
Marklen E. Konurbaev: Ontology and Phenomenology of Speech: An Existential Theory of Speech

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Introduction

Marklen E. Konurbaev's new book, *Ontology and Phenomenology of Speech: An Existential Theory of Speech* provides a rich phenomenological account of speech in its varied forms. The book not only focuses on the phenomenology of the speech act itself, but addresses what it is like to hear, read, compose, process, understand, and respond to speech. This review will provide a summary of Konurbaev's account and rhetorical style. The first section provides a general overview of Konurbaev's overall account. The second section addresses the phenomenology of creating (i.e. composing and performing) speech. The third section examines the phenomenology of receiving (i.e. hearing or reading) speech, including the mental processes we perform to internalize and understand speech. In the fourth section, I examine Konurbaev's rhetorical style, both in terms of the structure and elements of his argument and with regard to the material he chooses not to include in his book. This section also proposes a brief critique of Konurbaev's account and methodology, although the main substance of his account is strong and will remain unchallenged in this article. While portions of the book pay special attention to specific parts of speech (i.e. different kinds of terms and the relationships between them), I will primarily focus on Konurbaev's account of speech as a phenomenon as we encounter it in speaking, listening, and reading.

I. A Brief Overview of Konurbaev's Account

Before fully exploring Konurbaev's book, it is crucial to define the scope of his account and the terms with which he explores speech. Konurbaev speaks often of "life" (*ihya*) and "awakening." He is primarily interested in the ways in which speech prompts us to create vivid visual representations in our minds and prompts us to engage with the world and individuals around. "Life," then, does not refer to anything biological, although it certainly depends on a biological organism to produce it. Rather, Konurbaev uses "life" to refer to the living, changing mental concepts and representations in our minds when hearing, creating, performing, or understanding speech. He writes that "Life' ... is a phenomenon that is largely dependent on the speech agent's ability to build in his or her mind a dynamic, evolving and balanced reflection of interrelated objects caused by the act of linguistic communication..." (Marklen E. Konurbaev, *Ontology and Phenomenology of Speech: An Existential Theory of Speech*, 5)[1]. "Awakening" is the process by which speech stimulates this mental life, the process by which the listener builds "a dynamic, evolving and balanced reflection" of the life in the speaker's mind.

Two other concepts are vital to understanding Konurbaev's account: foregrounding and backgrounding. Foregrounding essentially consists of the concepts at the focus of our

attention, the material with which we are primarily concerned, while backgrounding consists of the concepts, emotions, and other material through which we interpret and analyze the concepts in the foreground. Konurbaev writes:

In the highly changing world of speech perception where the weight and value of every linguistic element in speech may change several times, the mental vision of life strongly depends on the ‘ratio’ of the span between the currently prominent elements and those that remain in the dark, in the perspective. As we move on during speech comprehension, this proportion should certainly change. But the *twilight area*, or the proportion of the positive and negative prominence should always remain stable. If it does not, the representation of the reality becomes ‘lopsided’ in a sense that the element that was bright and perceptually strong a page or a minute ago cannot possibly retain this condition in the new linguistic circumstances. This variation of phenomenological objects in speech gives them the volume that is so necessary for their natural human perception. (63-64)

Decoding speech thus requires balance between the “prominent elements” (the terms and concepts that are the focus of the message) and the background concepts and perspectives through which the message is interpreted.

With these concepts in mind, the central claim of his book is that “every act of communication should be a phenomenological act in a sense that it causes the experience of life awakening in the minds of readers or listeners. A phenomenon then is neither the sun when it rises, or the moon when it appears, or the stars scattered in heaven, or the clouds after the rain—but the dynamic mental representation of the reality caused by the act of speech” (x). Konurbaev is primarily interested in the first-person experience of life awakening and of interacting with speech phenomena. Readers should thus not be surprised when they primarily encounter examples from literature or personal anecdotes from the author rather than hard biological material. I return to this point in section IV.

