# SARTRE'S LINGUISTIC

# PHENOMENOLOGY

Both in *Critique de la raison dialectique II*, and in *L'Idiot de la famille* III, Jean-Paul Sartre writes, "Words are stones."[1] At the end of *Critique II*, Sartre suggests that this materialist ontology is part of the larger analysis of dialectical engagement that had occupied him in both volumes. In *L'Idiot III* Sartre offers a historical and political analysis of the material residue of Flaubert's acts of writing. Both in *Critique II* and in *L'Idiot III*, to which I shall restrict my analysis, Sartre proposes implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, that our power to speak and write helps constitute and is constituted by our social selves, incarnate in the vocal or written material of the deed, against which individual freedom rises anew in each act of expression.

Sartre's proposal offers a method that he employs sporadically in *Critique II* and at length in *L'Idiot III*. I shall call this method "linguistic phenomenology," though Sartre did not himself use the term, and though Sartre's method of analysis in these two volumes differs notably in its materialism from other phenomenologies it resembles, including Sartre's own in *L'Etre et le néant*. In the following remarks I shall first characterize Sartre's linguistic phenomenology and then give examples of its application in *Critique II* and in *L'Idiot III*.

## I. Sartre's materialist linguistic phenomenology in *Critique II*.

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[1] *Critique de la raison dialectique II*, ed. Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 434. Henceforth referred to in the notes as CRD II. *Critique of Dialectical Reason II*, ed. Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre, tr. Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 1991), 426. Henceforth referred to in the notes as CDR II. *L'Idiot de la famille III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 47. Henceforth referred to in the notes as *L'Idiot III*. See also Hazel Barnes, *Sartre and Flaubert* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 249. This and all other translations from Sartre in the text of the paper are mine.

In *Critique II*, near the end of the volume, Sartre writes:

> Using a word is a praxis because it tends to create a group. The word tends at the same time to mediate reciprocities and to create them. At the same time it functions as a third. Thus communication is done not by the word but by reference to the word, at once as institution, as direct relation to context, and as serialized third. The verbal institution is the serialized third. . . .[2]

In the same passage Sartre writes that words are material, though material as subtle and invisible as gas. This material is Sartre's linguistic phenomenon.

For the Sartre of the *Critique*, as the passage just cited shows, uses of language ceaselessly alternate between the speaker's or writer's praxis—the project or goal of speaking or writing—and the practico-inert—the linguistic phenomenon produced by that praxis; for, once uttered or written, the words resist change. As elsewhere in the *Critique*, Sartre conceives the alternation between praxis and practico-inert as an unending struggle in which group solidarity is at best temporary, so that the relationship among speakers and writers, too, is ambivalent. Since the alternation between praxis and practico-inert as individual psychological comprehension of words and as a social comprehension of words is itself a historical process, the dialectic is irresolvable. The words themselves, left behind as residue of that process, remain existentially ambiguous in constantly reengaging each new speaker's or writer's decision. These are the chief characteristics of Sartre's linguistic phenomenology.

Sartre thus conceives the use of language as a struggle between the ambivalent speaker or writer and the ambiguous material residue—words—that speakers or writers leave behind. Those who use language are ambivalent in that their individual acts conflict with established historical understandings of what words mean; and the words themselves are ambiguous in that their meanings are open to constant renegotiation.

Sartre's linguistic phenomenology contrasts in its materialism with the idealistic assumption of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure that using language to communicate implies a common set of beliefs, or presuppositions, and constitutes a common community of speakers. Saussure's linguist studies

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[2]CRD II, 434. CDR II, 426.

*langue*, a consensus arrived at a given time—synchronically. *Langue* is not studied historically, or diachronically, as are individual acts of speaking, *parole*, or their products, *langage*.[3] For Sartre, unlike Saussure, then, the materiality of language in use destabilizes it.

Sartre's materialist linguistic phenomenology contrasts, as well, with the "phenomenology of language"[4] of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty the use of language and other forms of communication in individual acts of *parole* both makes possible the form of phenomenological description that Merleau-Ponty calls "phenomenology of language" and creates the possibility of intersubjectivity: ". . . it is necessary to see language as an instrument for the conquest of self by contact with others"[5] and ". . . Other people are what deliver me from my own *ambivalence*: we are both, he and I, two variables in the same system. . . ."[6] By contrast, for Sartre, as we have seen, the speaker or writer struggles in constant ambivalence.

