



## Chapter One

### Language as the Ethical Other

I think that the beginning of language is in the face. In a certain way, in its silence, it calls you. Your reaction to the face is a response. Not just a response but a responsibility. . . . Language does not begin with the signs that one gives with words. Language is above all the fact of being addressed . . . which means the saying much more than the said.

(Levinas 1988: 169-170)

The absolutely other is the Other . . . the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself. But Stranger also means the free one. Over him I have no power. (Levinas 1979: 39)

#### I. The Language Turn

In the postmodern age, language has been highly problematized in that it is no longer regarded as transparent or immediate in conveying meanings. Yet, that is not an idea newly raised in contemporary age. The idea concerning language has been seriously discussed and examined since Plato and Socrates. From its property and function to its origin, different thinkers add different elements to it. Interestingly, the further we trace back the theoretical arguments about language, the more impossibly language allows being reduced to a means for representation or communication. This is especially echoed in postmodern perspectives which regards language as a labyrinth, perpetual intertextuality or a nullifying void in itself, while man is less a meaning-giver than a player who is incorporated and inscribed in the linguistic

network.

With the discrepancy between the signifier and the signified, language is responsible for the indeterminacy and uncertainty in the multi-valent and technologically-packed society, as Lyotard claims that the postmodern condition is characterized by the incredulity towards grand narratives. There are only little narratives as every statement is viewed as opinions or personal interpretations. Meaning or idea becomes a hardly-reached end. Moreover, Derrida's frequently-referred phrase, "There is nothing outside text," renders a strong impression that everything is merely the consequence of intertextuality. Man could barely have a say in language. An aporetic character persists in meaning-designation. It is uncertain whether we are using language or language is "speaking" us. The problematized signifying process not merely handicaps the possibility of meaning but distorts the subject-object relation with the representation or mediation of language. Hence, behind the façade of language in the postmodern age, greater efforts are diverted and invested in the exploration of the character of language. That is, if not a means to daily communication or expression, then what is language or how is it related to man?

Generally speaking, three diverging perspectives on language are taken by theorists. One group maintains language as a constant attempt to represent something unrepresentable, as Johann Georg Hamann and Walter Benjamin.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hamann believes that language is related to the Creation of God, which implies an abstract and unknowable origin about language. Hamann's notion of language is further explored in Benjamin's idea of language which is basically constructed around the divine Word of God as shown in Benjamin's quoting Hamann that "[e]verything that man heard in the beginning, saw with his eyes, and felt with his hands was the living word; for God was the word. With this word in his mouth and in his heart, the origin of language was as natural, as close and as easy as a child's game . . ." (1978: 326). Hamann's statement points to a divine origin of language which is embodied in man's sensual reaction with the world. By dint of Hamann's account, Benjamin brings out the idea that everything in the world has its linguistic being which is communicated in, not through, language. Ideas are no longer separable or anterior to language but coexist with it. It is the linguistic being of the nature that is being communicated. But, the divine nature of language is perpetually beyond man's reach, whereas the

Language, divine in nature, is the words of God. Benjamin avers that pure language is the words of God and it is after the Babel tower that we have different languages which are doomed to failure in reaching or merging with pure language. However, Benjamin contends that every language still reserves an aspiration for pure language. Languages in relation to pure language are compared to “the tangent touch[ing] the circle slightly and at but one point” (1968: 80). The pure language remains as related as elusive to the worldly languages.

