

on a conversation about a conversation / non-directionality / possibilities and conditions of a conversation / vibe and vibration / sense and senses / fruitful misunderstandings / translation and transcription / re-constructing an intention / the play of language / hesitation as condition for listening / embracing uncertainty as vulnerability / leaving space to the unknown / listening as an act of giving

with **Yotam Dvir**
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an ongoing collective exploration / learning from experiences of togetherness and uncertainty / reflecting on listening – with Yotam Dvir, Matteo Zoccolo – 03 june 2021
matteozoccolo.net/on_listening/conversations.html

YD: Let me start by saying a few words of reservation regarding the conditions and limitations being imposed by the non-written set of norms for this format of conversation. Especially in a so-called live interview, which is what happens between us now, time or better said – the lack of it, is of great concern as one must improvise and give answers to complex questions in a relatively tight time frame, and given the format, those answers also should be relatively limited in length... So, my suggestion is that you would record the meeting and afterwards send me the written transcription for further elaboration and refinement... I might choose to make some changes, so that the final outcome, while still retaining the form of a dialog, would be the result of further transcription and editing processes. I don't see it as a simple fiction, at least not in the sense of falsification. Another limitation which should be taken into account is that the realization of this conversation is only possible by my acceptance to speak in a language which is not my so called mother tongue, and while it could be easily showed that the questions related to mastering a language go well beyond the difference between native language and non-native one, without a doubt using a strange language amplifies these questions in a more acute manner...

MZ: Really, what you are telling me now is exactly what I'm already doing with everyone. So, what I'm doing is recording the audio only. There is no video involved. Then I will transcribe it with the help of a software, so that it's faster. And then I have a text, I put it on Google Docs, and I share it with you, so that we can edit it together. We can add things, we can remove things, we can edit it as we want. As you said, for me it's not about fiction, it's really part of the process because, of course, when you're speaking...

YD: The thing that scares me... I would say 'scare', even though this is not the word I'm looking for. I need another one, but at the moment I can't find one in English – and this is exactly what scares me: using a language in which it is more difficult for me to emphasize nuances by using certain words rather than others... I would probably make more mistakes. When I write a text for publication, for example, I do something like between 60 to 70... How do you say that word? Drafts!

MZ: Wallah!

YD: And I'm changing it all the time. Which, again, simply is not possible within the norms and code of a 'live' conversation. But it's OK, we both understand these limitations. So, you can record and ask me whatever you want, and I will try to answer the best I can.

MZ: As I said, you can also ask me questions. I would really avoid calling this an interview, I would call it more like a discussion. So, we can set together a starting point,

and then we can really engage in a conversation together.

YD: I believe we already started! We are already within the movement.

MZ: We are already writing.

YD: Yes, I would say we are within some sort of a play, a game, which we are not fully in control over. We both understand it. We are speaking about a future conversation yet to come, which is actually happening as we speak, and like in every conversation between two people or more, you never know where it will take you, where it will lead you. So, we are confronted from the beginning with the question of the direction, which is also the question of the sense. Sense and direction have the same meaning, in a way. I can say, “I lose my senses,” which means, “I lose my direction.”

MZ: It’s interesting what you say about the direction. That’s also what I always try to say, generally, with what I do in my artistic practice and in this work that we are doing. For me, the ‘what’ is less important than the ‘how’. Um... And this, in practice, turns into works that don’t have a clear focus on something very specific, but are a rather very broad array of things, all together. But I believe the direction is one, the intention and the sense are clear, it just comprehends a lot of stuff all together. Do you understand?

YD: I think I understand you, but I’m not sure that I completely agree. What I’ve tried to say is something opposed, in a way. It’s sort of a displacement of what you were saying, at least. Actually, what I’m trying to emphasize is that we’re in a “state” of non-directionality. I mean, we don’t know where we are heading. And this is the only chance, in a way, for a conversation. A conversation is a conversation when we are not sure what is the direction, not sure about where we are con-verted that is, when we have no control of the direction. And it relates to what you said about not having a clear focus. We have no-goal. We didn’t prescribe in advance a certain goal that we need to get to, a certain *telos*, as we say in a philosophical code or language. The *telos* cannot be separated from the question of the sense and the sense qua direction. When I know what the *telos* is, then I have a horizon, that is, a direction towards which I’m striving.

