, the Destruktion of philosophical terms provides the only proper access to the phenomena, to the subject matter.

**BACK TO EXPERIENCE**

The question of the proper access to the subject matter is intrinsically linked to what Gadamer saw as imperative for philosophy and authentic thinking: a relationship with *praxis*. Risser captures the necessity of grounding philosophy in *praxis* beautifully when he writes that all philosophical research should take “its orientation from the lived situation out of which and for the sake of which one is inquiring” (“Poetic Dwelling” 375). Gadamer saw hermeneutic phenomenology as the way to ground philosophy in *praxis*, hence to provide philosophical, theoretical accountability for their ideas—i.e., an alternative to the modern ideal of scientific objectivity.

As Gadamer tells us, the way hermeneutic phenomenology is able to ground philosophy in *praxis* is by operating a shift from first principles as the ground of knowledge to participation. Gadamer writes that he finds participation to be more suited to human reality than “the foundationalist account of the apodictic evidence of self-consciousness” (“Hermeneutics of Suspicion” 64-5). From the Greeks Gadamer learns that thinking does not need a grounding in a principle; rather, “it must be based on
primordial world experience”—hence, he restores the epistemic value of human experience (“Reflections” 9).

Experience is central to Gadamer’s hermeneutics. In his article “Rhetoric, Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology” Gadamer writes that “It is the task of a philosophical hermeneutics to reveal the full scope of the hermeneutical dimension of human experience and to bring to light its fundamental significance for the entirety of our understanding of the world” (274). Reflecting on his own philosophical and phenomenological work, he says that he tried hard to avoid “losing himself” “in theoretical constructions which were not fully made good by experience” (“Reflections” 16).

Gadamer’s restoration of the epistemic value of experience comes with his acknowledgment of the finite historical nature of human understanding. According to Gadamer, human finitude “precludes adequate knowledge a priori,” hence rendering the “finitude of our historical experience” the ground of all human understanding and knowledge (Truth and Method 416, 457). First of all, Gadamer writes, “experience is experience of human finitude. The truly experienced person is one who has taken this to heart” (357). Risser explains that, by starting with the finite nature of human knowledge, Gadamer’s hermeneutics rejects the possibility of “one, final, objectively correct interpretation” (Hermeneutics 119). At the same time, as Grondin observes, by grounding human knowledge in historical experience, Gadamer challenges the modern supremacy of method because “what can be methodologically controlled is only a tiny part of our life experience” (Hans-Georg Gadamer 285).
Of the two German words for experience, *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, Gadamer identifies *Erfahrung* as the one that captures the finite, historical nature of human understanding (*Truth and Method* 356, 357). Unlike *Erlebnis*, *Erfahrung* foregrounds the event-like character of human understanding, i.e., the fact that understanding transcends human consciousness. Gadamer writes that “the special feature of historical experience is that we stand in the midst of an event without knowing what is happening to us before we grasp what has happened in looking backwards” (“Text and Interpretation” 24). In his essay “On the Tragedy of the Hermeneutical Experience,” Gerald L. Bruns points to the event character of hermeneutic experience when he writes that *Erfahrung* means “living through an event as against merely responding to it as a spectator” (76).

With the event-character of hermeneutic experience comes its transformative power. Arthos explains Gadamer’s choice of *Erfahrung* over *Erlebnis* as follows:

*Erlebnis* experience is not sufficient to make a life . . . because it is what is experienced and not who one becomes from the experience. *Erfahrung* is experience gained, experience held. . . . The verb *erfahren* literally means ‘to learn.’ One learns by trial and error, through suffering, by undergoing experiences. As such *Erfahrung* is associated with the idea of wisdom gained through experience, practical wisdom, insight. (*Speaking Hermeneutically* 81-82)

Grondin captures perfectly the transformative role of *Erfahrung* when he writes that “experience strikes us and becomes part of us, more deeply than any syllogism or analytical argument” (*Philosophy of Gadamer* 20). The idea expressed by the German *Erfahrung* is captured in the English phrase *to learn something the hard way.*
As learning, the hermeneutic experience (*Erfahrung*) is defined by negation and openness. Gadamer writes that “experience is initially always experience of negation: something is not what we supposed it to be . . . Every experience worthy of the name thwarts an expectation” (*Truth and Method* 354, 356). This “fundamental negativity” of experience comes with hermeneutic openness because “the negativity of experience has a curiously productive meaning” (353, 356). Gadamer explains what he means by this: “The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definite knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself” (355). Bruns provides a helpful clarification of the dialectic of negativity and openness in hermeneutic experience: “[Experience] throws what one knows, or rather what one is, into question, that is into that open place of exposure where everything is otherwise than usual” (77). Bruns further clarifies a potential misunderstanding when he writes that Gadamer’s idea of openness is totally different from the “open-mindedness of the liberal enlightenment,” being instead “a condition of exposure in which one’s conceptual resources have been blown away by what one has encountered” (78).

The outcome of the dialectic of experience is a turn towards reality. Gadamer rightly observes that “Experience teaches us to acknowledge the real. The genuine result of experience, then—as of all desire to know—is to know what is” (*Truth and Method* 357). Bruns writes that “Acknowledgment is how we connect up with reality as historicality or limit” (80). Indeed, since our access to reality is mediated by our historical situatedness, “Genuine experience is experience of one’s own historicity” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 357). This is how experience opens us to insight. If at one end of experience (*Erfahrung*) we have thwarted expectations, at its other end we find insight.
What makes insight “a necessary side” of “experience in the proper sense” is the fact that it “always involves an escape from something that had deceived us and held us captive” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 356). Risser points out the significance of the relationship between experience and insight in Gadamer’s hermeneutics: “through experience we are confronted with the insight that insights are finite and limited” (*Hermeneutics* 10).

Gadamer’s restoration of the epistemic value of experience comes with his acknowledgment of the constitutive role played by ordinary language in conceptual thought. The message of Gadamer’s hermeneutic phenomenology that is also relevant to Gadamer’s idea and practice of listening to language is the following: if our thinking is to serve our practical life, instead of being mere theoretical, abstract constructions, the phenomenological cry *Back to the things themselves!* needs to be a return to the words themselves—i.e., where human experience comes into language. In his essay “Reply to My Critics” Gadamer defends the relevance of his hermeneutic thought for *praxis* as follows: “hermeneutic reflection discovers false hypostatizations of words, in the way Wittgenstein criticized psychology’s concepts by returning to the original hermeneutic situation of *praxis*-related speaking” (276). In Christopher Smith’s words, the principle that underlies Gadamer’s hermeneutics is that “native language as it is spoken is the root of all philosophy” (*Hermeneutics and Human Finitude* 109). The relationship between ordinary language and conceptual thought, between word and concept—which is the basic relationship in Gadamer’s idea and practice of listening to language—is the focus of the next three sections.
THE SELF-FORGETFULNESS OF LANGUAGE

Making the concept the object of phenomenological reflection was the natural consequence of Gadamer’s realization that our primary, essential relationship to language is not instrumental, i.e., we do not primarily use language as we use a tool. Since the instrumental view of language presumes we are using language to pursue conscious goals, Gadamer’s shift away from an instrumental view is also a shift away from the presumption that our relationship to language is grounded in consciousness. Our natural use of language is unreflective. Gadamer calls this “the profound self-forgetfulness of a language that’s doing its job” (“History of Concepts” 6). In another essay, he asks, “For what is more unconscious and ‘selfless’ than that mysterious realm of language in which we stand and which allows what is to come to expression, so that being is ‘temporalized’?” (“On the Problem of Self-Understanding” 50). Dennis Schmidt contends that the self-concealing character of language should constitute the starting point in any inquiry into the phenomenon of language (Lyrical and Ethical Subjects 104). Wachterhauser explains Gadamer’s idea of the self-forgetfulness of language beautifully when he writes: “when language functions properly it is self-effacing; it does not point to itself but allows the things themselves to become present in their inherent intelligibility” (Beyond Being 99). Interestingly, Grondin finds the “rudimentary character” of the third section of Truth and Method, where Gadamer explores the question of language, to be a consequence of the “maddening obscurity” of the subject matter itself, and he concludes, “In one sense, the more inarticulate and blurred an analysis of language, the more faithful it is to its object” (Philosophy of Gadamer 124), because in language “we are ‘projected’ into a network of intelligibility whose vessels are imperceptible to us” (128).
As both the discursivity of human thought and the nature of speech show, our unreflective relationship to language comes first, not our objectification (i.e., use) of it. Regarding the discursive nature of thought, Gadamer writes that “The verbal formulation is so much part of the interpreter’s mind that he [or she] never becomes aware of it as an object” (*Truth and Method* 403). Consequently, in his essay “The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy” Gadamer makes it clear that the object of his history of concepts is “not the isolated concept and those words corresponding to it in different languages . . . but rather the totality of a reciprocally upholding and sustaining *conceptuality* that itself arises as a linguistic whole out of the totality of our linguistic world orientation” (11, emphasis added). Conceptuality—as the object of Gadamer’s phenomenological reflection on language—needs to be understood both synchronically and diachronically.

The synchronic dimension of conceptuality consists in the key ideas that define a culture or a group of people in a given historical time, and are fundamental to understanding the social values and patterns of thought and action of that culture or group. We think in concepts, we do not use or apply them. In Gadamer’s words, we acquire a growing familiarity with our mother tongue as the initial articulation of that world in which henceforth we make our way. Everyone knows what it means to have a feeling for language so that something sounds strange when it is not ‘right.’ . . . When we grow up in a language, the world is brought close to us and comes to acquire a certain stability. Language always furnishes the fundamental articulations that guide our understanding of the world. (“Contribution of Poetry to Truth” 114)
These are ideas that members of a linguistic community are socialized into, hence tend to take for granted. The synchronic dimension of conceptuality shows that understanding is more being than it is consciousness (‘Hermeneutics and Logocentrism’ 121). These key ideas are so much a part of how the members of a linguistic community understand themselves and the significant issues in the community that they provide the members with the sense of what is right and rational.

Just like the discursive nature of human thought, the nature of human speech is such that generally we are not aware of the words we speak. Gadamer writes that “unconsciousness of language” continues to be “the genuine mode of being of speech” (Truth and Method 404-5). In one of his later essays he explains, “Nobody could utter one sentence if he [or she] were completely aware of what he [or she] was doing. If I were to attempt such total awareness I would not find a second word after the first” (“Hermeneutics of Suspicion” 62). The unreflective nature of human speech comes with the historical and ontological relationship between language and experience. In Gadamer’s hermeneutic phenomenology, the phenomenological return to the things themselves is a return to what Ferdinand de Saussure designated parole—in Gadamer’s words, to “the speaking word in its working reality” (“Hermeneutics of Suspicion” 62); it is a return to “the living meaning that resides in language as it is said . . . our customary usage of language” (“Aesthetics” 65). As Smith notes, Gadamer’s hermeneutics is a “philosophy of language as it is ordinarily spoken” (Hermeneutics and Human Finitude 106).

Gadamer’s hermeneutics favors speech over written texts for various reasons. One reason is that the constitutive nature of language first becomes apparent in speech, in
ordinary language. The things themselves are the things as they appear to us and in their significance to us, and these meaningful appearances are captured in speech, in our customary ways of speaking about our world.

That the things themselves are meaningful appearances, not the things in themselves, comes with the existential fact that we cannot rise above our own existence to look upon it objectively, from outside it. This is why Gadamer found Husserl’s concept of life-world an excellent example of a “success in words” that reflected “a real turning in thinking” (“Practical Philosophy” 78). Life-world captures the constitutive relation between self and world very well, that is, the hermeneutic truth that the world is always our world, the world in which we live our lives.

The realm of the given for human beings is always the realm of appearance and significance because the way we experience our world and the way we speak about it share the same ontological nature. According to Gadamer, it is a theoretical abstraction to see human experience and human language as distinct phenomena because “Experience is not wordless to begin with, subsequently becoming an object of reflection by being named” (Truth and Method 417). In Smith’s words, “for Gadamer there is no extra- or pre-linguistic reality that language could be said to picture. Language does not chart reality and give us information about it; it constitutes reality” (Hermeneutics and Human Finitude 110). Gadamer’s example of the expression sun setting is a good illustration of the relationship between experience and language: “When we speak of the sun setting, this is not an arbitrary phrase; it expresses what really appears to be the case. . . . what we see with our eyes has genuine reality for us” (Truth and Method 449). Speech captures the world as experienced as well as in its significance to us. Gadamer writes that his
hypothesis was that the “verbally-constituted experience of the world expresses not what is present-at-hand, that which is calculated or measured, but what exists, what man recognizes as existent and significant” (456). Idioms, proverbs, and sayings reflect this connection between everyday speech and that which is meaningful for a culture, its particular ways of seeing the world (i.e., appearance and significance). The relationship between perception, language, and culture has been well documented in a variety of fields. As Smith puts it, “The world of things among which we live is seen as it is because it is framed in the language we speak. And our task is to ‘get clear’ about what we say” (Hermeneutics and Human Finitude 113). The practice of listening to language can help us with this task.

The fact that our customary ways of speaking about the world capture the world in its appearance and significance to us—i.e., the world is always already our world—makes Gadamer call human speech or native language a “linguistic totality” (“Expressive Power of Language” 349). The idea of a linguistic totality refers to the universality of language; it speaks of the necessary historical relation between language and experience, hence between language and reason; it defines the realm of the intelligible in connection to language. This means that it points out the epistemically binding nature of language. Gadamer first introduces this idea in the third part of Truth and Method, where he elaborates his views on language: “It is the medium of language alone that, related to the totality of beings, mediates the finite, historical nature of man to himself and to the world” (457).

By the idea of linguistic totality Gadamer critiques the restrictive view of language as an arbitrary system of signs and the loss of its epistemic value: “what really
opens up the whole of our world orientation is language, and in this whole of language, appearances retain their legitimacy just as much as does science” (449). Gadamer wants to restore the epistemic and ontological value of language as a linguistic totality, as a world orientation, hence he contrasts it to the merely signifying function assigned to it by modern science (“Expressive Power of Language” 350). With the advent of the modern ideal of scientific knowledge, Gadamer says, “natural language lost its unquestioned primacy, even if it did retain its own manner of seeing and speaking” (“Text and Interpretation” 28).

Gadamer admits that language can have an instrumental function without subscribing to the instrumental view of the nature of language. Smith understands Gadamer’s “effort [to be] only to show that, though words can be tools, they are not that originally” (Hermeneutics and Human Finitude 318). And Schmidt explains that what Gadamer “requires [is] that we cease regarding language as a human activity, as something that we control, and instead treat it as opening up the realm of that which we call the ‘human’” (Lyrical and Ethical Subjects 3).

Human speech as a linguistic totality is a binding and open, expansive totality. The idea of language as a linguistic totality does not mean closure. This is why in a later essay Gadamer found it necessary to clarify: “[O]ne should not confuse universality with totality. . . . Language is a universal and in no way a completed whole. The proximity of language and reason is announced especially in this common universality” (“Towards a Phenomenology” 20). The idea of completion or closure is as foreign to Gadamer’s hermeneutics as the idea of objectivity. The practice of listening to language is predicated precisely on the incompleteness and openness of human understanding. The
idea of totality is not static; it is not a given once and for all; a linguistic totality is a
world orientation and a world horizon. “This way of language,” Gadamer writes about his
view of language, “is not absorbed in making judgments and examining their claims to
objective validity; rather, it is a way of language that constantly holds itself open to the
whole of being. Totality, in my view, is not some kind of objectivity . . . is never an object
but rather a world-horizon which encloses us and within which we live our lives”
(“Reflections” 37). The idea of world horizon is interchangeable with the idea of world
orientation as they both acknowledge the historical situatedness of native languages. A
world horizon speaks of the openness that defines a hermeneutic view of understanding.
Just as the horizon in nature, our world-horizon is not something static; instead, it moves
along with the changes in our understanding of the world. In Truth and Method Gadamer
writes, “The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never
absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon.
The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us” (304).
Our world orientation or world horizon grows alongside our experience of the world.
Anyone who speaks a foreign language well enough knows this. Gadamer himself
acknowledged that, whenever people learn a foreign language, “while preserving their
own relationship to the world, they extend and enrich it by the world of the foreign
language” (Truth and Method 453).

As the idea of language as a world-horizon or a world-orientation shows,
Gadamer does not believe in linguistic determinism. He supports his view with
phenomenological evidence. One such evidence is the natural process of concept
formation acknowledged by the diachronic dimension of conceptuality, which will be the focus of the next section.

**THE THINKING USE OF LANGUAGE**

As mentioned earlier, conceptuality has a synchronic dimension, which tends to be taken for granted, and a diachronic or historical dimension, which is usually overlooked. Gadamer refers to the diachronic, historical dimension of conceptual thought when he writes that “[w]e should never underestimate what a word can tell us, for language represents the previous accomplishment of thought” (“Relevance of the Beautiful” 12). The relationship between experience and language gives language its historical character, as “every language is constantly being formed and developed the more it expresses its experience of the world” (*Truth and Method* 457). The diachronic dimension of conceptuality was acknowledged in Gadamer’s work in the history of concepts. Any concept has a history. The diachronic dimension of conceptuality shows how history precedes, or rather defines, human reflection. Gadamer expresses this idea as follows: “language and its use precede the thought of thinkers. Of the history of human thought and action, language is the true prehistory in an immeasurable distance behind us” (“Historical Transformations of Reason” 3-4).

As the coming into language of reality, everyday speech also constitutes, in Gadamer’s view, the site of the natural process of concept formation. He sees “the range of variation” and “the metaphorical ambiguity of natural language” as “the basis of the life of language and its logical productivity . . . on which all natural concept formation depends” (“Truth in the Human Sciences” 39; *Truth and Method* 414, 432). First, that which leads to the natural process of concept formation is the metaphorical nature of
language. Gadamer explains how the relationship between experience and language grounds the metaphorical nature of language:

[I]f a person transfers an expression from one thing to the other, he [or she] has in mind something that is common to both of them; . . . [and] he [or she] is following his [or her] widening experience, which looks for similarities, whether in the appearance of things or in their significance for us. The genius of verbal consciousness consists in being able to express these similarities. This is its fundamental metaphorical nature . . . (Truth and Method 429)

Metaphor is, for Gadamer, a logical and linguistic “generative principle”—i.e., “the spontaneous and inventive seeking out of similarities by means of which it is possible to order things” (431-2). Consequently, he deplores the marginalization and instrumentalization of metaphor when it is reduced to a mere rhetorical figure (432).

Since the nature of language is metaphorical—i.e., it expresses similarities among human experiences—Gadamer finds the distinction between “the proper and the metaphorical meaning of a word” artificial (432).

The other factor leading to the formation of new concepts, the polysemy that characterizes everyday speech, is (partially) the result of the finite nature of the human mind. This is how Gadamer describes the common human experience of not being able to say all that we want to say: “The word of human thought is directed toward the thing, but it cannot contain it as a whole within itself. Thus thought constantly proceeds to new conceptions and is fundamentally incapable of being wholly realized in any” (Truth and Method 426). Therefore, the contingency that defines the natural process of concept
formation, Gadamer explains, “comes about . . . through the human mind’s necessary and
legitimate range of variation in articulating the essential order of things” (436). This leads
to a “multiplicity of what can be thought” (269) and to the ambiguity specific to everyday
speech.

The hermeneutic role played by polysemy and semantic ambiguity comes with
Gadamer’s view of speech as a search or a struggle: “Genuine speaking, which has
something to say and hence does not give prearranged signals, but rather seeks words
through which one reaches the other person, is the universal human task” (“Universality
of the Hermeneutical Problem” 17). Elsewhere he defines speech as “the seeking and
finding of the communicative word” (“Expressive Power of Language” 352). Smith
writes, in this regard, that “Vagueness, ambiguity . . . is significant as an indication of the
actual relationship which I have to language as a speaker of it. I am underway within the
event of language, which continually transcends me. . . . Vagueness, accordingly, is a
manifestation of the infinitude of language as a whole in relationship to the finitude of
human speaking” (Hermeneutics and Human Finitude 311).