How best to summarize Konurbaev’s account? The clearest explanation is that Konurbaev sees speech as a dynamic process in which we internalize and integrate information and concepts as part of our mental life; when we wish to stimulate life awakening in others, we engage in a process of searching and composing the proper terms to recreate our own mental life in the mind of the person receiving our speech, responding to the visual and verbal cues they provide to alter our speech accordingly. We receive a speaker’s words and construct tentative mental representations of their ideas, transforming those images as more information becomes available. When

speaking, we gauge whether or not the receiver understands the message; if they do not, we seek new ways of conveying the message.

II. The Phenomenology of Creating Speech

Although Konurbaev spends most of the book exploring the phenomenology of linguistic interpretation and the ways messages generate life in the mind of recipients, he also provides a rich phenomenology of speech creation. The goal of speech is to stimulate life in the mind of the receiver. Speech, then, “is a representation of its author’s thoughts, ideas, communicative intentions and emotional states” (31). To do this, speakers employ language, which Konurbaev says “is like a chain of ‘genes’ that are reproducible and recognizable, and yet, susceptible to variation that may or may not introduce a change into a long-established system” (56). Language changes over time just as genetic material evolves across generations, incorporating new elements and discarding outdated and ineffective terms through the series of human speech interactions. In crafting speech, “Every user of language invariably checks the elements available to him or her in the process of communication and decides whether their potential is strong enough to express the desired meaning or attitude” (Ibid).

Crafting a message requires both a consideration of the potential meanings of terms and of the background context through which the message will be interpreted. Speakers must be aware of the receiver’s frame of reference and the cultural assumptions he or she may hold to understand the range of possible interpretations he or she may form, and thus select the words, emotions, and rhetorical style that will best stimulate the life the speaker wishes to create. Speakers produce their messages by gathering previously used concepts and speech interactions and anticipating the ways receivers may interpret the message.

Speech is not just about conveying concepts and information the way textbooks do, however. Speakers aim to produce emotions, to persuade, to win approval, to convey feelings and experiences in the minds of receivers. The ultimate goal is to produce “*faith*, which is an authentic representation of reality in speech, a synthesis, an effect of a moving life, of ‘living’ through a new experience, which is mental and yet real, ample and organic, mixed with the person’s past experience—a *phenomenon of sustainable movement and change*” (115). To do so, speakers must use terms and a rhetorical style “that would evoke the complete scenes of life in the reader’s or the listener’s mind as quickly as possible” (123).

Konurbaev writes that speakers compose messages essentially by taking a “general vision” (*Topos*) and compiles words to convey that vision to the receiver, “[returning]...

as many times as possible to add all the features discovered during the communication act to its overall vision as life” (148). This involves “drafting” a vision of the topology, breaking the concepts up into parts, forming bonds between the elements of the *Topos*, and then selecting terms and phrases that capture these elements (149-150). This process is subsequently mirrored in the perception of speech, as receivers analyze the bonds and interpret the message through the *hermeneutic circle* and compose their own *Topos*.

III. The Phenomenology of Receiving Speech

The process of receiving and internalizing speech occurs in many stages. In his introduction, Konurbaev writes that “we decode the linguistic message at least eight times” (7). First, we decode speech syntactically, analyzing the structure of the message. Second, we examine the message for “*logical integrity with fact*” (Ibid). Third, receivers examine the message for its expressive meaning in terms of foregrounded material. Fourth, receivers begin to analyze the overall meaning, to hypothesize about the life the speaker wishes to prompt in the receiver. Fifth, we begin to use emotional cues to integrate background concepts and memories to deepen our understanding. Sixth, receivers predict or anticipate the overall direction of the remainder of the message and subsequently use this information to inform the seventh step of correcting the draft mental representations produced in the first five steps. Finally, “the eight level of the genesis of life in speech permeates and encapsulates all the previous ones through *mental audition*, the chief function of which is to support one of the main constituents of life balance and hierarchy of the key reference points of speech” (Ibid).