MZ: Alright.

YD: How would I say that in English? A conversation deserving its name, if there is one, always involves a sort of non-directionality. There should be a certain non-directionality involved for it to be a conversation. You don’t have to agree with me, of course.

MZ: Actually, I pretty much agree.

YD: For me the sense is not one, and it’s not clear. And this is a condition for a conversations like this one, for example – and this in itself is already a limitation of the pertinence of the reservation and limitation which I have presented at the beginning concerning the difference between native language and a non-native one: we never have a complete control over a language and the play of signs.

MZ: I definitely agree. There is a big potential in this tension that is created, in which you just choose to speak to someone, but you don’t know about what, you do know when to start, when to end. And you don’t know what you are going to tell, how your brain will get into communication with someone else’s brain.

YD: Yes, and I want to emphasize that you caught me by surprise. I mean, you came to me with an invitation to take part in this wonderful initiation of yours, which is so interesting. But you caught me by surprise. You said you would record it and transcribe it. And I have no idea how this conversation will evolve. And this ‘not knowing where’, not knowing how it will end, is exactly what I’m emphasizing with this non-directionality. And for me, it’s important. This space of playing is maybe the only thing which is important.

MZ: To keep it open.

YD: To keep it open and not to have a clear direction, or, as you said, one sense. To leave it always in the move.

MZ: Actually, now that you tell me those things, I don’t agree with the Matteo from ten minutes ago. Yeah, maybe I misunderstood the term ‘direction’. Maybe, what I wanted to say is that being open to what other people bring doesn’t allow this work to have a specific topic. So, it keeps it open to everything, basically. But since I’m still the one who decides with whom to engage, and I’m still the one who brings a certain setting in this thing, who’s in a way meditating, facilitating this, I would say that in the end this work has a certain vibe. Let’s call it vibe.

YD: It’s a good word. You spoke about sounds, and I think ‘vibe’ and ‘vibration’... I haven’t checked, but I’m almost 100% sure that if we would check the etymology, we would find that ‘vibe’ and ‘vibration’ come from the same root. And I think you spoke about sound or something which relates to the ears, as far as I remember.

MZ: Yeah, I guess it’s listening.

YD: Listening... Without vibration, without “vibe”, there is no listening.

MZ: But I would say, listening is also something that happens in the body and in the mind, not only through the ears. So, for example, listening for me is the methodology of

this work. What I'm doing is speaking with a lot of people and basically listening to them.

YD: Yes, and this could bring into play another direction or another sense – that precisely of the relation between the 'senses' and the 'sense'. We have just spoken about 'sense' in the sense of direction, but now we see or, shall we say 'sense', that the question of the sense cannot be separated from the question of the sense(s). Speaking about sense qua meaning or sense qua organ, it seems we are always moving around in the same territory as in a circle. Maybe this could be a good moment to bring up the thought of Heidegger about the senses into play. You know, he's doing a sort of a strange flip flop of a traditional common-sense statement about the senses. To schematize shortly, Heidegger says that we are not hearing because we have ears, but we have ears because we are hearing. We are not seeing because we have eyes, but we have eyes because we have the possibility to see. We can understand from this flip flop, that he is trying to think of something that may slip our mind when we are using the terms hearing or seeing in the usual sense. For Heidegger, seeing or hearing is not a biological phenomena. For him, only humans qua Dasein have ears and eyes, because only humans can hear and see.

MZ: Crazy.

YD: Because seeing is not a thing of the eye, for Heidegger. And while I cannot subscribe to his statement without a certain reservation – I would like to think that we can deconstruct it, still it's not completely false in a way. And another thing: before, you said you misunderstood the term 'direction', right?

MZ: Exactly.

YD: What you call a 'misunderstanding', in this case is a misunderstanding of the sense in which I have used the word 'direction' – thus, a strange and ironical misunderstanding since it concerns exactly the meaning of the word sense itself qua direction. However, these kind of misunderstandings, nonsense, non-understandings, are part of what we call 'conversation'. Usually we see them as something which is 'bad', we 'need' to reach an understanding, we need to understand the sense, the one and the same sense. What I'm trying to say exactly, is that we have to leave a place for games, for a sliding of the sense. Do you understand?