The articulation of meaning in language constitutes a tradeoff between depth and
clarity. For this reason, as Smith notes, Gadamer’s hermeneutics questions “language as
precise designation” (Hermeneutics and Human Finitude 300). Because of the
ontological relationship between speech and experience, because we perceive the world
through our words and language defines the intelligible realm for us, precise designation
comes with an impoverished thinking, with an oversimplified, hence potentially distorted,
understanding of phenomena. This happens because, Gadamer writes, “the part of lived
reality that can enter into the concept is always a flattened version—like every projection
of a living bodily existence onto a surface. The gain in unambiguous comprehensibility and repeatable certainty is matched by a loss in stimulating multiplicity of meaning” (Plato’s Dialectical Ethics 7). This idea is captured in Gadamer’s description of a technical term:

For what is a technical term? A word whose meaning is univocally defined, inasmuch as it signifies a defined concept. A technical term is always somewhat artificial insofar as either the word itself is artificially formed or—as is more frequent—a word already in use has the variety and the breadth of its meanings excised and is assigned only one particular conceptual meaning. In contrast to the living meaning of the words in spoken language—to which, as Wilhelm von Humboldt rightly showed, a certain range of variation is essential—a technical term is a word that has become ossified. Using a word as a technical term is an act of violence against language. (Truth and Method 415)

This is why Gadamer finds the modern preference for (or ideal of) univocity and linearity of meaning problematic (“Beginning and End of Philosophy” 23). A technical term is a sediment; it has no life in it. Therefore, it cannot produce new meaning, that is, it cannot take our thinking about a given phenomenon further or deepen our understanding of it. In Gadamer’s view, language should (and can) do that for us because its primary function is to make phenomena intelligible, to articulate the world. He calls this “the thinking use of words” (“Beginning and End of Philosophy” 23).

The hermeneutic closure that comes with the general, precise meaning of concepts and terms also motivates Gadamer’s critique of the statement. He discusses the reliability
of the statement as a linguistic account of reality by looking at the concrete situation of a court trial:

A person who has something to say seeks and finds the words to make himself [or herself] intelligible to the other person. This does not mean that he [or she] makes ‘statements.’ Anyone who has experienced an interrogation—even if only as a witness—knows what it is to make a statement and how little it is a statement of what one means. In a statement the horizon of meaning of what is to be said is concealed by methodical exactness; what remains is the ‘pure’ sense of the statement. That is what goes on record. But meaning thus reduced to what is stated is always distorted meaning. (*Truth and Method* 469)

As Risser points out, the problem with the proposition for Hegel, and subsequently for Gadamer, is the inherent assumption that its object is known in advance (“From Concept to Word” 315). In another context he writes that the witness’ statement in court “is finalized completely without the living context of the conversation. . . . The usefulness of the witness’ statement depends on keeping him [or her] uninformed [as to the questionable points and arguments]” (“Boundaries of Language” 15). We know how easy it is to distort reality and meaning when the context is not considered. In Gadamer’s evaluation, such distortion comes with any linguistic account or act of communication that does not take into consideration the living context. Without its context, the statement flattens the meaning, it levels it. In its flattening function, the statement resembles another experience of language—translation.
Anyone interested in the hermeneutic practice of listening to language needs to take the issue of translation seriously. The example of Western conceptuality provided by Gadamer can help us understand why. Gadamer sees a problem with the fact that Greek concepts came to us through Latin because “Greek conceptual determinations were words in living language containing—for all their conceptual precision—a multiplicity or, to put it as would modern poetic theory, a ‘multivocity’ of semantic elements, which still go on speaking together in the background” (“Hermeneutics and Logocentrism” 122). Richard Palmer notes how Gadamer sees the history of Western philosophy as “a struggle against the hardening of living ideas and questions into metaphysical concepts” (535). This makes Gadamer describe our position in the West as “dangerously one-sided” (“Greeks” 101). I believe he means by this that once Western thought made the natural move from speech to conceptual thought, it continued to apply concepts indiscriminately, without acknowledging the connection to the life experience from which the concepts sprang (“Beginning and End of Philosophy” 24).

Gadamer’s understanding of translation as an experience of language that is relevant to the practice of listening to language can be summed up in four statements: any translation is flatter than the original; it is a highlighting (an interpretation); it cannot close the gap between the spirit of the languages; and it is incompatible with real thinking. The first observation Gadamer makes about translation that is relevant to the idea and practice of listening to language is that “Every translation that takes its task seriously is at once clearer and flatter than the original” (Truth and Method 386). Whenever we reach clarity, meaning is flatter, hence lacking to some extent in depth. Translation brings about a tradeoff between clarity and depth, because, according to
Gadamer, the act of translation is not different in kind from interpretation (386). Since every translation “is necessarily a re-creation of the text guided by the way the translator understands what it says, every translation is “a highlighting” (386).

The third statement that Gadamer makes about translation that is important for the practice of listening to language can also be found in the third part of *Truth and Method*:

“Where a translation is necessary, the gap between the spirit of the original words and that of their reproduction must be taken into account. It is a gap that can never be completely closed” (384). Here we come again across the idea of incompleteness. This idea is significant to Gadamer’s hermeneutics because it defines any authentic experience of language. As a historical articulation of our experience of the world, language is essentially finite and incomplete. Commenting on the passage just quoted from *Truth and Method*, John Sallis wonders about the meaning of the word *spirit*: “Is it anything other than their meaning, that which animates the sounds so that they are words and not just sounds?” (74). Schmidt attempts an answer to this question when he writes that the difficulties that come with translation come with the particular nature of each language, what he calls its “materiality,” i.e., the particular way a given language brings together sense and sound (*Lyrical and Ethical Subjects* 45).

Translation flattens anyway, but scholastic Latin flattened Greek concepts even more by not preserving the living context captured in the Greek concepts. Gadamer writes about the incompatibility between the spirit of ancient Greek conceptuality and the spirit of scholastic Latin. Unlike scholastic Latin, Greek conceptuality is derived from colloquial Greek:
In the language and the formation of philosophical concepts of the Greeks there still lives the immediacy of experience out of which those concepts were formed. . . . But what holds even more strongly as regards the thinking of the Greek philosophers . . . is that they created their thinking from the language people spoke. These philosophers profited from and built upon the artful development of the spoken language in Homeric and Hesiodic verse art, and they built upon rhetoric. (“Reflections” 25)

Gadamer calls the translation of the multi-vocal ancient Greek into the univocal scholastic Latin “a mirroring process in which everything is distorted and nothing is preserved of that original movement of thought lying in the field between word and concept” (“History of Concepts” 8). Palmer explains that Latin translated Greek philosophy, which was grounded in colloquial Greek, literally and out of context, depriving the concepts of “their tentativeness and their original connotations in Greek usage” (535).

Finally, in one of his interviews, Gadamer adds that “in translation there is no living thinking” (“Without Poets” 29). We can see this in the case of people who speak a foreign language by translating from their first language, as opposed to those who think in the foreign language when they speak it. The colloquial and grammatical accuracy of the speech is undoubtedly superior in the case of those who think in the second language. Also, it is only the latter who can understand and make use of the subtleties of meaning in a foreign language. The ability to think in a foreign language shows that language is not (essentially) a prison for thought. Also, when reading a translated text, we should consider this fact as essential to our thinking about the subject matter.
What Gadamer calls the self-forgetfulness of language points out that our unreflective use of language is natural. However, if we do not balance our unreflective use of language with a reflective engagement with it, the quality of our thinking will suffer as we will be working with a distorted, misleading, or superficial understanding of the matter at hand. The practice of listening to language acknowledges both the binding that comes with the synchronic dimension of conceptuality and our relationship to language as a linguistic totality and the potential for insight into the matter at hand that comes with the diachronic dimension of conceptuality and everyday speech as the site of concept formation.

**CONCEPT-HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

Listening to language translates a theoretical acknowledgment of the binding and expansive nature of language into the hermeneutic practice of questioning (our) conceptuality. Practicing listening to language means asking questions such as “Where do such concepts come from? What do they contain? What is unintended and unconscious in such concepts?” (Gadamer, “Beginning and End of Philosophy” 22). By questioning our conceptuality, the hermeneutic practice of listening to language makes conscious what has been taken for granted in our conceptuality and restores its connection to experience, namely, its historical dimension.

The question is central to Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Gadamer defines hermeneutic practice itself as “a questioning of things” (*Truth and Method* 269) because the question is the epitome of (or the linguistic form that stands for) hermeneutic openness. “The essence of the *question,*” in Gadamer’s view, “is to open up possibilities and keep them open” (299). The absence of the hermeneutic openness represented by the question is
captured in English by statements such as *That's out of the question!* or *That's not even a question.* The question, therefore, is the opposite of the statement. From Plato Gadamer learned that a “[d]iscourse that is intended to reveal something requires that that thing be broken open by the question” (364). Also, the “art of questioning” presupposes the freedom from “the pressure of opinion” (366).

It is important to clarify that the questioning that characterizes hermeneutic practice is not a subject-centered questioning because, in hermeneutic questioning, Gadamer writes, “the questioner becomes the one who is being questioned” (462). We saw this earlier when we discussed the event-character and transformative power of hermeneutic experience (*Erfahrung*). As an expression of hermeneutic openness, questioning acknowledges and works in tandem with the finitude and incompleteness of language and understanding (Gadamer and Ricoeur, “Conflict of Interpretations” 302).

The questioning that defines the practice of listening to language should be understood first of all as the opposite of taking our conceptuality for granted. The aim is to become aware of our conceptuality, to engage it reflectively, mindfully, with our minds fully present—as opposed to unreflectively, mindlessly, out of habit. This means developing what Gadamer calls “concept-historical consciousness” (“History of Concepts” 10). It is important to know what this consciousness is and what it is not, as it constitutes Gadamer’s critique of the modern concept of consciousness.

Unlike its modern counterpart, Gadamer’s *hermeneutic consciousness* grounds conscious reflection in history. This is why he uses the terms *hermeneutic consciousness* and *historical consciousness* interchangeably. Philosophical hermeneutics begins with the recognition of our historical situatedness. Therefore, the concept-historical consciousness
developed during the practice of listening to language is grounded in Gadamer’s view of understanding as “a historically effected event” (Truth and Method 300). The hermeneutic consciousness that corresponds to the view of understanding as a historically effected event is a “historically effected consciousness”—“a consciousness which partakes in history without being able to fully account for its participation” (Gadamer, “Writing and the Living Voice” 127).

The concept-historical consciousness that is developed as we question our conceptuality is an awareness that concepts have a history, that they are historically-bound linguistic accounts of phenomena. In other words, it is an awareness of the diachronic, historical dimension of conceptuality. Gadamer sees concept-historical consciousness as critical to responsible thinking that avoids theoretical constructions not grounded in praxis. “Conscientiousness and reliability in the employment of concepts requires a concept-history kind of awareness, such that one does not fall into the arbitrariness of constructing definitions,” he writes; “a consciousness of the history of concepts becomes a duty of critical thinking” (“Reflections” 18). Grondin notes in this regard that it was “the guiding insight of continental philosophers that it would be blind-sighted to philosophize about the issues without taking into account the historical background and its import on the formation of our concepts” (“Continental or Hermeneutical Philosophy” 81). About Gadamer in particular Grondin writes that “His strength never lay in the area of conceptual construction, but rather in phenomenological concreteness, in conversation with history” (Hans-Georg Gadamer 268).

For those of us who live in the West, Gadamer has given us a particular reason for practicing listening to language: we should question our conceptuality, rather than take it
for granted, because we are still thinking and speaking in Greek concepts, even though they reached us through Latin ("Without Poets" 29). The importance of uncovering the Greek and Roman “substance” of our philosophical language (i.e., its diachronic dimension, its history) lies in the fact that Greek and Latin provide us with the “fundamental” concepts that make Western thinking and being (i.e. the synchronic dimension of Western conceptuality) what it is ("Historical Transformations of Reason" 4). This is one reason for Gadamer’s interest in the ancient Greeks. Uncovering the Greek content of our Western conceptuality also helps enrich our understanding of our concepts, as Gadamer says in one of his interviews ("Writing and the Living Voice" 68). This work of uncovering is done by questioning our conceptuality, by returning from the concept to the word.

The other, related, reason for Gadamer’s interest in the Greeks is his belief that Greek philosophy is grounded in colloquial speech; hence, it provides an example of what thinking can be when what Gadamer calls the movement of thought that happens in the field between concept and word is kept alive ("History of Concepts" 8). This movement is kept alive by the hermeneutic practice of questioning (our) conceptuality. Gadamer writes in this sense: “What the history of concepts is able to accomplish consists in its passing back and forth on the road between word and concept, and in its keeping this road passable. In doing so, it helps constitute the meanings of a concept, for the concept-historical origins of a concept belong to that concept just like overtones belong to a tone” ("History of Concepts" 11).

However, Gadamer tells us that concept historical consciousness is not a once-and-for-all clarification of a concept by referring to its ancestry ("History of Concepts"
11). Concept-historical consciousness does not mean complete clarification of the meaning of a concept for several reasons. First, the finitude of the human mind constantly leads to the formation of new concepts. Second, Gadamer sees concept formation as a process that is open at both ends: neither does it explicate a concept in such a way that “the semantic field in which that concept originated would no longer have any say in its definition,” nor does it “begin with a supposed immediacy of experience—we always find it already standing in the midst of the linguistic interpretedness of the world, and it is always, therefore, already on the way to the concept” (“History of Concepts” 15). Third, concept-historical consciousness presupposes thematization, which means that there is always some aspect of the investigated phenomenon that remains in the background, hence not made conscious (10). Finally, as we saw earlier, language at work is defined by self-forgetfulness. The self-forgetfulness that defines language limits the clarification that comes with doing history of concepts (6). Joel Weinsheimer’s succinct description of a hermeneutic view of understanding captures the ambivalence and humility that define hermeneutic consciousness: “Understanding consists in sophisticated historical consciousness forever coming to grips with its own naivité” (“Meaningless Hermeneutics?” 165). This hermeneutic ambivalence and humility motivate the practice of listening to language. Ultimately, the concept-historical consciousness developed during the hermeneutic practice of questioning (our) conceptuality is a consciousness of the finitude of human understanding and of language as its articulation. This is reason enough for Gadamer to say that the rigor of hermeneutic praxis is “uninterrupted listening” (Truth and Method 465).
CONCLUSIONS

This chapter began the exploration of Gadamer’s idea and practice of listening to language by explaining its roots in the phenomenological turn to language initiated by Heidegger. Gadamer’s practice of listening to language is a reflective (phenomenological) engagement of language driven by a concern with the proper access to the subject matter (die Sache) and with the relationship between conceptual thought and praxis. As a phenomenological reflection, listening to language grounds thinking in praxis by acknowledging the epistemic value of experience and the constitutive role played by everyday speech in conceptual thought.

A close textual interpretation of Gadamer’s views on the two poles of the practice of listening to language—conceptual thought and everyday speech—showed how language is both binding and expansive. The discursivity of human thought and the nature of human speech show that our natural use of language is unreflective. At the same time, since concepts come with a history and everyday speech is the site of the natural process of concept formation, the language in which we think and live is an open, expansive totality.

Listening to language acknowledges both the binding and the expansive nature of language by engaging concepts reflectively, by inquiring into the origin and meaning of concepts. Through questioning (our) conceptuality, the practice of listening to language develops concept-historical consciousness. This means that it makes conscious what is taken for granted and it recovers the covered-up history of the concept. This is how the practice of listening to language moves us away from theoretical constructions divorced from praxis and provides us new, deeper insights into the subject matter.
This chapter’s exploration of the hermeneutic practice of listening to language engages the conversation between Gadamer and communication studies in several ways. First, it confirms Deetz’ and Hyde’s observations that hermeneutic phenomenology can help ground communication research in experience. Second, by reversing the movement of thought involved in concept formation, the practice of listening to language shows the potential for rhetorical invention inherent in language itself; it also provides a philosophical ground for the role played by metaphor in rhetorical invention. Third, the art of questioning that defines the practice of listening to language engages at a concrete level the need for a more robust hermeneutic consciousness in our field acknowledged by communication scholars. This study subscribes to Leonard C. Hawes’ belief that “a hermeneutic phenomenology of communication stands dialectically juxtaposed to a logical positivism of communication such that the former functions as a presuppositional critique of the latter” (30). The next chapter will further define the hermeneutic consciousness developed during the practice of listening to language as an intuitive sense for language. It will do that by turning our attention to the role played by hearing in understanding.
CHAPTER THREE

TARRYING WITH LANGUAGE

You have to listen to words. I have always told my students that they must develop an ear for the implications of the words they use. This is as important for the philosopher as it is for a musician to have an ear for the purity of sound. (Gadamer, “Culture and Media” 173)

Each term we use contains a certain saying-power within itself. Our terms are not like signs that point to something but rather themselves tell something of their own origin and from this they form a horizon of meaning which is supposed to lead speaking and thinking beyond themselves to the thing meant. (Gadamer, “Reflections” 22)

INTRODUCTION

Gadamer often defines hermeneutic practice and hermeneutic consciousness with references to the ear or to a sensitivity for language. Here are a few examples. About Wilhelm von Humboldt he writes that “his sensitive ear . . . detect[ed] a difference in meaning between Kultur and Bildung” (Truth and Method 10). Referring to Freud, Gadamer says that his “sensitivity to language [was] reflected in his conceptual formulations” (“Expressive Power of Language” 350). Speaking of Derrida’s understanding of Heidegger’s concept of Destruktion, he writes: “I assume Derrida was not really familiar with its usage and thus chose what, to my feeling for language, is a peculiar and redundant verbal construction (namely, deconstruction) because he was
unable to hear anything but Zerstorung in Destruktion” (“Hermeneutics and Logocentrism” 121).

About himself Gadamer says in one of the interviews that he “had a real talent for listening” (“Writing and the Living Voice” 66). He also writes that whenever he had to interpret a text, he listened “very closely . . . to the language . . . to what the text really wanted to say (Century of Philosophy 60).

Gadamer credits Heidegger with having taught him how to listen to language, starting with reading the ancient Greeks. Under his teacher’s guidance, Gadamer and his fellow students stopped reading the Greeks “with academic eloquence using Latin conceptual language, which resounds throughout the language of modern science” (“Towards a Phenomenology” 23). Instead of speaking of “principle and the primary” for example, they would “say ‘arche’ and hear therein that it means both ‘beginning’ as well as ‘ruling’” (23).

All these references point to the relationship between hearing/listening and understanding/interpretation that lies at the core of Gadamer’s hermeneutics and the practice of listening to language. The question addressed by this chapter is, What is this ear or sensitivity for language? The answer provided in this chapter brings up the ways in which hearing defines our relationship to language, i.e., how we are primarily hearers, not users, of language. This chapter further defines listening to language as a phenomenological engagement of language by explaining how the concept-historical consciousness at work in the practice of listening to language is an intuitive sense for the right words, that is, for appropriate ways of thinking and speaking about a given subject matter. This means that underlying the hermeneutic practice of listening to language is an
aesthetic, not an instrumental, relationship to language: we are expected to tarry with words the way we would with a work of art.

HEARING, BELONGING, AND LANGUAGE

Chapter two showed how our unreflective use of language is natural because we think in a particular conceptuality and we speak words without being aware of every word. This chapter will begin by explaining the role played by hearing in our unreflective use of language. In order to better understand Gadamer’s view of hearing and its relevance for the practice of listening to language, we need to take a look at what he calls the “circular structure of understanding” (“On the Circle of Understanding” 71).

The hermeneutic circle

Gadamer reminds us that the circular process of understanding “counts among the earliest insights of rhetoric and hermeneutics” (“Text and Interpretation” 48). We know it as the hermeneutic circle (Truth and Method 265). The hermeneutic circle has undergone several conceptions over the history of hermeneutics. Gadamer’s appropriation builds on Heidegger’s:

A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He [or she] projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he [or she] is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he [or she] penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there. (267)
Risser remarks that Gadamer’s appropriation of the hermeneutic circle points out the event character of understanding, that is, that “understanding has the character of a process that one participates in rather than something constructed (by a subject)” (Hermeneutics 7). Gadamer notices the hermeneutic circle in the experience of music and in reading. To understand a musical piece, one must grasp it as a whole. He gives the example of someone who attends a concert but does not understand (the) music; that person will not know when to respond to it (“Hearing” 91). Understanding something in everyday life or understanding a text, just like understanding music, is not primarily or essentially defined by acquisition of information; it is about capturing meaning in its whole by anticipating it. The same anticipation of the whole characterizes the experience of reading. Reading was an important topic for Gadamer, who studied it for an entire semester in 1929 (“Hearing” 89). He sees a kinship between listening and reading because of their shared circular temporality (“Text and Interpretation” 48). Reading requires listening and understanding. He writes that “Whoever does not conceive of or reproduce texts in the totality of their articulation and modulation and structure cannot really read. Reading is not just the linking of word to word to word. . . . [It] is a silent way of letting something be said once more, and this assumes the anticipation of understanding” (“Hearing” 90). As with listening to music, Gadamer says that reading without understanding is not reading proper. He gives the example of someone who reads out loud without understanding what she or he is reading; the text makes sense neither to the reader nor to the audience (“Relevance of the Beautiful” 28). Moreover, the reader’s intonation betrays his or her lack of understanding.
The view of understanding as circular stems from the primacy and universality of interpretation. As we saw in chapter two, hermeneutic phenomenology starts with the hypothesis that there is no interpretation-free perception of the world. To any experience of the world (via a text, an encounter with a person, etc.) we bring our preliminary understanding of it, as shaped in the process of socialization.