Sartre's materialist linguistic phenomenology also differs from the "linguistic phenomenology"[7] of John L. Austin, for whom the use of language both presupposes a permanent social consensus and makes possible the ordinary-language analysis that he called "linguistic phenomenology": ". . . our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connexions they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations. . . ."[8] Austin, in striking contrast to Sartre, never questions the

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[3] *Cours de linguistique générale*, ed. Tullio de Mauro (Paris: Payot, 1980). *Course in General Linguistics*, tr. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1966).

[4] "The Phenomenology of Language," in *Signs*, tr. Richard J. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

[5] *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*, tr. Hugh J. Silverman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 63.

[6] *Ibid.*, 67.

[7] "A Plea for Excuses," in *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 130.

[8] *Ibid.*

individual speaker's sincerity, or good faith: "Believing in other persons, in authority and testimony, is an essential part of the act of communicating, an act which we all constantly perform. . . ."[9]

Sartre's linguistic phenomenology in *Critique II* entertains no assumptions of consensus, whether of Saussurian *langue*—an entity fixed in time—or of Merleau-Ponty's or Austin's versions of *parole*—individual, changing, uses of language. Instead, Sartre argued with characteristic ambivalence throughout his career both for a conflictual conception of human relationships and for an elusive communal ethic, an ethic of "we" that he sought from *War Diaries* and especially *Cahiers pour une morale* up to his last interviews.

In *Critique II*, Sartre's ambivalent conception of human relationships extends a dialectical view of language as verbal institution that both supports and sabotages human communication. In the very act of communicating, the speaker or writer engages with others, yet at the same time uses language to preserve seriality and inertia in others. In communicating, the speaker helps awaken the inert in the other, so that the other may become part of the praxis of communication; yet the words themselves also suppress reciprocity in that the words, uttered or written, become a serialized and isolated third—an outsider to discourse. Thus using words helps to conserve their forms as institutions and at the same time to transform them, and using words both unites speakers and isolates them from one another. This dialectic is unending, as we have already seen.

So constituted dialectically, the Sartrian linguistic phenomenon, the speaker's praxis, incarnates the residue of the institutions which each new act of communication challenges. The spoken word is paramount; its determination, again, material:

> . . . Never could the written word have been invented (material object, figuration on clay or stone) if the spoken word had not *already* been *written* potentially). It concerns the same thing: determination of a breath through structures and *exis* (phonetic) or determination of a stone, etc. But in the first case materiality is more subtle, not visible (in the sense in which a gas is subtle. . . .)[10]

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[9]"Other Minds," *Philosophical Papers*, 99.

[10]CRD II, 434. CDR II, 426.

At times Sartre's account of the materiality of language superficially resembles the internal analysis of deconstruction, as in Sartre's suggesting that poetry is an

> . . .attempt to play on the materiality of the word. . . . In brief, to make use of the relationship between words in order that each of them seems, in that it is inert, to make the negative synthesis of its senses. . . .[11]

But Sartre's conception of the linguistic phenomenon and the speaker's or writer's use of it in *Critique II* and *L'Idiot III* is of a praxis and institution constantly evolving historically and constantly contested rather than fixed in time, idealized, dependent on consensus or sincerity, or determined by internal structure alone

## II. An example of Sartrian linguistic phenomenology from *Critique II*: The word as concrete relation to context.

Sartre conceives the speaker's ambivalence, or multiplicity of intentions, as a linguistic phenomenon—an existential ambiguity made material, as we have just seen. This view is not central to his argument in either volume of the *Critique*, but it appears in scattered, striking passages, usually as an aside. For example, his editor, Arlette Elkaim Sartre, suggests in a note in her glossary untranslated in the English edition of *Critique II*:

> For the author of the *Critique de la raison dialectique*, the philosophic notion (contrary to the scientific concept which does not come back to man) retains a certain ambiguity because it is understood in interiority: "What serves [philosophy] is that these words are not entirely defined. . . there is in the ambiguity of the philosophical word something which one can make use of to go further.[12]

Sartre is well known for his conception of an embattled subjectivity, seeking others only to fall to their dominance, dominate them, and separate

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[11]*Ibid*.