MZ: Definitely. I think that's the point.

YD: There is also something which is... How do you say that in English? Which is fruitful in an unexpected way. I'm using the word in one sense, you understand it in another way. This sliding of sense is not completely accidental. It's part of what we call language and speaking with

one another. And we need to give it space.

MZ: If you see it like that, it has a great potential.

YD: It's also the question of translation. If I remember correctly, we spoke about it at length when we had our last conversation about a year and a half ago, at Café Bezalel in Jerusalem. During that conversation, I emphasized the question regarding the language by which you are communicating with the people in Israel. I have asked you, "What would then be the language of your art project?" You see, everything is merging together in a way, the senses like hearing and seeing and the sense in the way of meaning are also a question of translation. Here we are speaking the same language, but still, when I use the word 'direction' there happens to be a misunderstanding: even in the same language the sense of the word 'sense' is not fixed.

MZ: Yeah.

YD: It's not fixed. So, this is the space of the game, which is very important for me. Within it we have some control, as you are saying. You, as a subject and initiator, will make your decisions. But these decisions are being made *within* this play, and you are not in full control of the outcome of these decisions. The game is continuing. I would even dare say that you need to make decisions because of the game. Because of the game and within it you have to make all sorts of decisions such as, "With whom to speak? What to edit out from this conversation? What will be left in and out?" A series of decisions.

MZ: Alright.

YD: I'm feeling like having a conversation about conversations.

MZ: That's exactly what I like! This is amazing what we are doing.

YD: A conversation about the possibilities of a conversation, the condition or the non-condition of the conversation, the limitation, the control and the non-control.

MZ: You know, it's something I wanted to explore. Until now, you could read the conditions of this sort of performative act that I am doing with people, but only between the lines. We've never spoken about it precisely, like we are doing. So, I'm very interested in what you are saying, and I feel like I'm learning a lot.

YD: Yes, there is a set of conditions. In one way we are improvising, but this improvisation is limited by many, many conditions that are sort of unseen. But they are there. You know, also a Zoom meeting has a sort of unwritten protocol. We have a time for the meeting, we speak a certain language, there are many unwritten norms of how this

kind of conversation is now taking place.

MZ: I guess it would also be very different if we would call with audio only, without seeing each other's faces.

YD: Or if we would do it by writing and not 'live', the outcome would be completely different. Or if instead of one session we would have done it in a few sessions, giving it more time... Again, in a way we are improvising, but this improvisation is also limited. And we do need to be aware of these schemes in the background. They are there.

MZ: And something very specific happens when you turn spoken text into a written text. I'm discovering that the act of transcribing is not objective at all. It's more about interpreting what has been said, editing it in a way that it can be accessible while reading. Because if we transcribe this conversation exactly like it's happening, it will be a mess. Nobody will understand. You don't have all the elements that define an intention, like the volume of the voice, the facial expression, the pauses, the way time is managed, the speed... The intention gets lost. So, you have to fill in the gaps with proper language. You have to reconstruct the intention through punctuation marks, filling words, or by twisting the phrase you get. And this is something I am doing, and I encourage you to do the same when I send you the text. But still, in a way it's so manipulating what we are saying now. But if you see it in a more positive way, we are basically deciding how this conversation will be received by a reader.

YD: We can't! We want to believe that we can, but of course, we never know how it will be read by others. The other might give it his direction, which is unknown to us. It might give it a different sense, a completely different sense. You mentioned a lot of things: intentions, tone... I would say all those things which are traditionally related to the 'liveness' of the speech. I think we cannot not mention Jacques Derrida at this point. His thought was constantly concerned with the questions that go between speaking and writing, and you know that the main attack of the meta-physical discourse on writing was exactly regarding the 'lost' involved in writing. What we lose when we write is exactly these things, the intention, the tone, the liveness. And the intention is also related to the direction. Intention is tending toward, 'in-tentio', tending toward something. So, you already have the word 'sense' or 'direction' un-separated from the word 'intention'. Again, a transcription transforms, translates. What Derrida shows us is that a certain writing is already involved within speaking, which means that a certain non-intentionality and non-directionality are already involved within speaking before you even transcribe it to a so-called written text. And we've already seen it happening within this conversation, when you said, "I didn't understand your intention." I spoke about direction, you heard something else. So, what makes this misunderstanding possible? What made it possible from

the beginning is that the intention is not completely present within language. Even when I speak, what I'm saying at the moment doesn't reflect exactly my intention. The intention is only a restricted effect within the play of language.