If there is no interpretation-free perception of the world, then there is no interpretation-free hearing. Gadamer captures this hermeneutic truth in the following description:

> We are always hearing—listening to something and extracting from other things. We are interpreting in seeing, hearing, receiving. In seeing, we are looking for something; we are not just like photographs that reflect everything visible. A real photographer, for instance, is looking for the moment in which the shot would be an interpretation of the experience. So it is obvious that there is a real primacy of interpretation. (“Hermeneutics of Suspicion” 59-60)

Gadamer’s phenomenological observation is confirmed by Don Ihde’s insights recorded in his book *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*. Informed by Husserl’s and Heidegger’s phenomenologies, Ihde’s phenomenological account of listening and sound shows how a phenomenology of sound reveals an ontological relationship between a meaningful world and an intentional human being.

**The primacy of hearing**

The ear or sensitivity for language that is developed while listening to language is grounded in the unique hermeneutic role that Gadamer assigns to hearing. Of all the
human senses, hearing best reflects our ontological relationship with language. In other words, a phenomenological reflection on hearing shows that our relationship with language transcends human consciousness. In *Truth and Method* Gadamer writes that his “inquiry has been guided by the basic idea that language is a medium where [self] and world meet or, rather, manifest their original belonging together” (474). The idea of language as a medium corrects an instrumental view of the nature of language; this is how Gadamer explains it: “The words which we use in our speaking are much more familiar to us than this, so that we are *in* the words, so to speak. That is to say, words which are working never become objects. Rather, language is a medium, an element: Language is the element in which we live, as fishes live in water” (“Reflections” 22). Here we have the ontological ground of our unreflective use of language, which constitutes one of the reasons for practicing listening to language. When Gadamer speaks about language as a medium or the element in which we live, he corrects the view of language as an empty channel. Language is content, it “is the quintessence of everything that we encounter at all. . . . What surrounds us is language as what has been spoken, the universes of discourse (*ta legomena*)” (“Heritage of Hegel” 50). Arthos writes in this sense that the “word exists for Gadamer, as for the Greeks, beyond just the personal claim or intention of the speaker. . . . and it is something one needs to hear rather than see. Both of these principles are bedrock for philosophical hermeneutics. The word makes a claim on us, even though that claim does not emerge from a subjective will” (*Inner Word* 45). We experience the world in language, through hearing, hence Gadamer’s concept of linguisticality—“the universal linguisticality of man’s relation to the world” (“On the Scope” 19). Lawrence K. Schmidt writes that Gadamer’s concept of
linguisticality is supposed to indicate “the unity of language and reason found in the Greek term *logos*” (136). In *Truth and Method* Gadamer writes that hearing has an “immediate share in the universality of the verbal experience of the world” and this makes it “an avenue to the whole because it is able to listen to the *logos*” (462). In Gadamer’s reading, the Greek concept of *logos* means “‘speech,’ ‘language,’ ‘account,’ and finally all that expresses itself in speech, namely thought, reason. . . . [At the same time] *logos* is not [only] ‘reason’ but ‘speech’—i.e., words which people say to each other” (“Culture and Words” 181). Wachterhauser confirms that, etymologically, the Greek *logos* “was intimately connected with the reason or the essence of things” as well as “to language and speech” (“History and Language” 28).

It is in the framework of Gadamer’s appropriation of the Greek *logos* that we should understand Gadamer’s following statement: “Hearing means not just hearing; hearing means the hearing of words. This is a distinctive attribute of hearing. . . . Hearing permits the reception of human speech” (“Hearing” 87). Gadamer credits Aristotle with first seeing this (*Truth and Method* 462). He writes that, despite the fact that Aristotle pointed out “the universality of seeing” he also “knew no boundaries to hearing at all, because language is among the things one hears, and, as the *logos*, language encompasses simply everything” (“Reflections” 25). Smith refers to the ontological relationship between hearing and language when he writes that Gadamer saw that “we do not have atomic perceptions that we then proceed to signify; we do not hear sounds, but wind in the chimney, and ‘wind’ and ‘chimney’ exist for us only because language ‘lets’ them be what they are, ‘brings them into the clear’ as the things they are” (*Hermeneutics and Human Finitude* 113).
Because of the ontological relationship between hearing and language, the sense of hearing indicates that we always understand the world from within, as a participator. Gadamer puts it this way in *Truth and Method*:

If we are trying to define the idea of belonging (Zugenhöreigkeit) as accurately as possible, we must take into account the particular dialectic implied in hearing (hören). It is not just that he who hears is also addressed, but also that he who is addressed must hear whether he wants to or not. When you look at something, you can also look away from it by looking in another direction, but you cannot “hear away.” This difference between seeing and hearing is important for us because the primacy of hearing is the basis of the hermeneutic phenomenon, as Aristotle saw. (462)

The existential relationship between hearing and our belonging to the world or participation in our environment is an acknowledged fact. Comparing the two senses, hearing and seeing, John Dewey said that “Vision is a spectator, hearing is a participator” (qtd. in Levin 206). Our relationship to the world is not a subject-object relationship because we never find ourselves over against that which we want to understand. Whenever we understand something, we stand under that which we understand—i.e., the object of our understanding has priority over our consciousness. Hawes writes that a phenomenological involvement in the world brings about an understanding of phenomena “in the foundational sense” which means “to stand-under and see from beneath the taken-for-granted or presupposed” (34). The connection between hearing and participation can also be observed in the experience of having ear plugs on while engaged in some activity;
that person is disconnected from his or her environment to the degree that the surrounding sounds are not heard. Hearing is also the last sense a person loses.

The intricate relationship between hearing, belonging, and language defines understanding in a sense that precedes consciousness and semantics, as atunement to one another. The prosodic structure of language reflects this primary sense of understanding, which makes Gadamer consider the prosodic element the ground for the realm of communication (“Boundaries of Language” 14). He brings phenomenological evidence for his claim that the prosodic element of communication plays a crucial, primordial role in the experience of understanding “long before the articulation in semantic elements” (14). His evidence is the communication human beings have with their pets, the way children learn to speak, the idea of linguistic competence, and the natural process of concept formation. About pets Gadamer writes that when addressed, the pet “understands because it registers the prosodic aspect” (14). About children he asks, “What sort of communication occurs in learning to speak? It cannot yet be speaking. Without doubt it is an attunement with one another” (14). As for the idea of linguistic competence, Gadamer writes that the fact that there is such a term indicates that even those who subscribe to an instrumental view of language have to admit that language is more than just a system of rules (17). Also, Gadamer believes that the prosodic element lies at the basis of natural concept formation, because the condition for the natural formation of concepts is the “unlimited openness for further expansion” in language which is grounded in its “prosodic wealth” (14-15). Schmidt adds the poetic word, the foreign word, and the untranslated word as evidence for the essential relationship between language and
hearing: “When we hear a language spoken about which we have no knowledge, we still can recognize it as a language” (*Lyrical and Poetical Subjects* 109).

**Our default hearing**

We can now begin to understand the relevance of Gadamer’s view of hearing to the practice of listening to language. Since there is no interpretation-free hearing, and hearing grounds the participatory nature of human understanding (our belonging to the world), our default hearing of any discourse is a *hearing into*: we are hearing our own understanding of the subject matter into the respective discourse. The English expression *reading into something* refers to the same idea, namely, that our own understanding of a subject matter or a situation may prohibit us from hearing what a person or a text is saying. As we saw in chapter one, Stoltz’s discussion of hermeneutic listening captures this idea. Informed by Gadamer’s restoration of prejudice as the condition of all human understanding and acknowledging the human tendency to bring our preliminary understanding of a subject matter (i.e., our bias) into what we hear and listen to, Stoltz sees any act of listening—whether to a person or a text—as a *listening for* something (178). Stoltz’ use of the phrase *listening for* parallels Gadamer’s *looking for* something, both emphasizing the primacy and inescapability of interpretation in our perception of the world. The phrase *hearing into* emphasizes the idea of unreflective, routine hearing, i.e., by default. As such, it opposes the phrase *to listen for* that is used in this project to express the positive hermeneutic task of engaging language reflectively and mindfully.

At this point in our discussion, the following question arises: *Why is this default hearing problematic?* When we hear our own understanding of a given subject matter into the discourse we are reading or listening to, instead of understanding what the
discourse is saying, we are experiencing hermeneutic closure. We do not understand what the text is saying because we are not hearing what “the text really wants to say,” as Gadamer puts it (Century of Philosophy 60). We experience hermeneutic closure whenever we forfeit the possibility of understanding, i.e., of reaching an insight into the matter at hand. Informed by Gadamer’s thought, Deetz explains why this happens: when our encounter with a discourse is centered either in the self or the other, “either would be covering up the objective demand of the subject matter with one’s subjective reaction” (“Reclaiming the Subject Matter” 232). The result, Deetz writes, is that, “to the extent that the object or other is silenced by the success, the capacity to engage in conceptual expansion and reach open consensus on the subject matter is limited” (232). The most that one can take out of an interaction with a discourse that one is hearing into is information, not insight. The Oxford English Dictionary defines insight as “internal sight,” as “sight or seeing into a thing or subject. . . . penetrating into things or seeing beneath their surface with the eyes of understanding.” Only by listening can one reach insight because seeing (i.e., understanding) is conditional upon hearing. The experience of reading reflects this relationship between hearing and seeing. “When we speak of hearing and seeing in reference to reading,” Gadamer writes, “it is obviously not a question of having to see in order to decipher writing but rather of having to hear in order to see (i.e. understand) what the writing says” (“Hearing” 87-88).

In order to avoid the hermeneutic closure that comes with our default hearing of our own understanding of the subject matter into a discourse, and hear instead what a discourse is saying, we need to consciously listen for the word, that is, for the way in which the thing is articulated, called forth, evoked in a particular linguistic expression.
This means that we need to engage the time structure of understanding as presence and the evocative power of language, which define the event of understanding.

**THE EVENT OF UNDERSTANDING**

**The self-presentation of meaning**

In Gadamer’s view, the temporality that characterizes understanding is defined by the idea of presence or self-presentation, not by succession. Whenever we understand, Gadamer writes, whether it is a text or a piece of music, we listen “until we ‘have it,’ and in the moment we ‘have it,’ the whole is there”—meaning in its whole is all of a sudden present (“Hearing” 91). He contends that such “suddenness of transition” defines any experience of understanding: the whole is present in an instant (91). We know this as the “aha” moment of insight. Again, Gadamer tells us, we see this in the experience of reading because “it is not succession as such that is constitutive for all reading, but . . . the presence of the non-simultaneous. Whoever does not conceive of or reproduce texts in the totality of their articulation and modulation and structure cannot really read” (90).

Gadamer identifies the same sudden appearance of meaning in the experience of beauty:

We have described the ontological structure of the beautiful as the mode of appearing that causes things to emerge in their proportions and their outline, and the same holds for the realm of the intelligible. The light that causes everything to emerge in such a way that it is evident and comprehensible in itself is the light of the word. (*Truth and Method* 483)

The view of understanding put forward by Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics does not allow for more than moments of clarity. This is part of what Gadamer means by the event character of understanding when he writes that “what constitutes the
hermeneutical event proper is . . . not our action upon the thing, but the act of the thing itself” (*Truth and Method* 463). Ultimately, the Greeks, who have “no word for consciousness,” provided Gadamer with the idea about the nature of thinking as “the transparency of the rational, the light of which enters as from outside, by the door, . . . like a: ‘let there be light’” (“Historical Transformations of Reason” 5). The paradigm for “the overwhelmingness of this brightening presence as such” is “the experience of the divine” because “the divine cannot be represented save as standing in the constant presence of such clarity” (5). Unlike God, human beings cannot stand in the constant presence of such clarity. Each moment of clarity is followed by the absence of clarity. Gadamer also subscribes to Plato’s idea that “as with all human clarity and lucidity, [being itself] is clouded over by opaqueness, passing away, and forgetfulness” (Gadamer, “Heritage of Hegel” 60).

The time structure of understanding as presence refers to this *suddenness of transition* when meaning in its whole becomes present in an instant, and also to the *inexhaustibility of meaning* that leads to fresh insights each time a subject matter is articulated in language. Gadamer refers to the inexhaustibility of meaning in language in terms of the relationship between concept and word: “the general concept meant by the word is enriched by any given perception of the thing [i.e., *Sache*], so that what emerges is a new, more specific word formation which does more justice to the particularity of that act of perception” (*Truth and Method* 429). The temporality of understanding as presence or self-presentation shows that the intelligible realm is inexhaustible. Gadamer explains how language captures this ontological relationship between the inexhaustibility of meaning and the finitude of human knowledge: “All human speaking is finite in such a
way that there is laid up within it an infinity of meaning to be explicated and laid out” (458). Schmidt writes in this regard that “the guiding sentence of hermeneutics, ‘being that can be understood is language’ means that ‘that which is can never be completely understood’” (“Putting Oneself in Words” 484). This is why Gadamer considers “uninterrupted listening” the only hermeneutic rigor (*Truth and Method* 465).

The same inexhaustibility of meaning defines the work of art because its time structure is presence as well. Gadamer writes that “An artwork is never exhausted. It never becomes empty” (“Reflections” 44). He defines *presence* in relation to language as follows:

[Presence is] something that emanates in a kind of self-generated present in such a way that the mystery and awesomeness of the passing of time, the progression of moments in the flow of time, are as if suspended. This is the basis of the art of language. It is able to give us a hold in the tarrying lapse of time. We do not really read a work of art for the information it offers but because it constantly brings us back to the unity of structured form that is articulated in even greater differentiation. (“Hearing” 91)

If in chapter two we saw that we experience the world in language, this chapter is taking that hermeneutic truth further by exploring what it means to say that language is an articulation of the world—i.e., that language *articulates* that which is real and significant for us. Because of the time structure of understanding as presence, each articulation of the world in language is likely to bring insight into the subject matter, as the passage quoted above suggests.
The evocative power of language

The word makes the thing present by evoking it. Gadamer defines “the universal nature of all speech” as “the fact that what the word evokes is there” (“On the Contribution of Poetry” 113). According to The Oxford English Dictionary, the verb to evoke comes from the Latin voc-are, which means “to call” in “to call forth; esp. to summon up (spirits, etc.) by the use of magic charms”; “to call (a feeling, faculty, manifestation, etc.) into being or activity”; or “to call up (a memory) from the past.” That language has an evocative power means that the thing is called forth or called into being in the word. We understand a given reality (in a certain way) because of a particular way in which the word calls it forth. Gadamer calls this “the miracle of the evocative power of language,” which is most associated with poetic or literary descriptions (“Hearing” 89). “We can even say that the poetic word proves its autonomy by means of this power,” Gadamer writes. “Only a pedestrian type of person would want to actually visit a landscape depicted in a poem or story in order to understand the work better” (89).

The fact that the word evokes the thing shows that the relationship between language and phenomena is constitutive, not representational. We see this, Gadamer says, when we consider the relationship between language and philosophical thinking. It is the “saying-power” of the word that differentiates philosophical language from scientific terms:

[I]n philosophy the use of language looks quite different. Each term we use contains a certain saying-power within itself. Our terms are not like signs that point to something but rather themselves tell something of their own origin and from this they form a horizon of meaning which is
supposed to lead speaking and thinking beyond themselves to the thing meant. (“Reflections” 22, emphasis added)

About himself Gadamer writes that his coming “to heed the speaking power of words, a power which still goes on speaking in every linguistic usage and in its antecedents” meant for him “a slow process of reeducating [him]self to a viewpoint in marked contrast to that found in the predominant theory of signs, with its instrumentalist view of their function” (21).

The speech function of language or its saying power is important to Gadamer because he thinks that “wherever words assume a mere sign function, the original connection between speaking and thinking, with which [he is] concerned, has been changed into an instrumental relation” (Truth and Method 434). As a result, the full potential of language is not engaged. What Gadamer calls “the life of language”—its productivity, power, and resourcefulness—is “a life that denies univocity and entrusts itself to the metaphorical range and evocative power of language” (“History of Concepts” 10). Gadamer is against an instrumental view of language that reduces the nature of language to that of a sign because the essence of a sign, in his view, requires unequivocal, linear signification. Gadamer finds singular, unequivocal signification as contradicting the nature of language (i.e., language at work), hence making us move away from precisely what makes language relevant for human thought, viz., its metaphorical nature and evocative power, productive of depth of meaning. He writes in this regard that “an ideal system of signs, whose sole purpose is to coordinate all signs in an unambiguous system, makes the power of words—the range of variation of the contingent in the historical languages as they have actually developed—appear as a mere flaw in their
utility” (*Truth and Method* 414). When language is reduced to mere functionality—the word as a sign—its conceptual productivity (productivity for thought) is being denied and the concept is a dead end for meaning. In other words, we reach hermeneutic closure.

There are two consequences of the fact that language evokes reality, instead of pointing to it, which are relevant for the practice of listening to language. First, as a (historical) articulation of phenomena, language is finite: a word can never evoke the thing in itself, as a complete whole. This is why Gadamer says that there is an unending process of concept formation, as we saw in chapter two. Also, because the “language of philosophy is so evocative, [so] full of connotations, . . . [o]ne can never say fully what one wants to say” (“Writing and the Living Voice” 69). This applies to everyday speech too, not just to philosophical language. When it comes to the articulation of reality in speech, there is always a remainder; Gadamer calls it “the unsaid”: “Thus every word, as the event of a moment, carries with it the unsaid, to which it is related by responding and summoning. The occasionality of human speech is not a casual imperfection of its expressive power; it is, rather, the logical expression of the living virtuality of speech that brings a totality of meaning into play, without being able to express it totally” (*Truth and Method* 458).

Because no articulation of the thing in language can evoke the thing in itself Gadamer says that singular signification can lead to confusion and misunderstanding: “In the everyday use of language as well as within the so-called humanities, what increases speech’s wealth of association and extends its store of knowledge can lead to confusion when everything depends on the singularity of significations (“Expressive Power of Language” 352). He takes the word *force* as an example and contrasts the meaning of the
word *force* in colloquial speech to the meaning of the technical term: “A scientifically rooted concept of force has become so dissociated from the concept of force in the native tongue, with all the power of evocation *force* has there, that the word can be a source of misunderstanding, false oversimplifications, misleading superficiality, preservation of prejudices, and so on” (“Expressive Power of Language” 352). One way to understand what Gadamer means by singular signification leading to misunderstanding is to think of the way in which a simplified account of a situation can lead to confusion because the person who hears the account does not have access to all the elements of the situation that would reveal its complexity in relation to other elements of the situation. By moving from the concept back to the word, by exploring the different historical articulations of an idea (i.e., the history or etymology of a concept), the hermeneutic practice of listening to language enables us to hear the semantic complexity evoked by the word.

As a reflective engagement of language, listening to language reverses the movement of thought involved in concept formation, i.e., it moves back from the concept to the word. Listening to language does that by engaging the metaphorical nature of language and its evocative power, which together account for the ways in which we form concepts. In Gadamer’s view, the evocative power of language, along with the metaphorical nature of language, defines what he calls “the life of language . . . [which is] a life that denies univocity” (“History of Concepts” 10). He describes the interdependence of the metaphorical nature of language and its evocative power as follows: “To the cognitive function of metaphor on the one hand . . . there corresponds on the other hand the ringing forth of the original realm of meaning, a ringing forth that
achieves the evocative effect of the word” (6). It is by hearing this ringing forth that
listening to language reverses the movement of thought involved in concept formation.

The second consequence of the evocative power of language is that meaning is
not limited to authorial intent or to the individual consciousness of the author or auditor.
The fact that words evoke reality instead of pointing to it says something about the nature
of meaning. Gadamer sees the relationship between language and meaning as multi-
directional and multi-vocal, instead of linear and univocal, because thinking does not
happen “in pure signs, but in suggestive words” (“History of Concepts” 12). In its
evocative function, language suggests a way of perceiving reality; it does not point to it in
an unequivocal fashion. The multi-vocal, suggestive nature of meaning is one of
Gadamer’s phenomenological reasons for granting language priority over consciousness
or intentionality in the constitution of meaning. He writes in this regard that

To limit the understanding of meaning neither to mens auctoris nor to
mens actoris is a point dear to [him]. To be sure this does not mean that
understanding peaks in the explication of unconscious motives but rather,
that understanding draws out the thread of meaning in all directions,
beyond the limited horizon of the individual so that the transmission of
history will speak. (“Reply” 291)

The evocative power of language grounds the productive nature of understanding, which
is what Gadamer is pointing to in this passage—as a corrective of the reproductive view
of understanding that focuses on authorial intent. In Truth and Method he writes, “Not
occasionally only, but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author [and auditor].
That is why understanding is not merely reproductive but always a productive attitude as
“well” (264). The problem with a reproductive view of understanding is that it brings about hermeneutic closure. Nicholas Davey notes that

Gadamer persistently resists the reduction of meaning to the subjectivism of the psychological. Any return to the motives of the speaker as the single criterion of meaning implies a final end to interpretation, which is something that Gadamer persistently refuses. As the meaning of an expression spoken or written always ‘means more’ than initially intended, any return to intentionality would limit the hermeneutic richness of the text. (“Other Side of Writing” 86)

Listening activates the ontological relationship between language, thought, and phenomena that underlies Gadamer’s constitutive view of language and the practice of listening to language. For this reason, he thinks that the “logical analysis of philosophical sentences and arguments” can “always play only a secondary role” to listening (“History of Concepts” 14). Gadamer grants listening hermeneutic precedence over logic because through listening we gain insight into the matter at hand that reaches further than the author’s intended meaning and the auditor’s anticipations.