[12]CRD II, 459n. The citation is from Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations* IX, "L'écrivain et sa langue" (Paris: Gallimard, 1965).

again. This conception, famous from *L'être et le néant*, made social in *Critique I*, recurs in *Critique II*. Embattled subjectivity is incarnate and thus material in Sartre's very uses of the term "other" or "autre," cited in the editor's glossary with the following comment:

> OTHER (capitalized): even though he did not do so with great rigor throughout the manuscript, the author seems to have wanted to give this word a capital letter each time that, the pronoun representing or adjective qualifying a *person*, he insists on radical alterity: the other, in that he governs or is capable of governing laterally (or being governed by) each person's activity. We have systematized this intention, in excluding the adjective *autre* when it carries the same sense but does not qualify a person: it is in general in italics; its place sometimes suffices to underline its signification in the context (liberty other ≠ other liberty).[13]

This distinction between Sartre's uses of 'autre', which may either refer directly or qualify a subject, exemplifies his conception of praxis as a constant negotiation between the actor, other agents, and the practico-inert. I want to consider two examples from *Critique II*. In the first, Sartre capitalizes "Other" and uses the capitalized term to characterize that Other as external. In the second example, Sartre does not capitalize "other" and uses the term to characterize an other incorporated in individual acts. For Sartre in *Critique II*, these alternatives exemplify his view that human relationships are doomed to irresolvable contradiction in which they either solidify into bureaucracies or disintegrate once again into isolation.

## A. Other as Being, or subject: 'Autre' as nominalized pronoun.

In a passage entitled "The three factors of unity" Sartre describes the creation of Soviet Russia under Stalin. This description can also be read more generally as praxis imposed by an external Other, then integrated into everyone else's perception of that Other, who dominates. The unity of praxis is material production. This unity of praxis is, of course, coercive, operating according to a formal principle of reciprocity greatly modified, in the case of Stalin, by material circumstances and by subsequent revisionist accounts of these circumstances. The coercive unity of praxis is incarnate or material in specific

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[13]CRD II, 459. CDR II, 458, is shortened and misleading.

cases, such as that of the creation of Soviet Russia under Stalin, so that the Other—here Stalin—just is incarnate Being.

Sartre's very use of the capitalized "Other" or "Autre," as explained in the first part of the note from the glossary cited above, exemplifies his argument. Thus, in Stalin's creation of Soviet Russia, Sartre argues:

> . . . *Nothing can be produced anywhere* without provoking, *everywhere*, at a distance and without any preexisting practical relationship, an *internal* modification of *all human facts* (of the organic and constituting practice of *these facts* to the practico-inert). . . .[14]

This production depends on the intervention of an external Other—here Stalin—so that the synthesis that the Other imposes passively is in turn integrated actively by those whom the Other—Stalin—acted upon:

> . . . The creation, through coercive force and through all forms of work, of a sovereign unity, that is of an institutional and practical relationship of the sovereign to the practical field, transforms the context of his life for each person in the spatio-temporal determination of the sacrosanct field of the sovereign Other, and, simultaneously, constitutes the field of the individual and of the sub-group as virtually coinciding with the field of sovereignty (in that each person is himself and in that he is the Other, that is Stalin, mystifying unity situated at the point of infinity of all serialities; but this dialectic cannot be developed here, it would take us too far afield). . . .[15]

But in fact Sartre does suggests how that dialectic might be developed, when, two pages later, he also writes, of the wages of an individual worker, that

> . . . the relationship between his standard of living and that of the social categories immediately above and below him defines for him at the same time the real relationship of his objective existence to that of others. . . .[16]

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[14]CRD II, 257. CDR II, 247.

[15]*Ibid*.

[16]CRD II, 312. CDR II, 301.

In this example the Other, here designated by a nominalized pronoun, is a source of oppression external to the group, into which, at the same time, the Other is incorporated as other, here designated as an uncapitalized object.

## B. Qualifying an 'other' subject: otherness as object.

The preceding analysis has created a dilemma, which Sartre acknowledges. Either his analysis of a specific case, here Stalin's creation of Soviet Russia, constitutes an idealism of the specific circumstances, which of course is untenable in a materialist ontology; or, more modestly, Sartre's analysis outlines a materialist epistemology, which is relativistic and not an ontology at all. Sartre insists that he has escaped both horns of this dilemma. Sartre claims to escape phenomenological idealism because his analysis is grounded in specific cases of human experience. He also claims to escape epistemological relativism, because of the ". . . *practical reality* of each human action escaping the other by principle. . . ."[17] But Sartre's characterization of otherness (uncapitalized) then presents a further contradiction: ". . . the irreducibility of Being to the known-being as object of knowledge temporalizing itself at the interior of a more vast social milieu. . . ."[18] Sartre acknowledges this contradiction; it is endless.