Crucially, each of these processes occurs within the wider context of backgrounding and foregrounding, and of the background assumptions and beliefs we hold about the world and of each other. Assumptions and other conceptual elements in the background become lenses through which we interpret the speaker’s message; elements of the message jump into focus, into the foreground or spotlight of our attention, while others drift to the background to help construe the foreground elements properly. Konurbaev writes that the interpretation of speech involves both historical and predictive elements (25-26), calling to mind the Heideggerian emphasis on gathering the historical and present facts about oneself and projecting them into the future to assess one’s possibilities (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927)). In the same vein, receivers gather background assumptions, historical events, and knowledge about the speaker and the message to predict the direction that message will take, anticipating the meaning and adapting one’s mental representations of the message accordingly.

The result of these processes is a world of visual and conceptual representations, of life in the mind of the receiver. Moreover, Konurbaev argues this type of life presents an objective reality, “as real as our material bodily life is, in a sense that it is built on our vision of the whole undivided body of vision, because ontologically only the whole has the potential of sustainable living” (Konurbaev, 38). This world is unstable, however, and relies on the internal consistency of the message elements: “Life is a hierarchical world where every element of reality is deemed real only when its existence is justified by other elements and is not at odds with them” (39). If elements disagree, life collapses and the receiver must begin to construct their mental representations anew. Thankfully, the human mind is adept at handling the processes of creating and sustaining life: Konurbaev acknowledges that we seldom get bogged down in the fine nuances of everyday messages, and life is capable of rapidly “regenerating” itself in the face of errors and new information (40-41).

But how do our minds successfully interpret messages and construct life from concepts? Konurbaev lays out what he calls the String Theory of Foregrounding. The basic concept of the theory is that “A string is a mental association drawn between the words in the context of speech. Once the correlation is established, the reader draws the mental map of relative prominence of words and their relationship to each other in representing the subject of the text” (65). Readers scan the text for elements to bring to into focus (into the foreground) and then connect conceptual strings of meanings to form “shapes” of larger concepts and meanings. Konurbaev calls the places at which strings (meanings) intersect and converge “impact zones,” areas in which the meaning of the message is strongest (68).

There are several kinds of conceptual strings involved in producing life. Structural strings, composed of the syntactical elements of the message, connect the conceptual elements of the message to each other, conveying the relationships between the terms. Semantic strings pertain to the meaning and flavor of the concepts and terms in the message. Epistemic strings contribute to the formation of knowledge, and “rely on the preliminary vision of the whole [message]” (77). Attitudinal strings seek to invoke “feelings and judgments ranging between acceptance and rejection” (92). Although we must possess all of the strings to weave the full meaning of the message together, Konurbaev observes that the mind generates life before the message is complete, and receivers must continuously alter their mental images as more information becomes available.

Konurbaev writes that “Speech perception is unthinkable without empathy and Dasein” (152), pointing to the idea that receivers must understand the lived experience and life situation of the speaker, predicting those elements that may not appear in the words of

the message itself. Just as Dasein incorporates one's previous lived history, context, and the facts about one's existence in projecting one's possibilities into the future, the phenomenology of speech involves careful consideration of one's life experience, "general worldview, erudition, level of education, emotionality and linguistic proficiency" (156). Speakers and recipients essentially make observations, recall previous observations, make generalizations based on "the realities of our lives," and project this information into the future, forming mental representations of messages and observations "and their influence on the course of our lives" (160).

IV. Konurbaev's Rhetorical Style

Konurbaev's book explores speech in vivid terms. While the basic concepts could be conveyed in a comparatively dry, brief style, Konurbaev employs examples from literature to demonstrate the ways readers or receivers of speech explore messages for meaning, building complex and rich strings of concepts as they proceed and more information becomes available. He uses examples ranging from the book of Isaiah in the Bible (5-11) to a parable written by Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi (15-16), from Søren Kierkegaard (23) to William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (52). Konurbaev also uses rich language to produce an artistic phenomenology of speech, using metaphors and similes to describe the true flavor and experience of speech. Describing the phenomenon of conveying an idea to others, he writes:

'I was a hidden treasure and I desired to be known; and I spake and made myself known to the multitudes and they harkened unto the manner of my speech and then unto the matter thereof; and then spake in return and while beholding how I felt about their speech they knew me, and I, in beholding their reaction unto what I ere said—knew them; and, finally, I began to know myself through the contemplation of these people's reaction unto my words and, alas, gained but little satisfaction in this pursuit, but am still struggling in good earnest to understand if I actually live and have the enthralling vigour of life in my veins or have already evaporated into the thin air of ephemeral illusions of the multitude.' (1-2)

As mentioned in section III above, Konurbaev uses the imagery of strings and canvasses to artfully describe the ways our minds construct visual representations and meanings from perceived speech. His artistic language and varied examples makes for a flavorful, lively read.

For all of the things Konurbaev's book does well, there are two critical points to be made about his rhetorical style. The first concerns the materials he includes and the materials he ignores. The book does not provide any true biological account of the ways

our brains process messages and speech. Granted, Konurbaev clearly states that his book is meant to present a phenomenological account of the lived experience of speech, not a biological or neurological account of how we process and create speech. However, he spends considerable time focusing on what he claims are thought processes that occur in our brains, and on page 164 provides a graphic representation of a brain carved up by sections corresponding to different neurological functions. While the graphic is suited to the purpose and context of the passage, readers may often catch themselves wondering how much of Konurbaev's account is based in actual observation, in actual scientific data. Moreover, even if Konurbaev's account is completely accurate, the book would only benefit from a brief chapter or several sections detailing the biological side of speech. Philosophy is concerned with completion, with grasping all aspects of a phenomenon, and the book would only be stronger by including that material.

Further, Konurbaev only truly addresses the biological in the beginning of Chapter Seven, "*Organon of Life as a Phenomenon of Speech*," where he writes that "The biological aspect [of speech] has little or no effect on the quality of life as we, people, see it and live by—as humans, not merely as one of the members of the animal kingdom" (169). He divides life (i.e. the mental representations involved in speech) into Life(p), life as a mental phenomenon and lived experience, and Life(b), the biological processes and senses on which we base Life(p) (170). There are two rhetorical issues with this section. First, it simply seems false that the biological aspects of speech have little effect on mental life, given that the lived experience of speech and interpretation supervene on the proper functioning of biological processes. Second, the distinction between Life(p) and Life(b) is crucial to parsing Konurbaev's account in the proper context. Up to that point in my reading I often wondered why he hadn't addressed the role of biology in his account, and many readers may have the same experience. Konurbaev's account would be best served by including this material earlier in the book and simply recalling it as needed in Chapter 7, rather than waiting to introduce it until the later stages of the work.

A second point of criticism concerns the order in which Konurbaev discusses his ideas. He does not address the whole of a concept or factor of speech in one location in the book; he does not proceed sequentially from what it is like to create speech to what it is like to receive and decode that speech, for example, but rather meanders through topics as the chapters progress. The result is that one only fully grasps the phenomenology of the various components of speech by the end of the book, but not very clearly throughout, making it difficult to anticipate where the account is heading. This actually resembles Konurbaev's central claims about speech interpretation: receivers construct hypotheses and mental representations of the message and

continuously revise and incorporate new information as it becomes available, only reaching true understanding once the whole message has been delivered. Similarly, speech is a complex phenomenon that Konurbaev's readers may only fully grasp by the end of the book. Whether or not the metaphor is intentional, it would be easier for readers if Konurbaev organized his book around the individual parts of speech as a phenomenon (i.e. creating speech, receiving speech, speech parts, etc.) rather than drifting between topics.

V. Conclusion





Ontology And Phenomenology of Speech: An Existential Theory of Speech provides a compelling, broad phenomenological account that captures all of the varied aspects of speech as a lived phenomenon. The book is well-suited for anyone interested in the philosophy of speech or in phenomenology in general, and is an excellent contribution to the field.

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[1] Unless otherwise stated, all references are taken from *Ontology And Phenomenology of Speech: An Existential Theory of Speech* by Marklen E. Konurbaev (Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).

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