In order to hear the semantic complexity evoked by the word, we need to tarry with words. Tarrying is the appropriate response to the self-presentation of language. As we tarry with words, we develop an intuitive ear for the right word, that is, for “the word that really belongs to the thing—so that in it the thing comes into language” (Truth and Method 417).
THE ART OF LISTENING

Tarrying

The temporality that characterizes the practice of listening to language is the same as that which Gadamer identifies as specific to the experience of a work of art: tarrying (“Reflections” 44). This means that the kind of relationship with (or approach to) language that underlies the hermeneutic practice of listening to language is aesthetic. The term aesthetic is used here in Gadamer’s sense which, as Grondin explains, refers to a “receptiveness to what exceed[s] the boundaries of reason and science” (Hans-Georg Gadamer 21). By reason Grondin must be referring here to a restricted modern view of reason because Gadamer’s view of reason encompasses the true and the beautiful.

Gadamer writes that “we learn from the work of art how to tarry” because in the experience of art “we tarry, we remain with the art structure, which as a whole then becomes ever richer and more diverse” (“Aesthetics” 77). Just as the work of art becomes richer and more diverse as we tarry with it, our understanding of a subject matter becomes richer and more diverse as we tarry with language. This happens because, when we tarry with language, we engage the temporality of understanding as presence, i.e., the self-presencing of language. James Risser explains Gadamer’s view of tarrying as a “going with the work” and adds that “Attending to the work in this way is what allows what is in the work to come out” (“Poetic Dwelling” 372). By tarrying with language we allow the thing to articulate itself anew in language, and this is how we arrive at new, deeper insights into the matter at hand. The outcome of tarrying, as Risser observes, is a coming “to know the world” that does not consist in “a knowing of facts” but of “what is essential” (“Poetic Dwelling” 377). Each time we tarry with language, we become aware
of, we hear some new, unheard before connotations, assumptions, or implications of the concepts we use. In his essay “The Experience of Truth for Gadamer and Heidegger: Taking Time and Sudden Lightning” Robert J. Dostal notes that Gadamer’s identification of tarrying as the temporality of understanding reflects his belief that “The experience of truth takes time” (63). Unlike Heidegger, Dostal continues, Gadamer understood “how important for the insight is unrelenting effort. It is the unrelenting effort that allows the flash of light to come. It prepares the way” (64).

As the temporality of aesthetic experience, Gadamer contrasts tarrying with the temporal dimension of “the merely pragmatic realms of understanding” and he explains that “the Weile [the ‘while’ in Verweilen, tarrying] has this very special temporal structure—a temporal structure of being moved, which one nevertheless cannot describe merely as duration, because duration means only further movement in a single direction” (“Aesthetics” 77). However, as Risser writes, tarrying does not create a distance between us and practical life because when we tarry “we are drawn back to the questions of life as a whole, . . . not life in the abstract” (377). Dostal sees Gadamer’s tarrying as “a heightened experience of the unity of time, which as such, is tantamount to an experience of timelessness,” hence it should be understood in the context of his “phenomenological account of the human experience of time which rejects a one-dimensional number-line view of time and endorses a three-dimensional (past, present, future) understanding which takes the present, the ‘now,’ to be an ‘extended’ unity of the three dimensions rather than a point on a line” (63).

Listening to language as a reflective (phenomenological) engagement of language is an aesthetic approach to language also because, when we tarry with language, we
experience language, we do not use it. To experience language means to engage its speech function, instead of merely its signifying function, to hear the words rather than use them. To experience language as speech means to hear its saying, to hear the address—i.e., what the word is saying, how the thing is evoked in the word. The speech function of language makes Gadamer say that “It is quite literally more correct to say that language speaks us than that we speak it” (Truth and Method 463). Commenting on Gadamer’s statement, Smith writes that the hermeneutic task for us is, then, nothing more than “to hear what [language] says” (Hermeneutics and Human Finitude 310). When we are listening for what the word is saying, for what it is evoking, we are acknowledging our primary relationship to language as hearers, not users; to use Gadamer’s words, we are acknowledging our existence as a “sensitive-spiritual existence”—that is, as “an aesthetic resonance chamber that resonates with the voices that are constantly reaching us” (“Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem” 8).

To experience language as speech, to hear its saying, means to engage its power, instead of merely its utility. The driving force of the practice of listening to language is neither the listening subject’s purposes or ideas, nor the author’s intention, but the power and productivity of language. The practice of listening to language foregrounds the power of language for thinking, i.e., for reaching an ever deeper understanding of matters of significance to us. For Gadamer, understanding a subject matter always means a change in our self-understanding as well. In our relationship with language Gadamer identifies a “mystery . . . namely, that in a way [language] takes hold of us when we are taking hold of it” (“Articulating Transcendence” 9). When language is experienced, rather than used, what we hear makes an impact on us, it changes us. This is why the German word for
experience that defines the experience of understanding for Gadamer is *Erfahrung*, not *Erlebnis*, as we saw in chapter two.

The question that arises here and needs to be addressed is, *What is the nature of the ear for words that is at the core of Gadamer’s hermeneutic praxis?* The next and last section of this chapter will answer this question.

**The intuitive ear**

Although the relationship between hearing, a sense of belonging to the world, and language confers upon the sense of hearing a particular hermeneutic role, Gadamer’s discussion of the relationship between hearing and language seems to allow for a view of hearing that goes beyond the audible realm. A justified question in this regard would be whether the deaf can practice listening to language, whether they can develop a linguistic, hermeneutic sensitivity for the semantic complexity of words. Reflecting on Gadamer’s view of hearing from the perspective of the deaf, Schmidt asks a similar question: “[I]s it the case that hearing has a character that might not be able to be interpreted in terms of sound?” (*Lyrical and Ethical Subjects* 108). Gadamer’s texts allow for the interpretation that the hearing that is associated with the practice of listening to language is an *intuitive sense for language*. The sense of hearing helps, but it seems to be secondary, or rather, it seems to reflect this intuitive sensitivity for language, this “inner ear” as Gadamer calls it in one of his essays ("Eminent Text" 23). Speaking about the way in which Goethe “drew a distinction between the sense of the eye, the physical eye, and the inner sense which finds adequate fulfillment in words alone” Gadamer tells us that he has been trying to understand “the basis and constitution of the intuitive perceptivity by which we judge the
quality of linguistic expression not only for the poet but for everyone who uses language” (“Hearing” 90).

The goal of hearing the “ringing forth of the original realm of meaning” (“History of Concepts” 10) is to restore what Gadamer calls “the intuitional potential of the concept” (“Beginning and End of Philosophy” 22). Gadamer deplores philosophical thought that is reduced to “artificial constructions which . . . lapse more and more into ghostly symbols behind which it is no longer possible to glimpse any hint of a living linguistic intuition” and he sees this as part of the human tendency to “make use of forms and norms, schools and institutions without thinking about them in an original way” (21).

The word original as used by Gadamer does not point to the thinker’s individuality or intelligence but to the subject matter (die Sache), which lies at the core of Gadamer’s view of meaningful reflection and authentic thinking. Gadamer believes that “in all thought, only pursuing what consistently follows from the subject matter can bring out what lies in it. It is the thing itself that asserts its force,” he adds, “if we rely entirely on the power of thought and disregard obvious appearances and opinions” (Truth and Method 464). The opposite of (original) thought is (popular) opinion, of which Gadamer writes that it tends to control “our entire thinking and knowing like a closed and impermeable layer” (“Truth in the Human Sciences” 42). The aim of the hermeneutic practice of listening to language is to deepen our thinking about significant matters, to help us think about them in a fresh, insightful way, one that breaks open taken-for-granted, easy, popular views. The idea of insight is coterminous with the idea of depth.

We can restore the intuitional potential of the concept, hence deepen our thinking about significant issues through a phenomenological engagement of language. Gadamer
describes phenomenological reflection as a reflection that engages description, creativity, intuition, and concretion—in other words, the opposite of abstract, methodical, logical thinking (“On Phenomenology” 113). As we saw in chapter two, Gadamer’s hermeneutic phenomenology aimed to return philosophical thought to its roots in praxis, and this meant avoiding theoretical constructions that were divorced from practical life.

Following the ancient Greeks, Gadamer’s way to ground philosophical thought in praxis was to acknowledge the epistemic value of experience, hence the constitutive role played by everyday speech in conceptual thought.

Everyday speech can play a role in the quality of our conceptual thought because of its ontological connection to experience; in other words, our customary ways of speaking about the world capture the existent and the significant. This gives speech what Gadamer calls its “intuitive power” (“Reflections” 9). According to The Oxford English Dictionary, the word intuition comes from the Latin intuitiōn-em: “to look upon, consider, contemplate.” To intuit means “[t]o receive or assimilate knowledge by direct perception or comprehension; [t]o know anything immediately, without the intervention of any reasoning process.” The intuitive power of everyday speech comes with the fact that it provides immediate access to the things themselves, to the intelligible realm, without the intervention of deliberate reasoning.

By engaging the evocative power of language, i.e., by listening for what the words evoke, call forth, we develop a sensitivity for the “living linguistic intuition” that resides in speech (Gadamer, “Beginning and End of Philosophy” 21). Dostal explains that although “Gadamer accepts the Platonic and Hegelian injunction that the truth requires the whole, . . . [he] does not want to accept a nonlinguistic intuitionism which would
suggest that we somehow have an intuitive grasp of the whole prior to speech” (64).
Dostal adds that Plato and Aristotle provided Gadamer with the solution in what they identified as the “two aspects of the human grasp of truth . . . logos (language) and nous (intuition)” (64). Wachterhauser supports the idea that in Gadamer intuition is not separable from language:

Hermeneutical thinkers can be characterized quite generally by their common concern to resist the idea of the human intellect as a wordless and timeless source of insight. The human intellect, pace Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, et alia, does not have the capacity for a ‘pure’ seeing of reality ‘in itself,’ a wordless intuition of reality *sub specie aeternitatis.* (“History and Language” 5)

This sensitive ear for language is an intuitive, “inner sense” (Gadamer, “Hearing” 90) for “the intimate unity of word and subject matter” (*Truth and Method* 403) that comes with our primary relationship to language as hearers. The sense of hearing seems to be a sensory reflection (or the embodiment, the material counterpart) of the spiritual connection between a being whose existence is defined by understanding and a meaningful world.

This intuitive sense for language is also a discriminating sense for Gadamer; it is a sense “by which we judge the quality of linguistic expression” (“Hearing” 87). Gadamer identifies the presence of the inner ear particularly in the experiences of reading and poetry, where “[o]ne has in the inner ear how the poetical text is *really* speaking, and no performance can fulfill the expectations of the inner ear” (“Eminent Text” 23). Davey captures beautifully the relationship between hearing and listening that defines a
discriminating sensitivity for language when he writes, “Hermeneutic listening is not a matter of acoustic responsiveness but a being able to discern within what one listens to, that which asserts itself as truth. . . . Listening is, then, the experience of hearing the words one is listening to simultaneously disappear into and yet light up and resonate the full depths of what they are saying” (“Other Side of Writing” 88, emphasis removed).

The intuitive inner ear is a discriminating sense because it engages “the interplay of hearing and seeing” (Gadamer, “Hearing” 90). As we are listening for the semantic complexity of concepts, we begin to see into the matter at hand (Sache). Tarrying with language sharpens our intuition and this is how listening leads to insights.

This intuitive sense for language that we develop as we tarry with language fits within the kind of knowledge that Gadamer sees as specific to the humanities. He identifies a “world-intuitive” function along with the scientific function of the humanities (“Reflections” 27). This world-intuitive function stems partly from their object of study—human existence and experience. Grondin writes that Gadamer saw that the knowledge specific to the humanities “was a completely different kind of knowledge, namely, participation in, not dominion over, the experience of meaning” (Hans-Georg Gadamer 268). Also, in his essay “Truth in the Human Sciences” Gadamer writes that the humanities reach their conclusions, hence truth, by way of an “intuitive leap” (27).

Referring to Gadamer’s Truth and Method, Grondin notes insightfully that

Gadamer’s subject was a sudden event of truth, which method could only limp along behind: truth and then method, truth before method. That this kind of truth exists, that we cannot live without it, and that method threatens to become one of the new idols—this is what Gadamer’s
‘hermeneutics’ wants to recall to our attention. (Hans-Georg Gadamer 282)

However, Gadamer believes that the intuitive leap by which the humanities reach truth does not diminish the “fruitfulness of [their] knowledge-claim[s]” (“Truth in the Human Sciences” 26). In fact, he finds the “intuition of the artist” superior to “the methodical spirit of research” when it comes to producing insights into the subject matter (26) because the “precision” of the musician is superior, in his estimation, to that of the mathematician (“From Word to Concept” 5). Gadamer asks, “[I]s the precision attained by the application of mathematics to living situations ever as great as the precision attained by the ear of the musician who in tuning his or her instrument finally reaches a point of satisfaction?” And he continues, “Are these not quite different forms of precision, forms that do not consist in the application of rules or in the use of an apparatus, but rather in a grasp of what is right that goes far beyond this?” (5). Grondin writes that Gadamer’s point in protesting against the marginalization of the humanities was to show that the “limits of knowledge and judging . . . exceed the limits of measuring” (Hans-Georg Gadamer 287). Indeed, the fruitfulness of the philosophical insights of thinkers such as those mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, who had a sensitive ear for language, and their “conceptual precision” are a clear testimony to what Gadamer calls “the conceptual and intuitive power of the language in which we live” (“Reflections” 9, 10).

CONCLUSIONS

Through a close textual interpretation of Gadamer’s views on the relationship between hearing, belonging, and language, this chapter explored the role played by
hearing in our unreflective, routine use of language as well as our reflective, mindful engagement of language. By acknowledging both unreflective and reflective hearing, the practice of listening to language shows that we are hearers of language in two senses. The first sense is a default hearing which comes with the primacy and inescapability of interpretation and hearing, and tends to lead to hermeneutic closure. The second sense of hearing, the sensitive ear for language that underlies Gadamer’s hermeneutic praxis, comes with our choice to listen for the semantic complexity evoked by the word.

This chapter showed that, in order to move away from the hermeneutic closure that comes with the constitutive role of hearing and develop a sensitivity for language that leads to insights into the matter at hand, we need to relate to language aesthetically, not instrumentally. This means that we need to tarry with it, to experience language—i.e., its evocative power—rather than use it as a means that serves our purposes or retrieves for us the author’s intention. When we do that, we engage language as hearers instead of users. The outcome is an intuitive sensitivity for the relationship between words and things (phenomena) that guarantees new insights into the matter at hand.

This chapter’s exploration of the hermeneutic practice of listening to language engages the conversation between Gadamer and communication studies in several ways. First, it further defines the hermeneutic consciousness needed in the discipline by grounding it in hearing and listening. A disciplinary hermeneutic consciousness that acknowledges the centrality of hearing and listening would also benefit communication pedagogy. By grounding communication in hearing and listening, this chapter answers the recent call in listening studies for more theorizing of hearing and listening as communication phenomena, instead of cognitive activities originating in the subject. A
hermeneutic phenomenology of hearing and listening also answers the call put forth by listening scholars and communication ethicists for a more robust ethics of listening, one that accounts for the constitutive role of hearing and listening.

The next chapter will show how the intuitive ear for language developed during the practice of listening to language is grounded in the speculative nature of tradition. Although the insights into the subject matter arrived at through intuitive hearing are not verifiable, they are, as chapter four will show, perfectly compatible with theoretical accountability. The practice of listening to language develops philosophical and ethical accountability by engaging traditions of thought as conversation partners on the matter at hand.
CHAPTER FOUR

TRUSTING LANGUAGE

[Language is a medium where I and world meet or, rather, manifest their original belonging together. (Gadamer, Truth and Method 474)]

[No conceptual language . . . represents an unbreakable constraint upon thought if only the thinker allows himself [or herself] to trust language.
(Gadamer, “Text and Interpretation” 23)]

INTRODUCTION

Gadamer talks about language in two related ways: he either personifies it, by referring to its spirit or wisdom, or exposes concepts as carriers of prejudices. Here are a few examples. In Truth and Method he writes that “to regard the metaphorical use of a word as not its real sense is the prejudice of a theory of logic that is alien to language” (429); a few pages later, we read that “we must keep the dignity of the thing and the referentiality of language free from the prejudice originating in the ontology of the present-at-hand as well as in the concept of objectivity” (456). “It is also meaningful” he writes elsewhere, “that language says that we strike an understanding. Here the wisdom of language tells us that . . . ” (“Towards a Phenomenology” 27). About “the ancient concept of mimesis” he contends that it “still seems to possess some truth” (“Art and Imitation” 100). Finally, Gadamer says that he became aware “that the language customarily used in German philosophy was not just full of preconceptions and
prejudices, but also full of depth and significance” (“Reflections” 21). These references point to the content of language and indicate that language can be a catalyst as well as a hindrance for thinking about a subject matter.

This chapter completes the exploration of the hermeneutic practice of listening to language by grounding it in Gadamer’s dialectical hermeneutics as practical philosophy. Behind the practice of listening to language is Gadamer’s view of understanding as an event of tradition. Understanding as an event of tradition reveals the paradox of our belonging to language: The world comes into language in particular linguistic traditions and we recognize it in and through the language of particular traditions. Therefore, Gadamer’s practice of listening to language is a reflective engagement of traditions as conversation partners on the matter at hand. To listen to language means to listen to linguistic traditions for that which is significant, which can take us closer to the truth of the matter. This means engaging the dialectical nature of language, that is, engaging fully the ontological relationship between language and reason. The outcome is an undogmatic way of thinking that is guided by language, grounded in praxis, and on the way to truth.

**WE THINK IN LANGUAGE:**

**GADAMER’S PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY**

Gadamer’s historically-grounded view of reason makes his hermeneutic philosophy a practical philosophy and hermeneutic reflection a practical reflection, i.e., involving practical reason. He writes that “[r]eason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms—i.e., it is not its own master but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates. . . . [in other words] history does not belong to us; we belong to it” (Truth and Method 276). Wachterhauser believes that “the notion of
‘historicity’ is perhaps hermeneutics’ most central and most compelling claim” and explains that historicity “refers to the claim that the relation between being human and finding ourselves in particular historical circumstances is not accidental but rather essential or ‘ontological’ . . . [W]ho we are is a function of the historical circumstances and community we find ourselves in, the historical languages we speak” (“History and Language” 7). Risser explains why Gadamer’s hermeneutics is a practical philosophy:
“The model of practical philosophy, which concerns the knowing with respect to action, starts from the fact that one is first formed by one’s education and citizenship. Accordingly, the reasonability in practical philosophy, unlike the reasonability at work in the methodological thinking of anonymous science, does not sever the connection between knowledge and life (Hermeneutics 8). Gadamer learned from Aristotle “that the preconditions for theorizing in such fields [as the humanities] are not neutral objectifications, but articulations of pre-given and lived patterns of social life” (Gadamer, “Practical Philosophy as a Model” 84).

Therefore, Gadamer’s view of understanding as an event of tradition reflects his acknowledgment of the historical character of human rationality, hence his critique of a modern view of reason grounded in human consciousness. Risser goes as far as to say that “the central issue for philosophical hermeneutics is to account for the understanding that occurs by virtue of tradition” (“Poetic Dwelling” 369). Historical beings are defined by their belonging to particular speech communities and traditions of thought. Gadamer defines tradition as “a certain totality of normative orientations . . . [which] determines to a large extent the structure of our social life” (“Limitations of the Expert” 185).

Gadamer’s tradition corresponds to Humboldt’s language-view and Husserl’s life-world,
hence it is synonymous with culture. Referring to Humboldt’s insight into the ontological nature of language, Gadamer writes that Humboldt’s importance for hermeneutics lies “in showing that a language-view is a worldview” (Truth and Method 443). Husserl’s concept of life-world points out that the world in which we live “never becomes an object as such for us” because we live in it “as historical creatures” (Truth and Method 246-247). However, Warnke notes that Gadamer saw “Husserl’s appeals to the notion of transcendental subjectivity [as an effort] to surmount the variety of culturally and historically determined life-worlds” which for Gadamer meant “an ‘alienation’ of ‘the actual content of the concept of life’” (37); this is why, Warnke contends, Gadamer turned to “Heidegger’s forceful conception of ‘being-in-the-world’” (37).