This constant contradiction between a systematically elusive Other and other—subject and object—is exemplified in Sartre's own linguistic praxis, even as he describes it. If Being, as the Other, is manifest as objective reality in the forms of words through which it is communicated, then the historical process through which the forms of words came to incarnate being is neglected; and, with them, individual praxis as well. But if, in individual acts of speaking and writing, one incarnates and fixes the Other in oneself as forms of words, then the verbal institution remains as an unstable residue of a historical process.

Sartre's own use of language thus exemplifies the unending dialectic just described. Words—the verbal institution—remain as the serialized third, or other to the speakers or writers who use them. Sometimes the otherness of words is blatant, as Sartre suggests in characterizing the writing of officially approved

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[17]CRD II, 313. CDR II, 303.

[18]*Ibid*.

Soviet authors whose use of language must follow the Party and whose success is "the *incarnated* triumph of praxis-process."[19] But the otherness of words is a more general condition of using them, as Sartre also writes of "humanist realism":

> This use of language, we know it: it is ours, it is that of all dialecticians and from that fact it presents no danger if one sees there only a collection of rapid and imagistic locutions which saves time and which cancel themselves in the very act of comprehension. . . . "humanist realism " (that idealism of the human) is translated by images which make of praxis-process as *human reality* the substance of particular acts and local events.[20]

This passage restates Sartre's dilemma: if Being, as the Other, is manifest as objective reality in the forms of words through which it is communicated, then the historical process through which the form of words came to incarnate being is neglected, and, with it, individual praxis. Yet it is impossible to engage in individual acts of speaking and writing—in praxis—without fixing or transfixing the forms of words as practico-inert. Then individual human consciousness, with its comprehension of words as meant, both is, and is not, necessary to human communication.

The materiality of praxis is contextual and perpetually unstable, and this dialectic is exemplified by Sartre's own praxis in *Critique II*, as we have just seen. It is impossible to engage in acts of speaking and writing—in linguistic praxis—without transfixing them as objects, practico-inert, dead matter, resisting our understanding. Yet Sartre also offers concomitantly a conception of genuine interpersonal communication or "compréhension," a kind of understanding something like "Verstehen" and "Einfühling," as in the relationship among members of the groups temporarily fused or pledged. Comprehension is the material of the social world of human speech, incarnate in the vocal or written deed.

Thus comprehension, which Sartre elsewhere characterized psychologically, here becomes social at the same time; for Sartre embraces the contradiction as a dialectical movement. The dialectical movement between a

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[19]CRD II, 315. CDR II, 305.

[20]*Ibid.*

nominalized external Other and otherness is incarnate in individual praxis, as in Sartre's own uses of the (uncapitalized) "other":

> . . . History makes of man the intelligible non-essential. Man is never essential (except in the past). He is in himself *being-other* (because he makes himself interiorization of the world) but this *being-other* does not presuppose that there is a *being-self* blocked from below. The being-self is simply the repetition of the being-other. This is the dialectical movement of comprehension. . . .[21]

Comprehension, individual and social, is dialectical in the materiality of the word, for as Sartre had written earlier in *Critique* II:

> . . . *The words are the thing*: in the absence of their object, they destroy it in making themselves pass for it; in its presence, they bind to its physical being like real qualities (and, besides, *these are* real qualities). . . .[22]

The contradiction presented by these inert words poses itself against comprehension, which in turn incorporates another contradiction, as we have seen, ceaselessly.

In defiance of an objectification of the word, in dialectical comprehension, Sartre's subject continues to speak. Doomed, the speaker falls back, ceaselessly, into the practico-inert of forms of words already uttered. In *Critique II* Sartre offers no recourse to the divided speaker. In *L'Idiot III*, more than a decade later, he does suggest that the production of a divided writer, Flaubert, does offer that recourse.

## III. Sartre's materialist linguistic phenomenology in *L'Idiot III*.

Sartre begins *L'Idiot III* by proposing that two contradictory interpretations have been given of Gustave Flaubert's work. The first characterizes his achievement as a neurotic defensive strategy to escape the reality of his family situation, extensively discussed in the preceding volumes. Sartre calls this the subjective neurosis. The second interpretation makes of Flaubert's subjective

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[21]CRD II, 455-456. CDR II, 451.

