Thinking and Speaking

One day Michael arrived at our office and started to share his insights from a paper he had written that morning. He talked excitedly with waving hands, and I tried to follow his thinking, which sounded novel and interesting to me. During our conversation, I mainly nodded my head and produced continuers such as interjections ‘mm . . . yeah . . .’ to show my interest and encourage him to share more. Suddenly, he said, ‘Oh . . . do you have a pen and paper, I need to write something down!’ After finding a piece of paper, Michael then jotted down some words on the paper and said, ‘Just some ideas I suddenly have for my writing, and I need to write it down, otherwise I will forget!’ Here, one might wonder: ‘How could Michael share his previous insights and generate new insights at the same time?’ One might say it is Pei-Ling who said something to stimulate Michael’s new ideas. But as I have described, I did not say anything insightful. I only made interjection sounds and nodded my head. I don’t even know what ideas Michael jotted down on that paper. Obviously, it is not Pei-Ling who gave ideas to Michael. Then, how do we explain this phenomenon? (Hsu 2010: 162)

The relation between thinking and speaking tends to be thought and theorized in causal terms: speakers express what they have thought or are thinking. That is, speech is theorized as a copy of thought even though thought itself may be theorized in terms of inner speech. The verb ‘to express’ – as a live or dead metaphor – indeed portrays this relation as one in which some content of a container is pressed out. The verb etymologically derives from the Latin ex-, out + pressāre, to press, to squeeze. The French equivalent verb, ‘exprimer’, generates the same image as it derives from Latin ex- + primēre, to press. Even the German equivalent verb, ‘ausdrücken’, which etymologically has a very different origin, signifies pressing (drücken) something out of (aus-) a container. The conception of speaking that pushes something out to make it available to the listener goes back to Aristotle, who defines the relation between the soul (mind), voice, and writing in this way: ‘Those things therefore which are in the voice, are symbols of the passions of the soul, and when written, are symbols of the (passions) in the voice’ (Aristotle 1889: 46–47).¹ There is a direct, unmediated relationship between Being and the soul,

¹ Aristotle uses the Greek word psykhē, which has been translated into Latin as ‘anima’. This term is rendered in English as ‘soul’ or as ‘mind’. Psykhē is more comprehensive than mind and perhaps more akin to the English concept ‘psyche’.
which itself has been imprinted by nature (in the way wax is imprinted by and bears a copy of the seal). The things of the voice (phoné) are the outer symbols (signs) of something on the inside of the speaker. Verbal articulation therefore literally is expression, exteriorization; it shapes the medium that carries the sound in the same way that paper carries the symbols (signs) of the passions in/of the voice. That is, in the end, the voice does not even signify the soul but shows what has left its imprint (form) on the soul: nature. Because imprints have form, it is not nature itself that is recorded but its forms, ideas, in the same way that wax records the form of the seal rather than the seal itself. As a result, 'expression as sign that wants-to-say ['meaningful sign'] is thus a double exit outside of itself of sense in itself, in consciousness, in the with-itself or near-to-itself that Husserl begins to determine as the “solitary life of the soul”' (Derrida 1967a: 34–35). Much of the research in the social sciences is built on this model, whereby the content of research participants’ talk is taken as an outer expression of their inner thoughts, interests, motivations, or feelings. Not only does such research neglect considering the mediational role that language plays in any verbal articulation – I can only say what others will find intelligible and what I, concretely realizing a possibility of language, find intelligible myself – but also in the indirect relation between any inside that we might want to conceive of in the traditional model and the outside.

**Methodical Note**

Here, as elsewhere, the first-person approach focuses on an instant in life that generally is not notice: The fact that we speak even though we have not prepared our speech and even when we have never talked about. This suggests that the first-person approach requires a keen attention to events that generally tend to disappear, be (become) invisible, or are taken to be unproblematical. In the present instance, the keen attention is to the fact that we can find new ideas in our own speech. This has implication for the way in which we think about knowing or about the method of interviewing people about their intentions, interests, or feelings.

**Finding Thought in Speech**

The opening quotation points us to an interesting, in fact pervasive phenomenon that tends not to be recognized for what it is. The narrative is from a chapter that a postdoctoral fellow of mine, Pei-Ling Hsu, wrote following an experience at our common workplace. Upon my arrival at the office in the afternoon of that day, Pei-Ling, who has arrived ahead of me, asks me about what I have been writing (about) that morning. I launch into what is an impromptu account, uninterrupted, as Pei-Ling writes, because she only uses interjections and nods to acknowledge attending to what I am saying. As an impromptu account of what I have written (about), there has been no explicit plan to produce a certain narrative; at the time, I am not merely articulating a text that I have memorized beforehand. That is, the text that comes from my mouth forms itself in speaking. There is no mental image of *this*