As a totality of normative orientations, tradition is hermeneutically binding because it provides our self-evident, implicit understanding of the world (i.e., self-understanding and understanding of issues). Gadamer writes in this sense: “Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live” (Truth and Method 276). In other words, we think and speak as members of particular traditions before we are aware of what we are thinking and saying. As Wachterhauser puts it, “by learning our native tongue or by learning a specialized language of some field of study we inherit with it a past we have not shaped. . . Language, so to speak, goes out ahead of the reflective understanding and shapes our grasp of the subject matter” (“History and Language” 9-10). Our belonging to traditions of thought and speech communities grounds our thinking in particular conceptualities and our unreflective, customary use of language (discussed in chapter two). The self-evident, implicit ways in which traditions
guide our thinking, speaking, and acting constitute part of Gadamer’s reason for defining understanding “less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition” (*Truth and Method* 290); or, as he puts it elsewhere, “tradition is in play [or at work] in all understanding” (“Hermeneutics” 45). This is partly why Gadamer urges us to listen to what reaches us from traditions (*Truth and Method* 463). Listening to language is a reflective engagement of traditions.

The self-evident character of our historically-grounded understanding of the world motivates Gadamer’s rehabilitation of the concept of prejudice, making him say that “the prejudices of the individual, far more than his [or her] judgments, constitute the historical reality of his [or her] being” (*Truth and Method* 276-277). Therefore, by *prejudices* Gadamer means “nothing other than our rootedness in a tradition” (“Beginning of Philosophy” 46). This is how Gadamer puts it: “Understanding always implies a pre-understanding which is in turn pre-figured by the determinate tradition in which the interpreter lives and which shapes his [or her] prejudices” (“Problem of Historical Consciousness” 108). When Gadamer presents prejudices as our rootedness in a tradition, he corrects the modern view of understanding in which “one is able to leave oneself out” of the experience of understanding (“Hermeneutics” 45). Wachterhauser writes in this regard that hermeneutics “understands itself as a critique of this notion of a noncontingent, ‘autonomous’ intellect . . . [and that] hermeneutical thinkers have insisted on the ‘finite,’ ‘dependent,’ and ‘contingent’ nature of all understanding” (“History and Language” 16).

Gadamer captures the idea of our inherited, self-evident, prejudiced understanding in the phrase *effective history*: history is always at work in our understanding, whether or
not we are aware of it (“Reply” 291). Gadamer writes that he was aware of the effective history shaping his own understanding of philosophical questions—“a very definite German philosophical and cultural heritage” (“Reflections” 27). Arthos’ scholarship on Gadamer engages in depth the effective history at work in Gadamer’s thought, pointing out the hermeneutic value of the prejudices at work in his understanding, some of which Gadamer was not aware. Gadamer explains that the idea of a “historically affected consciousness” expresses his concern “with the philosophical issue of accountability” (27). He believes that “one who attempts to philosophize must first of all have an attentive ear for the language in which the thinking experience of many generations has been sedimented, long before we begin to attempt our own thinking” (“Limitations of the Expert” 181). Gadamer’s work in the history of concepts is a reflective engagement of the effective history at work in the thought of different philosophers.

Since prejudices reflect our historical situatedness (in traditions), our access to any subject matter is through (mediated by) prejudices. However, Gadamer says, traditions can guide our thinking either behind our back or with our knowledge. About the first option he writes that “It is the tyranny of hidden prejudices that makes us deaf to what speaks to us in tradition” (Truth and Method 270). He clarifies that “a prejudice in the strict sense of that term cannot get hold of us unless we are sufficiently unconscious of it” (“Problem of Historical Consciousness” 156-157). When we are aware of our historical situatedness in traditions, the strict sense of the word prejudice no longer applies. Although our preliminary understanding of the world as shaped by socialization continues to guide our thinking even when we are aware of our historical situatedness, its guidance is of a different kind: we can discern the hermeneutic value of prejudices, that
is, which prejudices lead to insights into the matter at hand and which ones obstruct our access to it. Therefore, Gadamer says that the “critical task of hermeneutics [is] that of separating true from false prejudices” (“On the Circle of Understanding” 77). By true and false prejudices he means prejudices that take us to the truth of the matter or not, in other words, which can help us see new truths about a subject matter or distort our understanding of it. Naturally, this is a never completed task. This is how Gadamer puts it in the framework of explaining his idea of “effective-historical consciousness”: “This term is meant to imply that we are fully aware of the constitutive prejudices of our understanding. Of course, we cannot really know all of our prejudices because we are never in a position to reach an exhaustive knowledge of ourselves and to become completely transparent to ourselves” (“Beginning of Philosophy” 46). For historical beings, the only options when it comes to understanding are dogmatism or discernment, that is, being dominated by the prejudices of our time or discerning their hermeneutic value, hence the hermeneutic consciousness. Objectivity—total self-transparency—is not an option. Becoming aware of the effective history at work in our understanding means being aware of our hermeneutic situation.

As historically situated, human beings always find themselves in a hermeneutic situation. The idea of a hermeneutic situation sheds light on Gadamer’s view of tradition as a worldview, a historical, cultural standpoint from where we engage the world. “The very idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside it and hence are unable to have any objective knowledge of it” says Gadamer (Truth and Method 301). Therefore, he defines a hermeneutic situation as “a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision” (302). Elsewhere he writes that “we are of necessity caught within the limits of our
hermeneutic situation when we inquire into truth” (“Truth in the Human Sciences” 40). However, the same position that limits the range of our vision also enables a view; in other words, any situation comes with limitations as well as a range of possibilities, hence the possibility for discernment. That is why Gadamer says that “essential to the concept of situation is the concept of ‘horizon.’ The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular standpoint” (Truth and Method 302). Wachterhauser calls this Gadamer’s “perspectival realism” when talking about Gadamer’s constant interest in the relationship between universals and particulars (“Gadamer’s Realism” 150-151).

As mentioned earlier, our historical situatedness in traditions grounds our unreflective use of language, in other words, our conventional uses of language. By conventional (uses of) language I mean any of the following: the conceptuality, vocabulary, terminology, or ways of speaking that are specific to a particular linguistic tradition or speech community, e.g., academic disciplines, neighborhoods, religions, political parties, and trades. Gadamer differentiates the routine, functional use of language, which he considers to be a “mere implementation of the meaning of words” (or the ritual character of language) from “authentic speaking” (“Towards a Phenomenology” 29), which he defines as “having something to say” and seeking “words through which one reaches the other person” (“Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem” 17).

Although Gadamer views the functional employment of language (i.e., its conventional usage) as a natural dimension of linguistic communities, the functional engagement of language comes with the danger of not acknowledging the constitutive role played by prejudices in thought. The problem with conventionalized language,
according to Gadamer, is the same as that with conceptual determination: they make a good host for the prejudices of one’s traditions, for “the truisms which have deposited themselves in linguisticality” (“Rhetoric” 281). In other words, we become so accustomed to thinking about issues in the concepts and terms provided by the intellectual traditions and speech communities we belong to that we find it difficult or impossible to think about those issues in different terms. That we find it difficult is understandable from Gadamer’s standpoint. This is why he writes, for example, with regard to the concept of play, that “we are so accustomed to relating phenomena such as playing to the sphere of subjectivity and the ways it acts that we remain closed to these indications from the spirit of language” (Truth and Method 104). We hear the established meaning, the prejudice of our time, into the discourse. This is why listening to language is important. As a reflective engagement of traditions, listening to language makes “concepts and their expressions speak once more, . . . [takes] them out of the merely functional context in which they are employed as overdetermined terms, and [brings] them back to their original role within language” (“Hermeneutics and Logocentrism” 121). Describing the clarification of meaning that comes with doing history of concepts Gadamer writes that it “revives the enduring connections between concept-words and the natural usage of language” and it makes concrete “the conceptual meaning of assertions” by freeing it “from dogmatic distortions” (“History of Concepts” 5).

Although it may be difficult to think in the terms of other linguistic traditions, it is possible, as our ability to think in foreign languages indicates. As linguistic beings, we are in language and this means that we think in language. However, we do not have to

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2 Someone who is fluent (who can think) in a foreign language can testify to the hermeneutic difficulty of thinking about a subject matter in the terms of the host culture when those terms are very different from the terms of one’s mother tongue.
think in the *same* language. Being able to think about significant issues in different terms is essential because of the complex nature of any significant matter.

Given the complexity of any subject matter of significance to us and the finitude of any linguistic articulation of the subject matter, thinking about a subject matter only in the terms provided by a particular tradition forms a dogmatic mindset: that person’s understanding of a subject matter is limited to the understanding captured in those terms (prejudices). The person tends to take one aspect for the whole thing, that is, one’s tradition’s view of the subject matter as the truth of the matter. The established meaning of the conventionalized term\(^3\) shares with the general meaning of the concept and the flat meaning of the statement the tradeoff between depth and clarity that comes with any articulation of meaning in language, that is, with the limits of our historical situatedness. This is why Gadamer sees unambiguous designation problematic. When clarity is taken as more than a provisional phase in our search for truth, meaning is distorted, hence Gadamer’s idea of “distorting prejudices” (*Truth and Method* 296).

By contrast, someone who practices listening to language is aware of the fact that conventional language is the expression of a linguistic tradition, and not of the individual speaker or writer. In other words, when we engage language instrumentally and conventionally, language is not really at our disposal, that is, the meaning of the term is not reduced to what we intended. When we employ language conventionally, we are in what Gadamer calls “the area of mutual understandings by means of custom, which clearly . . . determines a large part of our being with-one-another” (“Towards a Phenomenology” 50). As the language of a speech community, conventional language

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\(^3\) The very words *term* and *terminology* have a ring to them that makes one think of neutrality, of language as merely a tool.
constitutes a collective agreement on the good; in other words, it reflects the necessary relationship between *logos* and *ethos* that defines a speech community. Risser sees the “movement back to words” that defines Gadamer’s hermeneutics as an engagement of language intrinsically tied to *ethos*, in other words, an embodied (as opposed to abstract) *logos* (“From Concept to Word” 311). Referring to Aristotle’s discussion of the relationship between thought and speech in *Topics*, Gadamer corrects a mistaken view of the instrumental function of language:

> [T]he convention according to which the sounds of language or the signs of writing mean something is not an agreement on a means of understanding—that would already presuppose language; it is the agreement on which human community, its harmony with respect to what is good and proper, is founded. Agreement in using verbal sounds and signs is only an expression of that fundamental agreement in what is good and proper. (*Truth and Method* 431-2)

As Grondin notes, Gadamer’s attention to the theme of ritual in his latest essays reflects his acknowledgment of the centrality of *ethos* to the concept of reason and the social reality of understanding: “Much of what we do, say, and are, is supported in its correctness by an ethos which, in its hidden effectiveness, is more practiced and applied than actually known consciously” (“Play” 56). Conventional language reflects the ritual character of natural language (the language spoken by a community).

The meaning of the terms or concepts that we employ regularly depends on their implicit, contextual ground. In Gadamer’s view, a linguistic expression always says more than what was intended because of its implicit context. “What the expression expresses,”
Gadamer writes, “is not merely what is supposed to be expressed in it—what is meant by it—but primarily what is also expressed by the words without its being intended—i.e., what the expression, as it were, ‘betrays’” (Truth and Method 336). By the context of the conceptual expression Gadamer means “the context in the boldest sense”—that is, “not only the words but the whole life context” (“Hermeneutics of Suspicion” 63).

Wachterhauser explains that Gadamer’s view of understanding fits within a hermeneutic “‘contextualist’ theory of meaning” which states that the “meaning of any phenomenon or proposition depends on the ‘whole’ of which it is a ‘part’ or, in other words, it depends on the ‘context’ in which it has a ‘function’ . . . in terms of other realities that we already understand in some way” (“History and Language” 12-13). Warnke notes in this regard that “Gadamer’s position does not merely overlook a distinction between understanding meaning and understanding significance; it denies one. . . we understand [something] only in light of its significance” to us (68).

When Gadamer engages in history of concepts, he is listening for what comes to expression in concepts beyond or apart from the author’s intention. He is listening for the historical ground and life contexts of a particular conceptuality. Grondin writes that the basic idea behind Gadamer’s history of concepts is that “the relevance of a language cannot be detached from the urgency that gave it birth in the life of a language, and in the contexts of discussion where it has been employed since” (Philosophy of Gadamer 142). These contexts of discussion infuse any given concept with “prior determinations, anticipations, and imprints” (Gadamer, “Reflections” 17). These form the semantic field of the concept, which comes with its belonging to a particular tradition. Gadamer’s analogy with music helps us understand the relationship between linguistic expression
and its contextual ground that defines his view of natural language (the language spoken by a speech community) and underlines the practice of listening to language:

The concept-historical origins of a concept belong to that concept just like overtones belong to a tone. Just as music would be unthinkable in a system of tones artificially set up without overtones, so is the conceptual language of philosophy [or conventional language] capable of expression only by virtue of the resonance of the overtones that refer the circumscribed and selected field of a concept’s meaning back to the natural power of all concept formation, a power that lies in the life of language. (“History of Concepts” 11)

The fact that the meaning of conventional language is conditional upon its context shows that, as an event of tradition, the experience of understanding is defined by recognition, not by cognition. The conceptualization of understanding as recognition foregrounds the historical embeddedness of human understanding: we are always already in language, in various speech communities and intellectual traditions from within which we understand the world. Differently put, we always understand something in a particular context, in relation to something we know already. This is one of the insights that Gadamer took from Plato. He writes that there is an equally profound and accurate insight to be had from Plato’s doctrine that all cognition is first what it is only as re-cognition; for a ‘first’ cognition is as little possible as a first word. Even the freshest and most original perception, whose ramifications still seem entirely unforeseeable, is what it truly is only when its consequences have been
worked out, its connections with existing knowledge established, and when it has been absorbed into the medium of intersubjective understanding. ("Rhetoric" 279-280)

If a discourse makes sense to us, it is because of some pre-understanding that we bring to it, be it the language of the discourse, the topic, the situation, or something else. When we understand, we understand something as something. Grondin writes how in his view of understanding as recognition, Gadamer follows Heidegger, who developed Husserl’s insight that “there is no empty consciousness because consciousness is always directed intentionally: it points towards the object ‘as’ this or that, in a certain aspect” (Hans-Georg Gadamer 13). The positive hermeneutic role of the self-evident understanding that comes with traditions is that we need it in order to understand, i.e., recognize, anything. In other words, the nature of a ground is such that it is taken for granted and, at the same time, it may constitute an enabling condition, such as a foundation for something else. Because understanding is recognition, Gadamer grants prejudices hermeneutic priority over consciousness. He showed that the negative role played by prejudices in understanding is predicated on their primary function as a condition of understanding. This is what he says: “the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us” (“Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem” 9).

Although “the mode of being of tradition” is language (hence the conventionalization of language), Gadamer sees that the nature and content of language is
more than the expression of particular traditions \textit{(Truth and Method 463)}. In other words, Gadamer’s constitutive view of language is different from social constructivism. For Gadamer, conventional language carries not only prejudices specific to particular traditions, but also truths about the subject matter (“Reflections” 21). As an expression of tradition, conventional language is a linguistic account of matters of significance to us.

\textbf{WE THINK THROUGH LANGUAGE:}

\textbf{GADAMER’S DIALECTICAL HERMENEUTICS}

At the foreground of Gadamer’s view of understanding is the subject matter: \textit{We exist, therefore we talk about matters of significance to us.} These matters of significance define us as human beings, that is, they distinguish us from animals. Gadamer’s concept of the subject matter \textit{(die Sache)} or \textit{the thing} captures all that exists and has significance for human beings, i.e., “those units of our experience of the world that are constituted by their suitability and their significance” \textit{(Truth and Method 456)}. Elsewhere, Gadamer explains that by \textit{the thing} he means “that in which one’s own life is sedimented” (“Articulating Transcendence” 9). After clarifying that Gadamer’s concept of \textit{the thing} \textit{(die Sache)} is different from Kant’s \textit{Ding-an-sich}, Richard Bernstein provides a succinct and helpful intellectual framework for the centrality of the subject matter to Gadamer’s thought:

\begin{quote}
[Gadamer] plays on the implications of Aristotle’s assertion, in the \textit{Ethics}, that the appropriate form of knowledge and reasoning is conditioned by the subject matter; on the way in which Hegel, in the \textit{Phenomenology of the Spirit}, is always directing us to \textit{die Sache} in order to reveal the dialectical movement of consciousness; and on the significance of the call
\end{quote}
for the ‘return to the things themselves’ in Husserl and the transformation of this demand in Heidegger’s ‘hermeneutics of facticity.’ (*Beyond Objectivism* 154)

Gadamer’s ontology reverses modernity’s subject-object epistemology: the thing to be understood has ontological precedence over the understanding subject. This is why he says “Hermeneutics must proceed from the assumption that whoever wants to understand has a bond with the subject matter” (“On the Circle of Understanding” 75). Gadamer’s phenomenological evidence for this reversal of priority from the subject to the object is captured in the following statement: “Something awakens our interest—that is really what comes first! At the beginning of every effort to understand is a concern about something” (“Hermeneutics” 50). This is why the question takes central stage in Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Having a concern takes the form of a question; our concerns lead us to asking questions. Also, as individuals and as communities, we enter and exit the world, but the significant matters we care and talk about precede as well as outlive us. In his review of *Truth and Method* Campbell points out how the subject matter grounds Gadamer’s critique of consciousness as the critical element in understanding: “if we bring into being a meaning the author never intended, there is hardly anyone to be held at fault—the *logos* was quarterbacking our author’s game in the exact same way it quarterbacks ours. If what the author said was profound, our author could not see it all, nor shall we, nor shall those who come after us” (109, emphasis removed).

The significant matters precede and outlive us because they constitute the content of language: “It is matters of fact,” Gadamer writes, “that come into language” (*Truth*...
and Method 445). He calls this the “factualness (Sachlichkeit) of language” (453). The matters of significance that human beings talk about make the human environment a world and human communication language. Unlike animal communication, which “induces particular behaviors in the members of the species . . . human language must be thought of as a special and unique life process,” Gadamer writes, because “in linguistic communication, ‘world’ is disclosed” (Truth and Method 445-6). This statement refers to language as content (world) as well as a dialectical process (disclosed in communication).

Because of language, human beings have a world, not an environment. Speaking about Humboldt, Gadamer writes that he did not realize, as Heidegger did, that this language-as-living-speech “is not just one of man’s possessions in the world, but on it depends the fact that man [or woman] has a world at all” (401). Having a world or being creatures who have language means two things. First, it means having a life-world because the world is always already our world. This idea is captured in Gadamer’s view of tradition as a worldview, as hermeneutically binding (as we saw in the previous section). In other words, the prejudices shaped by our traditions constitute the content of language. Second, having a world means becoming because, as historical beings, we are always on the way. This idea is captured in Gadamer’s view of language as “the previous accomplishment of thought” (“Relevance of the Beautiful” 12), hence his view of tradition as having “something to teach us that we could not know by ourselves” (Truth and Method xxxv). Wachterhauser captures this idea when he says that Gadamer’s tradition is a body of learning: “We proceed from language toward a better understanding of reality in the sense that we proceed from the received teaching of a body of learning”

4 It is interesting to observe the difference between Gadamer’s use of the expression matter of fact and its modern use. Whereas Gadamer emphasizes significance, the modern usage refers to certainty.
In his essay “Reply to My Critics” Gadamer explains that his idea of tradition does not incorporate “a preference for that which is customary, to which one must be blindly subservient” because “[a]lteration of the existing conditions is no less a form of connection to tradition than is a defense of existing conditions” (288). To Gadamer, “transmission [of tradition] . . . means learning how to grasp and express the past anew” because tradition “exists only in constantly becoming other than it is” (288). He writes,

the word that has come down to us as tradition and to which we are to listen really encounters us and does so as if it addressed us and is concerned with us . . . on the other side, [we have] the coming into play, the playing out, of the content of tradition in its constantly widening possibilities of significance and resonance, extended by the different people receiving it. (Truth and Method 462)

In explaining Gadamer’s idea of tradition, Bruns calls it “an endless give and take among multifarious voices,” which gives it an authority whose nature is “speculative rather than dogmatic” (“Structuralism” 21-22).