[22]CRD II, 376. CDR II, 367-368.

neurosis a positive solution to changes in the class structure after about 1850. Art had previously been created by writers who stood outside the class structure, intellectually superior to the aristocrats upon whom they depended for patronage; but the artist of 1850 was economically bourgeois and had to live like one. Sartre calls this situation the objective neurosis, the result of a conflict of individual subjectivity with the objective mind, which is none other than Culture as practico-inert. Literature incarnates it. Literary work is praxis—transcending the "verbal recipes" which are cultural concretions, imposed by the dominant class. It is these verbalized systems of values and ideologies that stay in the mind or at least in memory, for words are matter. Literary work struggles to transcend the material inertia of the objective mind, which just is these verbalized ideologies; and literature is a work of material production enclosed in written language. The principle of writing is dual, embracing both the writer and the reader, and signs have no other function than "to guide the process of transcendence"[23] of their very materiality. Sartre's argument in the early part of *L'Idiot III* leads me to three conclusions in applying to Sartre's work on Flaubert the conception of language as material that Sartre outlined in *Critique II*.

    A. As Sartre had written in *Critique II*, language is concrete relation to context—that is, to social context.[24] As he extended the argument in *L'Idiot III*, the objective mind exists only through human, and, more specifically, individual activity. Each reader, each generation, makes a particular synthesis, altering the perimeters (and parameters) of totality.[25] Language creates being, but it creates being historically, not timelessly. Flaubert's own synthesis was a response to a historical demand.

    B. As Sartre had also written in *Critique II*, the word is a serialized third—that is an outsider, an uninvolved observer of the social relations speakers and writers engage it in transacting.[26] Extending the argument in *L'Idiot III*,

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[23] *L'Idiot III*, 47-48.

[24] CRD II, 434. CDR II, 426.

[25] *L'Idiot III*, 50.

[26] CRD II, 434. CDR II, 426.

Sartre wrote that the objective mind, which is culture incarnate in language, is *outside* thought, in *books*, the books of *others*. What makes the objective mind other is that it is the material vestige of the past. Because it is outside individual thought, the objective mind is a social object, incarnate in books and in that sense collective, yet individually and uniquely interpreted by each reader. The objective mind breaks human reciprocity by limiting our comprehension to what it obliges us to read.[27] For Sartre Flaubert, as a bourgeois creation of his age, read differently.

C. As Sartre had written in *Critique II* as well, language is institution.[28] In *l'Idiot III* the institution is none other than the objective mind, materialized as forms of words. But the objective mind is a collection of contradictory cultural ideologies of different historical periods converging simultaneously upon the reader, who perceives these contradictions uniquely as a demand somehow to reconcile, or "totalize" them. The institutions created by the written word are perpetually destabilized in new readings impossible to their original authors, who could not perceive the contradictions between their work and others they neither knew nor read. Sartre says that the objective mind (defined in writing) is the sum of works published at a time, together with all the totalizations of them effected by the contemporary reader, who often perceives their contradictions as an "explosion."[29] The objective mind tells us, in contradictory fashion, that we are what we have to do.[30] Thus the verbal institution created by writing is recreated by new reading and writing, as by Flaubert.

In *L'Idiot III* Sartre proposes that a vocation to write is a call to affirm literature ["la chose littéraire"] through a new totalization which, without the least aesthetic commentary, defines society, the public, and the place of the writer in social totality.[31] Flaubert's writing effected such totalization. Yet he

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[27]*L'Idiot III*, 55.

[28]CRD II, 434. CDR II, 426.

[29]*L'Idiot III*, 57.

[30]*L'Idiot III*, 59.

[31]*L'Idiot III*, 65.

also lived in a social totality that created an objective neurosis that became art neurosis. He was unhappily bourgeois in the passing of an eighteenth-century class structure that had made of writing a work apart, and of the writer a class apart. The literary situation Flaubert faced conflicted with the imperatives for totalization that, as an aspiring writer, Flaubert perceived in the finished works that preceded him. His situation, then, became absurd.

Flaubert not only believed in imitating a schizophrenic attitude toward his own bourgeois economic and social position, but lived that doubling. He had to invent unreality as literary material, because it was his material reality as a member of a class. He negated, produced second-order images of the real, and was distanced from his subject, and this attitude toward his material was a matter not only aesthetic but also ethical. He was obliged so to live and write, because, for Sartre, "to negate oneself in playing a role is, in some sense, to deserve to create."[32] Thus Flaubert's transformation of the material that is language is also an individual act of transcending the material circumstances of his class.[33]

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[32]*L'Idiot III*, 60.