MZ: I follow you.

YD: Alright. Both writing and speaking entail a certain non-intentionality, that...

MZ: I lost your voice. Do you hear me?

YD: I hear you, you still lost my voice now?

MZ: No, I lost your video, but your voice is here. Do you hear me?

YD: Yes, I hear and see you perfectly.

MZ: OK, I hear you bad and I don't see you.

YD: I think it's something on your side. Bad internet?

MZ: OK, I changed that. I lost the last things you said, but I definitely agree with what you said before. And I would say, it's not about reconstructing the meaning, or the intention, but it's maybe about constructing an intention.

YD: But what I'm trying to say is that if we need to reconstruct the intention, it is because the intention was never constructed in the sense of always already being there as present or presence. It's not something which is simply there. If we need to reconstruct it, then it was already never fully present from the beginning.

MZ: So, do you think we can use the term to 'represent' or 'present' an intention?

YD: I think the concept of reconstruction was better. In a way, we cannot present or represent the intention, because the intention was never present. So, we can only re-construct it, whether in speaking or in writing.

MZ: So, we can reconstruct it!

YD: We can reconstruct it. But the important thing is that what we're re-constructing something which was never constructed. We always only reconstruct, that's what I'm trying to say. It's not that we're reconstructing something that was already constructed as pure presence. When you represent, it's not that we re-present something which was present. We have the possibility of reconstructing because it was never fully constructed or conversely, we might say that the intention is always only a construction and not a simple undivided pure presence. The moment of translation, or transcription, is already happening within the logos, within the conversation before we even transcribe

it. We are already trying to understand each other, missing each other's point of view, missing the sense and the intention. And these accidents are not exactly accidents, because we are within the play of language, and the intention is being played by the language. It's not that we are controlling the language, so that it becomes the mirror of our intention. By the very act of using the language, we are already within this game. We are already within this possibility of misunderstanding, non-directionality...

MZ: I would say this is embracing uncertainty.

YD: Yes, it gives space to uncertainty. If the intention of the speaker was completely present when they were speaking, then these moments of misunderstanding would never have happened. We need to ask the right questions. If intention was simply present, how is it possible that people don't understand each other from time to time? You have related the moment of non-intentionality to the realm of writing. You said that in writing the intention is lost. However, what is presupposed inexplicitly within this statement is that, in the moment of speaking, we seize the intention of the speaker. In contrast, what I'm trying to emphasize is that misunderstanding of the intention is something that happens all the time, even when we speak. Which means that *the moment of translation or interpretation works already within speech*, and the intention was never completely or simply present.

MZ: Also because, what I am thinking now, it's very unstable. When you speak, I'm not thinking about something clear, I have a bunch of thoughts in my head that come and go, and sometimes I open my mouth and I try to articulate some things that I believe have some sort of sense. I say what I intuitively think it's intelligent, or it's nice to add to the conversation. But this happens so fast and in a sort of unmediated way... Or maybe it's always mediated. I guess that time plays a big role. You know, the first thing you said is that you don't have time to think while speaking. You just have to speak or to listen. And when you write, you can make 60 drafts and always change them, articulating your thoughts draft after draft. You can fine-tune what you're saying. And speaking is very uncensored, in a way.

YD: It's a good point. Of course, I will never have enough time. On the one hand I would most likely always prefer to postpone. We give importance to this postponing, to this giving time for thought. But on the other hand, it is also very important to speak, to postpone the postponing, to make a decision. But yeah, relatively I have more time when I'm writing, but it's still never enough.

MZ: So, would you relate the act of listening to the concept of hesitation?

YD: I never thought about it... In what sense?