Bruns is referring here to Gadamer’s productive view of understanding, which Gadamer captures as follows: “The paradox that is true of all traditionary material, namely of being one and the same and yet of being different, proves that all interpretation is, in fact, speculative. . . . This means that assimilation is no mere reproduction or repetition of the traditionary text; it is a new creation of understanding” (Truth and Method 473). Risser puts it beautifully when he explains the sense of new that defines Gadamer’s productive view of understanding: “Philosophical hermeneutics recognizes
that temporality demands a creative repetition in all our projects” (Hermeneutics 34). This is what makes the human world different from the animal environment. Gadamer writes that having language “involves a mode of being that is quite different from the way animals are confined to their habitat” and gives the example of learning foreign languages which do not cause an alteration of our “relation to the world, like an aquatic animal that becomes a land animal; rather, while preserving their own relation to the world, they extend and enrich it by the world of the foreign language” (Truth and Method 453). The productive nature of understanding stems from the speculative, dialectical nature of language. Language is an interpretation of the world.

As mentioned earlier, the subject matter is at the core of Gadamer’s hermeneutics: We exist, therefore we talk about matters of significance to us. The matters of significance that human beings talk about make the human environment a world and human communication language. By language Gadamer means any of the following: speech, genuine speaking, talk, discussion, conversation, discourse—Gadamer’s Sprache. In what follows we are going to look at what it means to say that the primary function of language is to reveal, to articulate the world (i.e., that which is significant for human beings).

The ancient Greeks captured the world-revealing function of language in the concepts of logos and dialectic. The following passage from Gadamer’s essay “Truth in the Human Sciences” helps clarify the relationship between language and reason captured by the Greek logos and by Gadamer’s famous saying Being that can be understood is language: “Speech, logos, is often translated—correctly—as reason insofar as for the Greeks it was quickly discernible in speech that that which is primarily kept sight of and
safeguarded are the things themselves in their intelligibility. It is the reason of things themselves that allows itself to be presented and communicated in a specific manner of speech” (36). This is why Gadamer considers the emphasis on subjectivity in modernity “a distorting mirror” and takes inspiration from the Greeks, who were not caught in “the aporias of subjectivism” (Truth and Method 460) because “they did not conceive understanding as a methodic activity of the subject, but as something that the thing itself does and which thought ‘suffers’” (474). The last sentence defines the Greek idea of dialectic which the Greeks saw as the “expression of the logos” (460).

The world-revealing function of language as its primary ontological function means that language is an interpretation of the world. The world or the subject matter comes into language (language reveals it) and we recognize it in language (language means interpreting it). Going back to the Greeks, Gadamer writes that “we have the Logos—that is, language that exists in delun, the revealing of matters of fact. Thus we not only point to facts but also recognize them for what they are. Now that is what we mean by the life-worldliness of language. Language itself is one interpretation of the life-world” (Truth and Method 350). This statement captures the paradox of the original belonging of self and world in language (hence of understanding as an event of tradition) which comes with the fact that language is a speculative medium: “All understanding is interpretation,” Gadamer writes, “and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language that allows the object to come into words and yet is at the same time the interpreter’s own language” (389). This is how Gadamer defines the “speculative unity” that characterizes the being of language (and which encapsulates his ontology of language):
To come into language does not mean that a second being is acquired. Rather, what something presents itself as belongs to its own being. Thus everything that is language has a speculative unity: it contains a distinction, that between its being and its presentations of itself, but this is a distinction that is really not a distinction at all. (475)

Arthos explains that, by fitting within “the broader movement of dissociation from the dualist mindset endemic to Western rationalism,” Gadamer’s dialectical view of understanding “develops a kind of transitivity that undermines conventional polarities by confusing, straddling, and bleeding their boundaries” and it does that not “out of any taste for subversion, but rather because it finds these tensions in the natural work of language” *(Speaking Hermeneutically xv).* Arthos provides a list of these dichotomies, all of which begin in the subject-object distinction (xv-xvi).⁵

Because of the speculative character of language, Gadamer finds the relationship between word and thing to be more intimate than correspondence:

words name things in a much too intimate and intellectual way for the question of the degree of similarity to be appropriate here. . . . The ‘truth’ of a word does not depend on its correctness, its correct adequation to the thing. It lies rather in its perfect intellectuality—i.e., the manifestness of the word’s meaning in its sound. *(Truth and Method 410-411)*

Therefore, Gadamer understands *the word* to be more than the articulated word; “it seems necessary to separate the concept of the word from its grammatical sense, as I myself

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⁵ The dichotomies Arthos lists are subject-object, person-work, self-world, reader-text, reality-appearance, essence-contingence, thought-expression, self-other, individual-social, law-case, individual-particular, timeless-historical, past-present, certain-probable, whole-part, literacy-orality, product-process, theory-practice, empirical-normative *(Speaking Hermeneutically xvi).*
have sought to do,” he writes. “The word is that which says something, above the
distinctions of grammatical parts such as sentences, words, syllables, and so forth”
(“Hermeneutics and Logocentrism” 124). As we saw in chapter three, the primary
function of language for Gadamer is its speech function, not its signifying function;
words evoke things. Language is saying. The present participle *saying* indicates first, that
neither the world nor the word has ontological priority; second, that language (*Sprache*)
is a dialectical process, in other words, the mode of being of language is defined by
incompleteness (“Towards a Phenomenology” 25). Language is the subject matter
revealing itself again and again. This makes Gadamer turn to the Christian idea of
incarnation and the corresponding concept of the inner word. This is what he writes:

> There is, however, an idea that is not Greek which does more justice to the
> being of language, and so prevented the forgetfulness of language in
> Western thought from being complete. This is the Christian idea of
> *incarnation*. . . . The mystery of the Trinity is mirrored in the miracle of
> language insofar as the word that is true, because it says what the thing is,
> is nothing by itself and does not seek to be anything. . . . It has its being in
> its revealing. . . . [T]he human relationship between thought and speech
> corresponds, despite its imperfections, to the divine relationships of the
> Trinity. The inner mental word is just as consubstantial with thought as is
> God the Son with God the Father. (*Truth and Method* 418, 421)

Therefore, about the inner word he writes that it “is certainly not related to a particular
language, nor does it have the character of vaguely imagined words that proceed from the
memory; rather, it is the subject matter thought through to the end” (*Truth and Method*
422). The idea of the inner word points to the intimate connection between thing, thought, and word: “The starting point for the formation of the word is the substantive content (the species) that fills the mind” (426). This makes language “a totality of meaning” that transcends any particular view of the subject matter (458). This is how Gadamer describes it: “To be sure what comes into language is something different from the spoken word itself. But the word is a word only because of what comes into language in it. Its own physical being exists only in order to disappear into what is said. Likewise, that which comes into language is not something that is pregiven before language; rather, the word gives it its own determinateness” (475).

Gadamer’s phenomenology of language as speech, speaking, or conversation indicates the intimate relationship between thinking and speaking. Because of the ontological relationship between thing, thought, and word, to speak is to interpret. To speak is to articulate the subject matter. Speaking requires, presupposes understanding in order to be speaking proper, and this differentiates it from the ritualistic character of conventional language (discussed in the first section). Gadamer remarks that, in order to be speaking proper, speaking “requires understanding—understanding of the words that are spoken, also our own words” (“Hearing” 87). He gives the example of recitation of birthday poems by children and notes that this recitation is not genuine ‘saying’ because it “reduces the delivery of language to an extreme of unthinking memorization in which understanding plays no part” (90). About the spoken word he writes that it “interprets itself to an astonishing degree, by the manner of speaking, the tone of voice, the tempo, and so on, and also by the circumstances in which it is spoken” (Truth and Method 393). Wachterhauser writes that, according to Gadamer, “in finding ‘the right words’ we have
the thought (and hence an understanding of the object) for the first time. Thought comes to fruition in language and not just to outward expression. It is first by articulating a thought in some language that the thought itself becomes distinct and understandable” (“History and Language” 30). Two experiences of language illustrate the “intimate unity of language and thought” (Truth and Method 402). One such experience is conversation: if we have difficulty understanding a particular topic, talking about it with someone often leads to a clearer and deeper understanding of it. Another experience is free writing, not by accident also called writing to think. Conversations and writing, by virtue of requiring the articulation of the subject matter, lead to an increased understanding of it. Also, the way we speak reflects the degree or quality of our understanding of a subject matter. Wachterhauser refers to this relationship between speech and understanding when he notes that “Our understanding of some phenomenon will vary in sophistication and depth in direct proportion to both the number of different ways we have of speaking about it” (“History and Language” 31). Therefore, he sees “a complex and nuanced language [as] a necessary condition for understanding what something is and how it is related to other realities” (31).

The quality of speech is a reflection of the quality of thought because the subject matter is the content of language. At the same time, speaking itself increases our understanding of a matter because language is a speculative medium. By the speculative nature of language (Sprache), one of the things Gadamer means is that “the finite possibilities of the word are oriented toward the sense intended as toward the infinite” (Truth and Method 469). Gadamer’s view of speaking is related to his view of thinking. He defines thinking in terms of Greek dialectic, which is grounded in the finitude of
human knowledge. Gadamer writes that Plato saw philosophy as “something for human beings, not for gods. Gods know, but we are in this ongoing process of approximation and overcoming error by dialectically moving towards truth” (“Hermeneutics of Suspicion” 64). Therefore, Gadamer writes,

thinking means unfolding what consistently follows from the subject matter itself. It is part of this process to suppress ideas ‘that tend to insinuate themselves’ and to insist on the logic of thought. . . . Here dialectic is nothing but the art of conducting a conversation and especially of revealing the mistakes in one’s opinions through the process of questioning and yet further questioning. Here, then, the dialectic is negative; it confuses one’s opinions. But this kind of confusion means at the same time a clarification, for it opens one’s eyes to the thing. (Truth and Method 464)

As the linguistic form that defines thinking, questioning is always a self-questioning as well. In other words, that which triggers the dialectical movement of understanding that leads us to new truths about the subject matter is a concern. As mentioned earlier, Gadamer believes that “At the beginning of every effort to understand is a concern about something” (“Hermeneutics” 50). The form taken by a concern, in Gadamer’s thought, is the question. Having a concern, having a question about a particular matter means placing in question our previous understanding. Grondin points out the dependence of hermeneutic truth on questions. Die Sache is revealed by questions. He then explains how the centrality of the question to Gadamer’s hermeneutics answers the accusations of essentialism: just as there is no thing in itself, there is no truth
in itself, that is, “independent of the questions and expectations of human beings” (“Hermeneutics and Relativism” 48).

Our concerns are not separated from our life in traditions; in fact, our concerns and questions arise from within our hermeneutic situation. This means two things: first, that our prejudices play a key role in our arrival at truth, hence Gadamer’s idea of “justified prejudices productive of knowledge” (*Truth and Method* 279). Our prejudices are the key players in the event of understanding, in the act of interpretation. Gadamer writes that “To interpret is precisely to bring one’s own preconceptions into play so that the text’s meaning can really be made to speak for us” (397). Second, the fact that our questions arise from within our hermeneutic situation means that, although from a hermeneutic situation we can only see a limited view of the thing, what we recognize is the subject matter *itself* because “the subject presents different aspects of itself at different times or from different standpoints” (284). By *the subject matter itself* Gadamer means an essential aspect of it which stands out, in other words, a truth that we need to consider. He writes:

> Recognition as cognition of the true occurs through an act of identification in which we do not differentiate between the representation and the represented. . . . When I recognize someone or something, what I see is freed from the contingency of this or that moment of time. It is part of the process of recognition that we see things in terms of what is permanent and essential in them. (“Art and Imitation” 99)

Warnke notes that by *truth* Gadamer means that “an aspect of human experience has been separated out from others, given an emphasis of its own and thus illuminated for all. To
this extent,” she adds, “his conception has affinities with Heidegger’s account of truth as aletheia or disclosure; it makes an uncovering of some aspect of the world, our lives, a text or the like that was previously occluded” (58). As Wachterhauser insightfully puts it when accounting for Gadamer’s Platonic resemblance between truth and beauty, “We interpret only because the truth ‘shines forth’ from the variety of linguistic accounts of some phenomenon and compels us, as it were, to make greater sense of what we find already there” (“Gadamer’s Realism” 158). In bridging the intelligible and the beautiful realms, Gadamer’s concept of truth is rhetorical, as the following passage indicates:

The idea is always that what is evident has not been proved and is not absolutely certain, but it asserts itself by reason of its own merit within the realm of the possible and probable. . . . what is evident is always something surprising as well, like a new light being turned on, expanding the range of what we can take into consideration. (Truth and Method 485-486)

This is why Gadamer’s view of truth can be defined in relation to the phenomenon of play: “the play of language itself, which addresses us, proposes and withdraws, asks and fulfills itself in the answer” because “In understanding we are drawn into an event of truth and arrive, as it were, too late, if we want to know what we are supposed to believe” (490). As an event of tradition, understanding is an event of truth.

All these ideas indicate that Gadamer’s dialectical hermeneutics revisits the idea of human agency. The ontological priority of the subject matter over the subject does not mean that the subject is inconsequential. Quite the contrary. The person is important because the subject matter is recognized through the person’s prejudices. That which
opens up the subject matter anew, in a different light, is the person’s concern, the person’s question. Arthos captures this beautifully in the terms provided by the phenomenon of play:

If in a game of badminton the focus is on the shuttlecock, still we ourselves are always in that movement and lend our ingenuity to its adventure. This ambiguous role of being the pivot and not the goal is the person. If language is a kind of alembic for the transmutation of the stuff of life, then being myself and not another is what sparks the gap between word and thing, the initial irritation that moves the game. (“Humanity of the Word” 490, emphasis removed)

Consequently, Arthos writes that “The person is never dissolved in Gadamer, but is always simply understood in an active state of relation, of transubstantiating effects, both to others and to things” (489). We could say that the preposition that defines a hermeneutic approach to human agency is through, not by. If our prejudices define us as historical beings, it is through our prejudices that we arrive at truth, provided that we become aware of our historical situatedness in tradition, hence of the constitutive role played by prejudices in our understanding; in other words, provided that we hold them lightly as we pursue the truth of the matter. This dialectic between prejudice and truth that defines Gadamer’s hermeneutics and underlies the practice of listening to language is captured in Gadamer’s view of hermeneutic consciousness. Hermeneutic consciousness has a dialectical nature, holding prejudice and truth together, in a productive tension:

a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither
‘neutrality’ with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings. *(Truth and Method 269)*

As Gadamer sees it, the practical reflection that defines the experience of understanding is “dialectical in its highest measure,” that is, “always concretely motivated already, prejudiced to be sure, but also challenged to a critique of prejudices” (“What Is Practice” 82). In discussing Gadamer’s idea of prejudice and the hermeneutic task of discerning between distorting and productive prejudices, Grondin introduces the notion of “vigilance” as defining a hermeneutic kind of knowledge that keeps one’s eyes on truth while aware of one’s own limited (self-)understanding *(Philosophy of Gadamer 95).*

Finally, Bernstein captures very well the hermeneutics of trust that defines Gadamer’s thought when he says that Gadamer argued that “we can take our historical situation and the practices that are constitutive of it seriously, and at the same time we can develop a critical perspective on it that is at once informed by an understanding of our history and is oriented to an open projective future” (“What Is the Difference” 359). Gadamer’s hermeneutics of trust is most evident in his idea and practice of listening to language. Not only is language not a prison for thought, language provides us with the way to transcend our linguistic boundaries, if we trust it to guide our thinking; in other words, if we choose to think *with* language.
THINKING WITH LANGUAGE:

GADAMER’S HERMENEUTICS OF TRUST

The hermeneutic practice of listening to language engages fully the relationship between language and reason. We saw in the previous sections that, as social beings who belong to traditions, we think in language. In other words, language and reason are always historically situated (understanding is always prejudiced). At the same time, as linguistic beings, we also think through language because the mode of being of language and reason (the nature of understanding) is dialectical. Gadamer’s practice of listening to language shows us the hermeneutic and rhetorical possibilities that come with the relationship between language and reason when we (choose to) think with language. To listen to language means to think (along) with language because we trust it to guide us to the truth of the matter. To think (along) with language means to engage traditions reflectively, as conversation partners on the matter at hand.

Gadamer’s practice of listening to language is grounded in a hermeneutic of trust. He does not believe in linguistic determinism. That is why he writes that he discovered “that no conceptual language, not even what Heidegger called the ‘language of metaphysics’ represents an unbreakable constraint upon thought if only the thinker allows himself [or herself] to trust language; that is, if he [or she] engages in dialogue with other thinkers and other ways of thinking” (“Text and Interpretation” 23). His work in the history of concepts shows a trust in language as traditionary content and as a dialectical process. To trust language as traditionary content or expression of tradition means to engage it as a linguistic account of the matter at hand. To trust language as a dialectical process means to listen for the matter at hand to reveal itself anew. In other words,
thinking with language is defined by questions and good will. If questioning is what the person who listens to language does, good will is the spirit underlying the questioning.

The challenge that Gadamer’s hermeneutics presents to anyone interested in genuine thinking is to think (along) with a discourse, instead of criticizing it. Writing about his work with Plato’s texts, he writes: “To philosophize with Plato, not just to criticize Plato, that is the task” (“Reflections” 32). To think along with a discourse, instead of against it, captures what Gadamer calls the “undogmatic dialectic” that characterizes genuine conversations (22). This is a different kind of thinking, not centered in the thinking subject, but in the subject matter. Gadamer’s work in the history of concepts is but a conversation with the thinkers’ traditions which led to the formation of those concepts.

First, engaging a tradition reflectively as a conversation partner on the matter at hand means taking its linguistic account of the matter seriously. This acknowledgment translates into asking questions driven by the matter at hand and grounded in an awareness of the hermeneutic relevance of the contextual ground. The key idea behind such questions is captured in the following question: What does this tradition or standpoint see about this particular issue that I/we do not see from where I stand but perhaps should? Other possible questions are, What does this way of speaking about the issue reveal about it? What is the life-context that led to this way of speaking and thinking about this matter? Gadamer writes that to think with the Other means to place oneself in the Other’s point of view, which further means openness to being persuaded and even working at making one’s interlocutor’s case stronger:
When we try to understand a text, we do not place ourselves in the author’s inner state; rather, if one wants to speak of ‘placing oneself,’ we place ourselves in his [or her] point of view. But this means nothing else than that we try to let stand the claim to correctness of what the other person says. We will even, if we want to understand, attempt to strengthen his [or her] arguments. ("On the Circle of Understanding” 69)

As the questions mentioned above and this passage reveal, the reason behind the questions is not psychological (empathy) but hermeneutical and rhetorical. One of the outcomes of hermeneutic questioning is learning to think along with other ways of thinking about significant matters, learning to think about significant matters in different terms; in other words, learning to see “through the prejudice of another” as Gadamer puts it (“Reply” 283). As Risser writes in this sense, the goal of the hermeneutic conversation is “to think with the other and to come back to oneself as if to another” (Hermeneutics 16). According to Gadamer, the task of learning from one another is intrinsic to the linguistic turn: “But the linguistic turn, which is grounded in the linguisticality of the human being . . . contains the idea that we as human beings have to learn from each other. We do not need just to hear one another but to listen to one another. Only when this happens is there understanding” (“Hermeneutics” 39). As a thinking along with the Other, the question is the linguistic expression of good will.

Therefore, engaging a tradition as a conversation partner on the matter at hand means tarrying with another way of thinking about the matter at hand. As Dostal notes, for Gadamer “the exemplary experience of truth comes when we take the time to dwell on the matter at hand (Sache selbst) in conversation with another” (49). Gadamer is very
serious about truth as a rhetorical and ethical endeavor. He writes about hermeneutic truth that, “If we regard it as something that is simply aesthetic, non-binding, and lacking in existential seriousness, we are obviously failing to see how fundamental is the finitude of [the human being] for the hermeneutic experience of the world” (*Truth and Method* 488). It is one’s pursuit of truth that lies behind the good will that defines listening to language.

Both learning and listening are conditional upon good will. We know from personal experience how our good will towards another person makes us hear differently, and how the absence of good will makes us deaf to what the Other is saying, so that we hear our own prejudices into his or her discourse. From Plato Gadamer takes the insight that good will constitutes the spirit of genuine thinking (“Expressive Power” 348). Tarrying with the language of a discourse resembles Plato’s dialectic, as an “art of thinking,” because, like his dialectic, it “consists not in trying to discover the weakness of what is said, but in bringing out its real strength” (*Truth and Method* 367). “By hermeneutics,” Gadamer explained in 1996, “I understand the ability to listen to the other in the belief that he [or she] could be right” (qtd. in Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer* 250). Comparing Gadamer’s view of rationality to MacIntyre’s, Warnke describes Gadamer’s view as “a willingness to admit the existence of better options” and she adds, “The awareness that one’s knowledge is always open to refutation or modification from the vantage point of another perspective is not a basis for suspending confidence in the idea of reason but rather represents the very possibility of rational progress” (173).

The good will that underlies the practice of listening to language is a sign of the person’s trust in language as a speculative medium, that is, as productive of insight if one takes the time to dwell with it. To engage traditions reflectively as conversation partners
on the matter at hand means to listen for the subject matter to reveal itself anew. As the person takes time to ask questions of a given tradition’s account of the subject matter, the established meaning of the concept or the term is opened up and its contextual ground starts resonating.

The end of the practice of listening to language is genuine community. As Barthold notes about Gadamer’s idea of truth, “Hermeneutical truth, i.e., the event of understanding, is an ethical affair to the extent it requires embarking on a common pursuit with another” (xx). Gadamer’s practice of listening to language can help form what Davey calls “a community of border crossers” (Unquiet Understanding 49). “This is a community of those who recognize that they are indeed dependent upon the other for becoming other to themselves,” a community whose members develop “the ability to be responsive to, to adapt to, and to pass between different cultural borders” (49). Davey’s metaphor of border crosser resonates with Gadamer’s metaphor of linguistic circle. “Each one is at first a linguistic circle,” Gadamer writes, “and these linguistic circles come into contact with each other, merging more and more” (“Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem” 17). As Barthold rightly observes, “Gadamer tells us that speech has another role apart from giving an account that aims to clarify the subject matter; it also aims to draw others into an understanding that fosters productive understanding” (31). Gadamer’s idea and practice of listening to language shows that our recognition of truth—in its self-evidentness as well as its validation—is a collective endeavor. When we trust language by thinking (along) with it, language will guide us to the truth of the matter, one truth at a time.
CONCLUSIONS

This chapter completed the exploration of Gadamer’s idea and practice of listening to language by grounding it in his view of understanding as an event of tradition. Understanding as an event of tradition reveals the paradox of our belonging to language: The subject matter comes into language in particular linguistic traditions and we recognize it in and through the language of particular traditions. This means that when we think, we think in the language of our linguistic traditions. However, thinking also means, for Gadamer, pursuing what follows from the subject matter, that is, engaging the speculative nature of language. If we want to avoid the dogmatism that comes with our belonging to linguistic traditions and benefit from the wisdom of language, we need to learn to think (along) with language, that is, we need to trust it to guide us towards the truth of the matter.

Therefore, someone who practices listening to language is aware of conventional language as an expression of tradition and engages it reflectively as a linguistic account of the subject matter. This acknowledgment translates into tarrying with other ways of speaking about a subject matter, asking questions that are driven by the subject matter, and listening for the subject matter to reveal itself anew. The end of engaging traditions reflectively as conversation partners on the matter at hand is genuine community.

The next chapter will continue the conversation between Gadamer and communication studies by exploring some ways in which Gadamer’s practice of listening to language can help communication scholars and practitioners think and speak wisely. This exploration will begin by engaging rhetorical and hermeneutical approaches to the
study of listening and will continue by discussing the relationship between the practice of listening to language and Aristotle’s *phronesis*.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION: THE WISDOM OF LANGUAGE

You must sharpen your ear, you must realize that when you take a word in your mouth, you have not taken up some arbitrary tool which can be thrown in a corner if it doesn’t do the job, but you are committed to a line of thought that comes from afar and reaches on beyond you. (Gadamer, Truth and Method 547-548)

INTRODUCTION

Subscribing to Gadamer’s belief that being insightful and discerning is “part of the vocation of [the human being]” (Truth and Method 356), this dissertation has explored Gadamer’s idea and practice of listening to language in order to understand the relationship between a constitutive theory of language and a life of wisdom. This concluding chapter considers some ways in which the hermeneutic practice of listening to language can assist communication scholars and practitioners in becoming discerning and insightful. This exploration begins with a brief summary of the hermeneutic practice of listening to language.

LISTENING TO LANGUAGE: A SUMMARY

Gadamer’s practice of listening to language is central to his hermeneutic praxis and defines the art of understanding as an art of questioning, listening, and thinking. When we practice listening to language, we place ourselves in the position to hear the wisdom of language by not taking concepts for granted, by experiencing language instead
of using it, and by letting our thinking about significant matters be informed by alternative ways of speaking about them. In what follows I will summarize what the practice of listening to language consists in, Gadamer’s reasons behind it, and its benefits for those who practice it.

Gadamer’s practice of listening to language has its roots in the phenomenological turn to language initiated by Heidegger at the beginning of the twentieth century. At the core of this hermeneutic practice is a concern with the proper access to the subject matter and a grounding of thinking in *praxis*. Listening to language is theoretically grounded in Gadamer’s constitutive view of language, which can be summed up as follows: language, not consciousness, is the critical element in understanding or communication of meaning; our primary and most consequential relationship to language is as hearers, not users, of language; and, the nature of language is both binding and expansive, hence the problems that come with its binding nature (via hearing) can be attended to from within language itself by engaging its expansive nature (through listening).

First, the hermeneutic practice of listening to language is a reflective engagement of language that acknowledges the constitutive role played by customary ways of speaking in conceptual thought. Consequently, someone who listens to language tends to stay away from theoretical constructions that are not grounded in experience and employs concepts reflectively and mindfully. This means that, instead of taking their established meaning for granted (i.e., approaching language instrumentally), *the person who listens to language asks questions regarding the life-context and historical background of concepts.*
By reversing the movement of thought involved in the natural process of concept formation (that is, from word to concept), this hermeneutic questioning of concepts opens up the general, established meaning of the concept and restores the intuitive power of ordinary language to conceptual thought. As a result, the person develops a concept-historical consciousness that enables him or her to engage issues and ideas in a manner that is philosophically grounded and consistent.

Second, the hermeneutic practice of listening to language is a reflective engagement of language that acknowledges the constitutive role played by hearing in understanding; that is, it acknowledges our primary relationship to language as hearers. Someone who practices listening to language does not relate to language instrumentally, as a user of language, but aesthetically, as a hearer who belongs to a meaningful world that discloses itself in words. Acutely aware of the evocative power of language, the person who listens to language submits to its guidance by tarrying with language, listening carefully for the ways in which words evoke the subject matter.

As a result, the person develops an intuitive ear for the right words. By this Gadamer means a sensitivity for language that can judge the linguistic quality of conceptual expressions, i.e., the way in which concepts evoke things. This sensitivity is responsible for the conceptual precision that characterizes the thinking of those who tarry with language.

Third, the hermeneutic practice of listening to language is a reflective engagement of language that acknowledges the constitutive role played by prejudices in our pursuit of truth. Therefore, someone who listens to language is aware of the binding power of conventional terms on thought, which comes with our historical situatedness, our
belonging to particular intellectual traditions and speech communities. At the same time, he or she trusts the productive dialectic inherent in language to reveal new truths about the subject matter.

As a result, someone who listens to language engages traditions or other ways of thinking as conversation partners on the matter at hand, listening for the subject matter to reveal itself anew. As the person learns to think along with other ways of thinking, he or she begins to hear the subject matter resonate in particular conceptualizations of it. What is developed in the process is an undogmatic kind of thinking that is guided by language, grounded in praxis, and on the way to truth.

As the exploration of Gadamer’s practice of listening to language has shown, once we acknowledge that we are first of all (ontologically) hearers of language, listening becomes a critical element in understanding. The relevance of listening as a socio-cultural practice to the public sphere has been acknowledged in philosophy and communication studies. The next section will explore some ways in which rhetorical and hermeneutic approaches open up the study and practice of listening.

**The Social Practice of Listening**

By bringing the rhetorical and hermeneutical paradigms into the study of listening, philosophers Gemma Corradi Fiumara, David M. Levin, John Uhr, and Matthew Meyer, and communication scholars Krista Ratcliffe, Daniel M. Gross, Paula S. Tompkins, Molly Stoltz, and others make the case for listening as a necessary practice in Western culture. Whether they call it “political listening,” “rhetorical listening,” “hermeneutic listening,” or “listening to logos,” these scholars point out the centrality of listening to cultural criticism, social justice, and democratic deliberation. All these
approaches to listening would subscribe to Gross’ definition of listening as “a differentiated and deeply social phenomenon” as well as his estimation that listening “has been neglected as a rhetorical art” (74, 77). This view of listening as a social phenomenon and practice corrects the socio-cognitive view still prevalent in communication studies that treats listening as a skill. These approaches also contribute to a more robust theorizing of listening as an ethical practice. Pat Gerhke sums up the view of other communication scholars when he writes in the 2011 special issue of the International Journal of Listening: “right now, the field of listening is in a prime position to benefit from a more sustained and clear focus on ethics, while the field of ethics is in dire need of a more sophisticated theory of listening” (2).

First of all, because of particular social changes, we are in danger of losing our ability to listen if we do not practice it. In Gadamer’s view, learning to listen means “rising above the universal leveling process in which we cease to notice anything—a process encouraged by a civilization that dispenses increasingly powerful stimuli” (“Relevance of the Beautiful” 36). According to Fiumara’s evaluation of the Western ethos, a society saturated by information (brought to us by technology) leads to the tendency to seek out the interesting, which, in turn, makes us immune to human suffering and forms indifference in us (172). By contrast, she sees listening (paradoxically) as “a way of avoiding passivity” as we learn to avoid “the blunting mechanisms in our cultural machinery in order to be able to heed something, and to ‘dwell’ with it,” that is, to “begin to draw upon the unusual, without aspiring to consume it as ‘interesting’: and, through the same concern, [to] familiarize ourselves ever more with that which is ordinary until it actually becomes disconcerting” (171-2). In a voice resonant with Fiumara’s, and also
informed by Heidegger’s reflections on Heraclitus, Meyer does not see much hope for listening as a practice as long as “many people (as speakers and listeners) are satisfied with ‘you catch my drift,’ ‘know what I mean,’ and so on” (58). He adds that this type of so-called agreement that something has been communicated is one in which the speaker has not reflected thoughtfully and the listener already assumes to know what will be said. In this background, were one to attempt to fully explain oneself, the speaker would find rather untrained ears. (58, emphasis added)

His last words make one think of Gadamer’s hermeneutic praxis about which Gadamer writes that “[i]n it what one has to exercise above all is the ear” (“Reflections” 17). In a voice that resonates with Gadamer’s, Levin urges us to assume responsibility for our hearing and develop it “beyond what normal living, normal socialization, minimally requires of us . . . as a practice of compassion, increasing our capacity as listeners, to be aware of, and responsive to, the interrelatedness and commonality of all sonorous beings” (47).

Similarly, Uhr points out the current need for political listening when he writes that, “If democracy means self-government, then the powers and public persuasion exercised by the media weakens the prospect of direct democracy by making it harder for the people individually to ‘hear themselves think’ and collectively to listen to themselves” (266). He adds that “the basic problem about political listening was originally identified by Hobbes in terms of inattentive publics” (267). Therefore, he brings in the idea of “auditory democracy,” which “acknowledges the role of people as
auditors, delegating governing powers to their political representatives over whom they retain important levels of audit and accountability” (240). Uhr’s question is whether in the political sphere there are distinctive practices and institutions capable of assisting the civic listening process; and whether one can construct a model, not simply of a listening government, but more democratically, of a listening polity inspired by recent philosophical investigation of ‘the listening self’ (243).

He is referring here to Levin’s philosophical inquiry *The Listening Self: Personal Growth, Social Change and the Closure of Metaphysics*. Pat Arneson’s “political listening” follows Uhr’s observation that the theorizing of the public sphere, democracy, and deliberation needs to bring in “listening in” in addition to “speaking up” (168). Arneson is interested in the social change initiated by women who were able to discriminate between more helpful and less helpful traditions because they attentively listened “to/with the ways [they were] multiactively situated” (168). Arneson’s idea of political listening is a reminder of Gadamer’s emphasis on the importance of a reflective engagement of traditions. Uhr’s, Levin’s, and Arneson’s inquiries point to the need and potential for thinking about listening at the intersection of private and public. Since it is accessible to everyone, Gadamer’s practice of listening to language can assist us in moving listening back into the public sphere, starting at the individual level, by forming discerning, reasonable communicators.

Similar to Uhr’s interest in the role of citizens as auditors is Gross’ interest in revisiting the history of rhetoric from the perspective of the listener (the implicit listener of Aristotle, for instance). Some of his questions, which constitute the ground of his
graduate course on listening from a rhetorical perspective, are: “how do we configure our
listening differently depending on the public space we occupy; or how are we culturally
configured to listen to the past; or how are different social roles, such as master and slave,
differently configured around listening?” (78). His questions remind one of Lipari’s
invitation, addressed to communication theorists, “to rethink communication through the
lens of listening” (“Listening, Thinking, Being” 359). Gross deplores the move of “the art
of listening” from the public sphere “into the domain of so-called soft social science,
most importantly, psychoanalysis” and points out the implications “for our cultural self-
understanding,” namely, that “we are now configured as creatures who pursue meaning in
the folds of our unconscious” and “public spaces . . . are no longer spaces to lose oneself
or perform a social role. . . . they are places where we find ourselves and our intimate
others” (79). Just like Arneson, he considers studying listening from a rhetorical
perspective of benefit to “the study of subordinate populations, the public sphere and its
limitations, and traditions of passive disobedience” as it draws our attention “to the ways
in which listeners are ethically and emotionally constituted” (78).

By revisiting the history of rhetoric from the perspective of the listener, Gross
problematises the study of the listener and places it in a larger theoretical framework.
Gadamer’s practice of listening to language provides the ontological ground for such
theorizing by showing how the listener is first of all (ontologically) a hearer of language.
In doing that, Gadamer’s practice of listening to language puts flesh on Lipari’s “listening
being” which she sees as “not an actual state or principle, but a horizon toward which we
might travel” (358). One of the benefits of grounding the practice of listening
ontologically is that it brings to the fore the relationship between the nature of language and the practice of listening, rather than keeping the former in the background, assumed.

Language needs to come to the fore of our efforts to theorize listening. From Gadamer’s standpoint, listening is primarily an experience of language. In his 2011 article “Rethinking Conceptual Approaches to the Study of ‘Listening’” Robert N. Bostrom contends that “fundamental issues in the nature of language are basic to the building of any theory of communication, and especially so in listening” (11). However, a survey of the current state of the study of listening in relation to language confirms Meyer’s conclusion that “we have not come far enough in our reflections on language . . . if only evinced by the fact that we tend to take our understanding of words rather casually, . . . equally problematically, we tend to focus on the meaning educed in statements as rigorously intended” (64). A few rhetorical and hermeneutical approaches to listening point, directly or indirectly, to the interdependence between a theory of language and a theory and practice of listening.

Although they come to the study of listening from different perspectives, Ratcliffe and Tompkins identify the practice of rhetorical listening as necessary in creating social justice. Behind both Ratcliffe’s and Tompkins’ concept of rhetorical listening lies a constitutive view of language. By rhetorical listening they both mean a reflective engagement of our discourses in order to affirm and include unheard or unseen Others. Ratcliffe’s concept of rhetorical listening is grounded in Heidegger’s reflections on Heraclitus, hence in logos, which Ratcliffe defines as “a system of discourse within which a culture reasons and derives its truths” (23). “Within this more inclusive logos” writes Ratcliffe, “lies potential for personal and social justice. Perhaps through listening,
people can engage more possibilities for inventing arguments that bring differences together, for hearing differences as harmony or even as discordant notes” (25). Therefore, Ratcliffe defines rhetorical listening as “a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture” (xiii)—and here comes her particular interest—“[that] may be employed to hear people’s intersecting identifications with gender and race (including whiteness) the purpose being to negotiate troubled identifications in order to facilitate cross-cultural communication about any topic” (17).

Tompkins, on the other hand, defines rhetorical listening as “an attentiveness to communicative connection in an effort to discern the traces of Others obscured or hidden by language and communication practices that create rhetorical absence rather than presence” (77). If for Tompkins rhetorical listening involves empathy and moral imagination, Ratcliffe’s rhetorical listening is a questioning of the *logos* of others and her own *logos* with regard to two specific cultural biases—gender and race. Ratcliffe’s concern is, therefore, “if and how [she] ever participate[s] in white discourses in ways that might unknowingly erase the desires and material existence of others” (40).

Therefore, rhetorical listening requires, according to Ratcliffe, continually asking, “What’s at stake? For whom? And why?” (97).

Ratcliffe’s thorough, creative, and practical reflections on rhetorical listening show the potential for theorizing listening as a social practice when we approach it as an experience of language. Meyer’s and Fiumara’s approaches to listening, informed by Heidegger’s reflections on Heraclitus, also see listening in relation to language, even though their approaches are not as practical as Ratcliffe’s. Referring to the idea of listening to *logos*, Greg Schneider concludes that this view of listening “could have a
profound effect on the way that listening is taught and studied in the future” by
encouraging “a more difficult, but potentially more profitable, listening activity . . .
listening for the nuances and implications of language, over and above the meanings of
the speaker” (68). Schneider finds this approach to listening particularly promising for
rhetorical criticism and commends Ratcliffe’s work because it “shows us the practical
and critical possibilities of listening to the logos” (68).

The relationship between listening and language has implications for the ways in
which we theorize ethical listening, for instance, the ways in which we understand the
role played by bias in listening. David Beard contends that only when the constitutive
role of hearing is taken into consideration can we talk significantly about an ethics of
listening or understand what ethical listening is. He urges communication scholars
interested in the study of listening to start considering the constitutive role of hearing, i.e.,
“to account for the ways that our acoustic environments give contour to our sense of self
. . . [because] we [never] stop making sense of our auditory environment . . . [being]
always already interpreting and being shaped by sound (7). The discussion of, or
reference to, bias in several studies (Ratcliffè, Levin, Meyer, Stoltz, Bodie, Wolvin)
indicates first, that there is a space created for hermeneutic approaches to listening;
second, it indicates the need for a careful engagement of the complex relationship
between listening and understanding. Naturally, as Meyer writes, “listening will always
require restraint on the part of the listener” (60), just as ethical listening requires an
“active self-revision” (Huglen 175). If restraint means “a resolution to give our full
attention” to the Other (Meyer 60), which defines a dialogic view of listening (Floyd,
Shotter), Gadamer would agree. However, Gadamer would find a view of listening “that
does not anticipate or expect, but waits for the revelation of new possibilities for understanding through listening” (Meyer 65) both unrealistic (defined in terms of a false dichotomy) and problematic. In its acknowledgment of the constitutive role that prejudice plays in listening and understanding, Gadamer’s idea and practice of listening to language provides communication scholars interested in theorizing (ethical) listening with a realistic and productive way to address the relationship between a listener’s prejudices and ethical listening. Moreover, grounded in a view of understanding as phronesis, Gadamer’s practice of listening to language takes the discussion of ethical listening to a deeper level, thus answering Lipari’s question regarding the “theoretical transformations [that could] emerge when listening is conceptualized as phronesis itself” (“Listening, Thinking, Being” 359).

The rhetorical and hermeneutical approaches to listening surveyed here confirm Gross’ claim that the absence of a rhetorical perspective on listening means that “crucial angles on the topic have been neglected” (78). The next section will explore the relationship between the practice of listening to language and wisdom by bringing together Gadamer’s appropriation of Aristotle’s phronesis, on the one hand, and communication and philosophical scholarship on practical reason, on the other hand. In its relevance to a life of wisdom, Gadamer’s practice of listening to language answers the call for social practices that develop practical wisdom and provides a philosophical ground for more particular views of the practice of listening such as those mentioned above.
THE WISDOM OF LANGUAGE

Gadamer’s understanding and Aristotle’s phronesis

Gadamer’s idea and practice of listening to language is central to his view of understanding, which, in turn, is grounded in Aristotle’s phronesis. He claims that the latter provided him with a model for his view of understanding and that his philosophy is nothing but phronesis⁶ (Truth and Method 324; Century of Philosophy 54). This also means, for Gadamer, a return to Socratic wisdom, the “consciousness of not knowing” (“Reflections” 31). Gadamer reminds us that Aristotle defines phronesis as the knowledge that guides the praxis of a being who is becoming. Both Aristotle’s phronesis and Gadamer’s understanding are a kind of knowledge that cannot be detached from being, hence from becoming (Truth and Method 312). Gadamer points out that any genuine understanding is a self-understanding as well as a “coming to an understanding about something” with others (“On the Problem of Self-Understanding” 51; Truth and Method 180). In other words, like phronesis, the experience of understanding presupposes application and dialogue.