MZ: As you said, a conversation is based on sending and receiving, if we understand a communication through semiotics. We can keep a certain rhythm, but, you know... I bring you a clear example: There are different ways in which I am carrying these conversations, and the microphone plays a big role. Now, it's different if it stands on a tripod in between two people, or if we hold it and we raise the hand when we want to talk, passing it to each other. It's even different if I have the microphone and I move it between my mouth and the mouth of someone else. Those three settings give three completely different results and vibes to the conversation. Together with the people I'm speaking with, we found out that we can turn this conversation into a play, a game, by putting some rules. The first one is that those who have the microphone can speak, while those who don't have the microphone, cannot speak.

YD: Alright.

MZ: And if you want the microphone, you have to raise your hand. This gives much more space to listening, than to speaking. It's also something dangerous of course, because people can take advantage of this rule, and they can speak for hours while nobody can say anything, they can only raise their hand, right? But this, actually, gives also a sort of responsibility to the people involved, encouraging them to think of a conversation as something more relational, something that is in between people. And also, when you want to say something, you raise your hand, but you cannot say that something in that precise moment. And when the person is continuing to speak, then you have to re-think what you want to say, because the conversation is already gone. That moment is already gone. You lost it. You wanted to say that but you couldn't say it. And you have to accept, think and listen to what's going next, you have to adapt to the conversation which is continuing. I don't know if we can relate this example to the element of hesitation. Or maybe it's more related to the element of interruption?

YD: I thought about your question while you were giving your example. I would suggest one answer, one possible answer which would bring us back to that statement of Heidegger... As was already mentioned, he's saying that we are not listening because we have ears, but rather the opposite, we have ears because we are listening. Your example shows us that listening is not just hearing sound waves. I can hear someone but that doesn't always necessarily mean that I'm listening to him. It's two different things. And this is what Heidegger tries to emphasize. Listening is understanding, in a way.

MZ: Um...

YD: I would say, at least if we are to accept Heidegger's statement, that without hesitation there is no listening. When I'm not hesitating, that means I already know. And

when I know, I don't have to listen to anybody, because I already have it. There is nothing more to say because I already know. When people are speaking from a position of being sure that they know, it means they don't have any hesitation. Only a person who hesitates is someone who is in the position of not being sure. Not being sure that he knows. And if we ever listen to someone, it's only if we are uncertain. When we are certain about our beliefs or our knowledge, we don't hear. We fight, we try to prove others that we are correct, but we are not listening. We're not listening.

MZ: Does listening put you in a position of vulnerability?

YD: Of course, it must! Being exposed to the other means to admit that you are not sure. You are exposed when you are not sure. Knowledge is power. When you are in a state of knowing something, then you are secured. Knowing is security. When are you feeling secure? When you know! When are you feeling like a stranger? When you're coming to a new place where you aren't familiar with the local rules, you don't know the norms, you don't know the language, the habits... You simply don't know. And then you feel like a stranger because you don't know, you feel unsafe. Security and knowledge always come together.

MZ: That makes sense.

YD: Hesitation is being in a position of leaving space to the unknown. To the possibility that you are wrong. And this is the only place from which you can listen to someone else. Otherwise, you're not listening. Maybe you're arguing with them, you're trying to say why you are right and they are wrong. But you're not listening because you already know.

MZ: And can this be turned into a position of strength? Can the listener be a strong listener? Because we usually identify and connect the spoken word with a position of strength. Who is powerful, can speak. Who is weak, cannot speak. But I'm trying to understand if this concept can be turned upside down, to understand who's speaking as weak, and who's actively listening as strong.

YD: At least from the perspective that concerns me, I want to believe that listening is giving a space for the other. I'm not sure if I would speak in terms of strength or power. But if we are speaking in terms of power, it means to give the power to the other, and of course there is a risk within that act. The one who has the power can take advantage of those who listen. This is also what has been shown out in your example – they could speak all the time and don't give the microphone to anyone else.

MZ: But if I am a listener, and I can give the power to someone to speak, I am the condition of this power because it would make no sense to speak while no one is

listening. What I'm trying to say is that, since I can give power to someone by listening to them, it means that I have that power.

YD: I would rather emphasize giving instead of power. The act of listening is an act of giving. That's what I would say. I feel less comfortable trying to schematize the relations between people who speak in terms of power. I think it's not accidental that you're speaking about giving.

MZ: So, what is listening?

YD: Listening is giving space to the other. Because, again, when I'm listening to you, it means I'm creating a space for you. Within my knowledge, within whatever I'm certain of, I'm leaving a space open for something which will surprise me. For something that will shake my beliefs.

MZ: That's cool!

YD: Listening is an act of giving. It sounds strange, because when you're listening, you could say, you're not giving anything, you're passive. But this strange state of passivity, which is not exactly the opposite of activity, in a very paradoxical way is an act of giving. Giving space and time to the other by taking a risk, because when you give a space to the unknown, you are exposed. I mean, the other could take advantage of it. But without this risk, there would be no listening. We would not be able to listen to one another without this passivity.

MZ: So, listening is an act.

YD: Not exactly an act... We spoke about the intention, and this act of giving is not exactly intentional. However strange it might sound, it's not exactly a decision. This might be the time to mention again Derrida... One of his books is entitled 'Given Time' and deals with the question of donation, of the giving, the gift. And... I forgot what I wanted to say. I would say that the word 'engagement' is very important here. To be involved in a way that you are becoming engaged in something, in a way that a promise engages you. So, being engaged in a conversation is already being engaged in this space of donation, of giving.

MZ: Alright.

YD: Even if you disagree with the other, you already gave space to the speaker. The donation was already made. Once you're ready to get into a conversation, you're already within this space of giving, without knowing exactly what you are giving. We could have a completely different conversation only about the question of giving, of the present, the gift. But I've tried to answer your question in my way.

MZ: Thank you so much.

YD: It's all coming together, it seems that all this conversation is about conversation!

MZ: And that's what I meant at the beginning with 'vibe'. You know, we are speaking about many things, but in the end I feel everything is getting together.

YD: If I have to give a title to our conversation, it might be 'a conversation about the conditions of conversation', about what is conversation, about the non-condition of conversation. We spoke about listening and the condition for listening, hesitation... All this conversation was a conversation about the conversation. We spoke about translation, about sense, about direction... All the things which a conversation is made from. And the limitations of conversation, the misunderstandings and the understandings, the question of giving and donation...

MZ: Now that we are coming to an end, how can we decide when to stop?

YD: No decision comes in a place with no hesitation. We only decide when we don't know where to stop. That's the only place where we can decide. A decision could not be 100% justified. Maybe we can end the conversation with this statement. What do you say?

MZ: I agree, even though I'm not sure because I would continue for hours and hours.

YD: You're never sure, that's the only condition for making a decision!

MZ: We both have the power to turn off the camera!

YD: I have to think about the word 'power' here. I'm not sure why it's sort of... It's not that I'm trying to neutralize the question of power. But you've seen that I tend to emphasize a different thing. Maybe we're also giving power to the other, yes.

MZ: I mean, more than just giving power, you are defining a geometry of power. So, by engaging in a conversation you define dynamics of power.

YD: Always. I mean, that's what I'm trying to say, I'm not trying to neutralize the question of power, and I'm not trying to say that power is not involved. But the question of power is also happening within this space of giving. Power that can be given or denied...

MZ: I want to bring the last thing, and this will open new worlds. We didn't speak about care!

YD: Care... OK...

MZ: You know, listening is basically the tool that we use

to care about other people, no?

YD: Let me check... I think it comes from the latin word 'cura', and I'm wondering if it is connected to the word 'cure'. There must be a connection between the words 'cure' and 'care'. I'm not sure, let me check one of my dictionaries...

MZ: Sure.

YD: You know, you're asking something which is not small. You're manipulating me!

MZ: I told you!

YD: 'Cura' is carefulness, concern... I just want to check if it also comes with 'cure'.

MZ: I'm pretty sure. Even in Italian it is the same word.

YD: Found it. It comes from 'curatus' in Latin. And 'curo' is to take care. So... There is a connection between 'cure' and taking care. You know, it came to my mind also regarding the global context that we're in now. The question of cure, of course, is a question that involves all of us in pandemic times, globally speaking. So, what did you want to ask about the notion of care?

MZ: I don't have any questions actually. I just wanted to bring it there and open up new horizons, new directions.

YD: Completely. But this is a topic for another conversation.

MZ: Sure.

YD: Although I think that the relation that we have just suggested already gives us something to think about. Care and cure...

MZ: Care as healing? Let's think about it another time!

YD: Let's think about it, yes. Let's leave it open.