Moreover, human beings are acting beings—that is, beings who need to know and decide for themselves; this makes phronesis a moral practical knowledge (Truth and Method 313). As moral knowledge, phronesis requires “an inner link with the ethos,” and this link differentiates it from techne (“Reflections” 31). Aristotle differentiates between phronesis and techne as follows: while “prudence is a disposition with true reason and ability for actions concerning what is good or bad for man” (1140b), “to think by art is to investigate how to generate something . . . [that is] art must be concerned with production

⁶ In his book Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgment and the Lure of Technique Joseph Dunne shows how all of Gadamer’s concepts can be traced back to Aristotle’s phronesis.
and not with action” (1140a). Gadamer defines *ethos* as “a habituation which has grown to become second nature. . . a way of behaving and an attitude which is able to give an account of itself” (“Culture and Words” 184). If *phronesis* is the ethical know-how that requires an insight into the good, *techne* is the know-how that lacks any necessary connection to the good. Or, as McGee puts it,

we do not describe technical mastery as wisdom, for it consists of

habituated familiarity with the applications of a technology—cabinet-makers do not ‘decide’ in exigent circumstances; in fact, virtually all of their ‘decisions’ are determined by the possibilities of their *techne*. By contrast, the *phronimos* is ‘always already in the situation of having to act’ in exigent circumstances (23).

Gadamer’s efforts to point out the fundamental difference between *phronesis* and *techne* have been recognized by communication scholars such as McGee, Hariman, Arthos, and Deetz. His efforts are grounded in his belief that our ability for deliberate, responsible action has been endangered by modern science. Gadamer believes that “with all our technical and scientific progress we still have not learned well enough how to live with each other and with our own progress” (“From Word to Concept” 10-11). For this reason, he adds, “hermeneutics asserts something nobody today can deny: we occupy a moment in history in which we must strenuously use the full powers of our reason, and not just keep doing science only” (11). Moreover, the human reliance on experts, which replaces the act of deciding for oneself, is a human tendency that has been magnified, Gadamer writes, with the advent of modern science (“Limitations of the Expert” 188). McGee concurs when he writes that “[w]herever in society we once would have looked to
find an example of the *phronimos*, we find instead an expert whose *ethos* consists of credentialed mastery of the *techne* of his or her field” (24). This is why Gadamer claims that *phronesis* “is even more badly needed now with more complex societies and the developments of science” and he adds that the solution is “a responsible application of its results, something for which society as a whole and its political organization must take responsibility” (“Limitations of the Expert” 192). This responsible application can be effected by *phronesis*, which asks, *Should we do this (just because we can)?*

Because *phronesis* cannot be taught, only exercised within human practices, the answer to this contemporary problem is more practices that develop *phronesis*. Just like Gadamer, MacIntyre advocates practice as an alternative to the overwhelming presence of “bureaucratic expertise” as well as to “the fictions of rights and of equality” that make up the texture of modern consciousness (*After Virtue* 155; “Bernstein’s Distorting Mirrors” 40). Practices are important because they develop virtues. The accounts of practice given by MacIntyre in his book *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* as well as by Eugene Garver in *Aristotle’s Rhetoric: An Art of Character* build upon Aristotle’s belief that virtues cannot be taught; instead, they are acquired by being exercised within socio-cultural practices. Gadamer writes in this sense that “Aristotle has made it clear that practical reason and practical insight do not possess the teachability of science but can be exercised in *praxis*” (“Reflections” 31).

Given the relationship between thought and speech that underlies the practice of listening to language, this project suggests that the practice of listening to language forms *phronesis* as discernment and reasonableness, as thinking and speaking wisely. The practice of listening to language can form discerning and reasonable thinkers and
speakers by requiring and developing an awareness of the norms that guide our lives (the *ethos* of our language-worlds), an appropriate application of those norms to particular situations (a sense of the right measure), and reasonableness. These three characteristics of *phronesis* will be addressed in the following three sections.

**Thinking in language: awareness**

Gadamer writes that, although both *phronesis* and *techne* “imply a practical knowledge fashioned to the measure of the concrete tasks before them,” as moral practical knowledge, *phronesis* means being “aware of the normative viewpoints [one] follows and know[ing] how to make them effective in the concrete decision demanded by the practical situation” (“Problem of Historical Consciousness” 138; “Heritage of Hegel” 48). He reminds us that, as the kind of knowledge connected to being, *phronesis* “stands always already within a living network of common convictions, habits, and values—that is to say, within an *ethos*” (“Practical Philosophy” 79). Writing in Gadamer’s spirit, Weinsheimer clarifies for the modern reader that “the good judgments of *phronesis* do not lose their claim to be rational; they are no less *logos* for being grounded in *ethos*.

There is no standard of certainty higher than the self-evidence of what ‘we all share with the deepest inner clarity’” (Foreword xiii). An inherent problem of societies and cultures is that they come with a sense of self-evidentness, hence with a level of comfort that makes us act out of habit and following the herd instinct, without much reflection. This is why a first necessary step in a life of wisdom, of thinking and speaking wisely, is an awareness of the *ethos* of our life-worlds, of the normative rules we follow. This means being aware of them as a coherent, guiding worldview with implications for our practical life.
The inevitable presence of ethos or commitment in human discourse distinguishes phronesis from techne and makes philosophers like Charles Taylor and Eugene Garver denounce the modern illusion of objectivity. According to Taylor, deliberation, debate and understanding depend on what he calls “strong evaluation” and practical argument starts with “what we are already committed to” (“Explanation” 212; 213). Therefore, Taylor accounts for the current problems in public discourse by identifying its grounding in the modern illusion of neutrality, that is, in a “blind acceptance of an apodeictic mode of reasoning” (215). In rhetorical studies, Walter R. Fisher contends that his attempt to restore the rhetorical to communication theory and the public space, through what he calls “narrative rationality,” follows his identification of technical discourse as predominating both scholarship and practice (xiii). The anthropological bent of his thesis adds force to his dismantling of the modern, elitist illusion of value-free rationality. Against the modern ideal of the expert, Fisher’s reasonable person would be someone who can articulate the values that make up one’s narrative background and is able to discern the reasonableness of a discourse based on the logic of good reasons. Also, as we saw in chapter one, communication scholars Deetz and Stewart have pointed out the problems that come with the reliance of our discipline on eighteenth-century concepts as well as with the insufficient reflection on the presuppositional commitments of our theoretical inquiries.

*How does the practice of listening to language help us develop an awareness of the norms that guide our lives?* When we practice listening to language we employ conventional ways of speaking reflectively by questioning their self-evident, established meaning. Through questions, the familiar is made strange and we become aware of the
implicit ground of our thinking, speaking, and acting that comes with our belonging to particular traditions of thought and speech communities. In other words, we become aware of their/our ethos, their/our presuppositional ground. We are developing a hermeneutic consciousness, that is, an awareness of the particular ways in which traditions guide our thinking, speaking, and acting.

A simple question such as, *What does X mean?* makes the familiar strange, that is, it opens up the established meaning of a linguistic expression as we tarry with our customary ways of speaking and listen for their implicit context. By asking *What do we (as a community) mean by X?* we become aware of language as an expression of tradition, we come to an understanding of what it means to speak as a member of that tradition; in other words, our thinking in the language of our traditions that happens behind our back is brought before us. Naturally, this bringing before us is never complete. When we listen to language we also habitually ask, *Do I/we want to commit to this way of thinking and acting regarding X?* As this question indicates, someone who practices listening to language recognizes the ontological and rhetorical interdependence of being, thinking, saying, and doing.

Someone who listens to language knows that logos is inseparable from ethos. To speak is to commit ourselves to a certain way of life. We are, or rather, we become our words, just as our ways of thinking about matters shape the ways we act in relation to them. As a result of questioning the taken-for-granted meaning of conventional speech, the self-evident understanding of the world (that is, self-understanding and understanding of issues) that comes with our belonging to particular traditions is either embraced as a genuine commitment and conviction or discarded as mere popular opinion. This is what
the practice of listening to language as a hermeneutic reflection does for us,\(^7\) which makes Arthos call hermeneutics “the depth dimension of rhetoric” (“Hermeneutic Version” 77).

**Thinking through language: appropriateness**

Gadamer writes that in order for human beings “to make the right use of human knowledge” a “distinctive capacity is required,’ namely, “striking the ‘right measure,’ finding what is appropriate” (“From Word to Concept” 5). He adds that we experience it “in the wonder of harmonious tones sounding together, or in the harmonious feeling of well-being that we call ‘health’” (5). Reflecting on Aristotle’s *phronesis*, Gadamer writes that “As far as [he] can tell, Aristotle himself had the same thing in mind when he used the term *phronesis* . . . rather in the sense that there is a ‘measure’ that the things themselves possess” (“Greeks” 97).

Therefore, the second problem that Gadamer and contemporary scholars identify in the predominance of *techne* over *phronesis* as a mode of reasoning rests with the different kind of application required. About the application that defines practical reason Gadamer writes that it “cannot evolve by mere rules,” because “for the application of rules there exists in turn no rule;” instead, it “is something which must be done by the reasoning man himself” (“Practical Philosophy” 82; “Heritage of Hegel” 49). Taylor notes, too, that the application that defines practical reason is not simply the application

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\(^7\) The kind of hermeneutic reflection that defines Gadamer’s practice of listening to language would also benefit communication pedagogy. For example, how would our teaching of communication skills and critical thinking look like if informed by the hermeneutic practice of listening to language? A disciplinary hermeneutic consciousness that acknowledges our primary and most consequential relationship to language as hearers would be especially helpful in teaching interpersonal and intercultural communication—for example, in the study and practice of rhetorical sensitivity, a concept developed by Roderick P. Hart and Don M. Burks in 1972 and already applied to the teaching of interpersonal communication (Darnell and Brockriede).
of a formula. In discussing the nature of a practice in his article “To Follow a Rule,” he makes praxis conditional upon hermeneutics: we follow a rule by constantly interpreting what the rule means.

Although both social practices and professional expertise require application, social practices require the application that characterizes practical reason. Gadamer defines the expert as “someone who can give us true directions for acting because of his [or her] superior knowledge and the superiority of his [or her] experience” (“Limitations of the Expert” 184). Although he acknowledges the necessity of experts for the management of “complex theoretical and technical processes,” he explains how a socio-political reliance on experts is problematic: a “society of experts” is “a society of functionaries . . . for it is constitutive of the notion of the functionary that he [or she] be completely concentrated upon the administration of his [or her] function.” This is problematic because it leads to “the degeneration of practice into technique and—through no fault of the experts themselves—to a general decline into social irrationality” (“What Is Practice?” 74). The following passage helps explain why Gadamer sees a socio-political over-reliance on expertise as leading to social irrationality:

[I]t is an error to think that ‘the experts’—the business and economic experts, the environmental experts, or the military experts—can take away from us our praxis in society and relieve us from decisions on matters we all have to deal with as political citizens working with each other. . . . This specialization and arrangement in a fixed structure of tasks is . . . not the whole of a societal existence. In reality, our praxis does not consist in our adapting to pregiven functions or in the thinking out of suitable means for
achieving pregiven purposes. That is technology. Rather, our praxis must consist in prudent choices as we pursue common goals, choices we arrive at together and in practical reflection making concrete decisions about what is to be done in our present situation. That is societal reason.

(“Practical Philosophy” 84, emphasis added)

We are familiar with this problem whenever someone uses the phrase It’s not my job to evade responsibility for social engagement. When personhood is reduced to the person’s function, the person withdraws from general social deliberation, thus reducing the collective processes that constitute social rationality. In the same vein, MacIntyre’s understanding of internal goods (in addition to external goods) as the characteristic that defines a (social) practice explains why expertise is dangerous: concerned only with applying means to external ends, expertise as deliberation jeopardizes the very existence of the civic practice of deliberation. The application that comes with phronesis is different because it requires discernment or judgment, i.e., it questions both means and ends. That is why, to MacIntyre, neither the Manager, nor the Therapist—two of the “characters” of contemporary Western ethos—is capable of moral deliberation (After Virtue 30). By “characters” MacIntyre means the moral representatives of a culture, who morally legitimate “a mode of social existence” (28). Whereas moral deliberation presupposes the dialectic of means and ends where ends as well as means are questioned, the two characters of the Western culture are concerned only with the means, while ends are “given” and outside their concern (30). The prevalence of a bureaucratic and psychological register that pervades all aspects of our contemporary social life makes MacIntyre’s observations more than pertinent today.
The same social concerns motivate the turn to civic humanism in rhetorical studies. Hariman, Michael Leff and Dilip P. Gaonkar, who engage prudence from a Ciceronian perspective, deplore the neglect of civic humanism in rhetorical scholarship. Gaonkar accounts for this neglect by “a disciplinary consciousness obsessed with abstract epistemological questions” (201). Leff brings as evidence the exclusive association of decorum with style—an association that is grounded in the divorce between style and proof (61). According to Leff, the hope for the restoration of substance to rhetoric rests with the concept of decorum or propriety, which he defines as “the process of mediation and balance connected with qualitative judgement” (62). This happens as decorum mediates the “ambiguous” relationship between action and production that is present in practical discourse (58, 62). In a voice similar to Hariman’s observations on the provisional, yet powerful, manifestation of phronesis (311), Leff writes, “Decorum has no substantive stability across situations, since it represents a constantly moving process of negotiation. . . . Nevertheless, the achievement of decorum in a given situation establishes a maximum point of balance and stability” (62).

Gadamer draws an analogy with the field of health care that is helpful in understanding the different kind of application required by phronesis and praxis on the one hand, and techne and expertise on the other hand. He deplores the fact that “the large area of actual health care, which today is called preventative medicine, has been neglected—in the mistaken reliance upon the competence of modern medical science” (“Limitations of the Expert” 192). Preventative medicine requires phronesis, is defined by the verb to care and is done by the patients themselves. Medical science, on the other hand, requires techne, is defined by the verb to fix and can only be done by the medical
experts. The application that defines practical wisdom resembles the guiding care required by preventative medicine (not accidentally called *health care*, as Gadamer observes) and it is different from the fixing function of *techne*—the kind of knowledge required by medical science. In other words, preventative care is the right measure one tries to find for healthy living, and it is badly needed to complement “the measuring that measures” which defines medical science (“From Word to Concept” 7). In one of his discussions of artistic and scientific knowledge, Gadamer writes that both kinds are equally necessary and important because they engage different kinds of “measuring:” “the measuring that measures, and the ‘right measure,’ the appropriate” (7).

The care that characterizes the wise person, and, by extension, the listener to language, is the latter’s response to the measure that the things themselves possess. In other words, a life of wisdom acknowledges that there are limitations imposed on our behavior by the particular nature of phenomena, hence there are implications of not acknowledging those limitations. Gadamer refers to this in his writings as “the nature of the thing:” “some laws are entirely a matter of mere agreement (e.g., traffic regulations), but there are also things that do not admit of regulation by mere human convention because the ‘nature of the thing’ constantly asserts itself” (*Truth and Method* 319). His example of the sphere of ethics illustrates the sense for the right measure that defines *phronesis*:

despite all the variety of moral ideas in the most different times and peoples, in this sphere there is still something like the nature of the thing . . . [the guiding principles of ethics are not] mere conventions, but really do correspond to the nature of the thing—except that the latter is
always itself determined in each case by the use the moral consciousness makes of them. (320)

The right measure that defines phronetic reasoning is the result of the dialectic between the nature of the thing and the particular situation. The focus of practical wisdom, and of the practice of listening to language, is the thing itself, the matter at hand about which we need to decide; and this means an openness to constant revision in light of the particular case.

_How does the practice of listening to language help us develop a sense for the right measure?_ The movement from general to particular required by _phronesis_ is the reverse movement of thought that is involved in theorizing. Gadamer writes that the inner tendency of human reason towards theorizing (or philosophy) requires generalization—i.e., surpassing our practical situation (“Practical Philosophy” 80). The problem with generalizations, according to Gadamer (following Aristotle), is that, when we theorize, the particular case loses some of its own urgency and moral challenge; this is the natural outcome of “the human capacity to distantiate everything linguistically” (80). Practical wisdom reverses this movement by reintroducing the moral urgency for which the generalization is applicable.

Likewise, when we practice listening to language, we are moving away from unquestioningly employing concepts or terms in their generally-accepted meaning towards understanding the particular hermeneutic situation and life-context that led to the formation of that way of speaking. Also, the hermeneutic consciousness developed as we engage traditions reflectively is a consciousness of the hermeneutic situation, of its limits as well as possibilities for understanding and action. The movement from general to
particular that defines the hermeneutic practice of listening to language is a dialectical movement. This means, among other things, that it is a movement that aims to reach insight, not closure. When we employ the language of discourses reflectively, as linguistic accounts of the subject matter, we are engaging the dialectic that defines the nature of language: we are listening to traditions (the many or the particular) for the subject matter (the one or the universal). In other words, our reflective engagement of traditions is driven by the subject matter, by the thing itself. In the back and forth of thinking with other ways of thinking we develop a sense for appropriate ways to think and speak about issues of significance to our speech communities. By appropriate I mean in tune with both the nature of the phenomenon or issue in question and the life of the respective speech community. By thinking through language, we develop an understanding of what is at stake in a particular situation.

**Thinking with language: reasonableness**

Finally, Gadamer reminds us that Aristotle’s *phronesis* is different from *deinotes*.

As reasonableness, *phronesis* “is meant to bring us to consensus and to mutual understanding,” which he opposes to *deinotes*, which is ”the possibility of those terrible men who can comprehend everything immediately and can master and decide everything” (*Century of Philosophy* 62). Gadamer calls this “will to power,” not practical wisdom (62). The wise person (Aristotle’s *phronimos*) is a reasonable person, who reaches his or her decisions in cooperation with other people who have a stake in the issues. Therefore, the ground of *phronesis* for Gadamer is dialogue. He writes in this regard that he “became initially aware of *phronesis*, the reasonableness of practical

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8 *Deinotes* is Aristotle’s term for cleverness, which is different from *phronesis*.
knowing, through Heidegger” and adds that he “subsequently found a better basis for *phronesis*, which [he] developed, not in terms of a virtue, but rather in terms of the dialogue” (20-21).

*How does the practice of listening to language help us become reasonable communicators?* As the following passage from Gadamer shows, the Other is already present in the ontological ground of the practice of listening to language:

> But the linguistic turn, which is grounded in the linguisticality of the human being contains the idea that we as human beings have to learn from each other. We do not need just to hear one another but to listen to one another. Only when this happens is there understanding. ("Hermeneutics" 39)

As Gadamer’s practice of listening to language indicates, the linguistic turn constitutes a rhetorical and ethical turn towards the Other. For Gadamer (following the Greeks) this means a turn towards *phronesis*, as he says in an interview: “*phronesis* is evidently the most important of all the developments of practical philosophy, of ethics; and one must further acknowledge that this was all there was in ethics at the outset of Greek history” (*Century of Philosophy* 78). The practice of listening to language requires us to learn how to listen to other views, even how to make the Other’s case stronger, in order to learn from the Other. Aware of the ways in which our prejudices make us deaf to truth, unable to recognize it, the practice of listening to language underscores the importance of good will in understanding.

Because of its commitment to truth, the practice of listening to language comes with a genuine interest in the Other. This is why Gadamer writes the following: “what I
have gradually developed is not *Mit-sein* but *Miteinander* [‘with-one-another’]. . . *Mit-sein* is, in truth, a very weak idea of the other, more a ‘letting the other be’ than an authentic ‘being-interested-in-him’” (*Century of Philosophy* 23). The turn towards the Other that comes with the hermeneutic practice of listening to language is a turn towards the Other’s tradition, a serious engagement of the Other’s view as an account of the matter at hand, hence, as potentially revealing a significant truth about it. When we listen to the Other’s discourse, we are listening to the unfamiliar for the significant; we are asking questions such as, *What does this standpoint see about this matter that we do not see from where we stand but we should?* or *What is the difference (the Other, the standpoint) that makes a difference in this particular matter?* Our aim is to discern how that tradition sheds light on the matter at hand. *Listening* (understood as an experience of language in pursuit of truth) and *ethics* (seen as a turn towards the Other’s account of the truth of the matter) meet in the hermeneutical and rhetorical virtue of discernment.

The aim of hermeneutic listening—discernment of truth—indicates that Gadamer’s practice of listening to language offers an alternative to the postmodern engagement of difference. As Weinsheimer notes, in its insistence upon difference and condemnation of assimilation, postmodernism “leave[s] understanding quite unexplained because [it] conceive[s] of all understanding as assimilationist and hence equivalent to misunderstanding; but this makes the different simply unintelligible” (“Meaningless Hermeneutics?” 165). By contrast, as a thinking along with the Other’s standpoint, the hermeneutic practice of listening to language leads to an understanding of the limitations and possibilities of the Other’s hermeneutic situation, hence what the Other has to offer to a deeper understanding of significant issues.
The end of the practice of listening to language is authentic community. The Other is in the service of truth along with the Self. The focus and driving force of the hermeneutic practice of listening to language is the truth of the matter. And that is a collective endeavor. A life lived well, in pursuit of truth, is a life lived well together.


Hyde, Michael J. “Transcendental Philosophy and Human Communication.”


Schmidt, Lawrence K. “Participation and Ritual: Dewey and Gadamer on Language.”


Shotter, John. “Listening in a Way that Recognizes/Realizes the World of ‘the Other.’”