While Hamann and Benjamin mean to regard language as the representation of the unrepresentable pure language, Derrida takes the other polar end of the perspective that language is nothing but the perpetually deferred intertextuality. Representation is no longer a possibility. Language turns out to be an infinite fun house of language—“there is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside-text; *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (1976: 158). Derrida contends that “[s]igns, whose relation to their objects is always mediated, generate endless, undecidable chains of meanings” (2003: 225). As language is a perpetual withdrawal of signification and meaning deferral,<sup>2</sup> representation is nothing but an impossibility. Highly suspicious

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languages applied in daily use have been translated or mediated in words and deferred from the original word of God. The complexity arises since language in daily use is not totally deprived of its divine property but marks itself with an uncertain element haunting our daily communication. With the recognition, Benjamin delineates the process of what and how language implicates:

The language of things can pass into the language of knowledge and name only through translation—as many translations, so many languages—once man has fallen from the paradisiac state that knew only one language. . . The paradisiac language of man must have been one of perfect knowledge; whereas later all knowledge is again infinitely differentiated in the multiplicity of language, was indeed forced to differentiate itself on a lower level as creation in name. . . . The Fall marks the birth of the *human word* . . . . (1978: 327)

Significantly, starting from the idea of the Word of God, Benjamin endows language with a divine and mysterious origin which is beyond man’s reach. Language in communication or expression is destined to leave an unbridgeable lacuna as an inevitable confrontation.

<sup>2</sup> According to H. Giroux, Derrida’s language suggests meaning is the product of language constructed out of and subject to the endless play of differences between signifiers. What constitutes the meaning of a signifier is defined by the shifting, changing relations of difference that characterizes the referential play of language. . . . meaning can never be fixed once and for all. (Williams and Sewpaul 563).

of the logic of metaphysical truth or reference, Derrida strives to undercut the so-called referential process of the signification. The matrix of language is made up of a network of signifiers both infinitely deferred and differed as Derrida mapped out in “Defférence.” He contends that defférance (constituted by infinitely deferring and differing) is “not only irreducible to any ontological or theological—ontotheological—reappropriation, but as the very opening of the space in which ontotheology—philosophy—produces its system and its history, it includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return” (1982: 6). Derrida presents an ontotheological but infinite end of language which is similarly beyond human comprehension. However, unlike Heidegger, he does not think an underlying or infinitely deferring truth or reference is still possible. He demonstrates the ethical register later developed in his discussion of Levinasian ethics “At This Very Moment in This Work” as well as the “Violence and Metaphysics” in *Writing and Difference*. Derrida’s deconstructive reading finds its echo in Levinasian ethics as he remarks in an interview, “Deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothingness, but an openness towards the other” (Kearney 124). Yet, their homology does nothing but mark their difference from each other—Levinas is concerned with the absolute Other whereas Derrida insists more on the gist of deconstruction and implies that a text is always an opening to another. Both of them try to articulate a view of ethics

that would allow for respect for otherness without subsuming otherness under one’s own categories. Derrida tries to do so by discovering an ethical relationship within language . . . . Levinas tries to do so by discovering an ethical relationship beneath or beyond all language.  
(May 151)

In other words, the relation between the self and the Other is still a traceable thing in

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language to Levinas but Derrida would hardly spare any space to talk on behalf of the self. Language, to Derrida, is always text-haunting process, unfolding the experience of the incessantly-compiling texts.

It doesn't inhabit it, but haunts it. Another text, the text of the other, arrives in silence with a more or less regular cadence, without ever appearing in its original language, to dislodge the language the translation, converting the version, and refolding it while folding it upon the very thing it pretended to import. It dissimilates it. (1991: 414-15)

It is the intertextual haunting that unsettles the original text and submerges the possibility of the designated meaning. Hence, Derrida's attention to language is laid upon the interrelating and interlacing texts—language is more than what plurality or multiplicity could account for. Language as a system of referring but deferring signs would always stay as heterogeneous as indeterminate, leaving the self totally out of the scene.

## **II. Language: From the Uncontrollable to the Ethical Other**

The third perspective neither rests on the reservation of the representational language nor reduces language to a perpetually-deferred signifying process. Neither of them yields a solidified sense of language, as the former indicates that the insistence of representational function always lapses into an irretrievable origin or a representational void, while the later makes an entropic linguistic swirl showing no way out. The focus is thus shifted to a more acute and concrete configuration of language. Recognizing language as an uncontrollable and alien force without making futile efforts to decipher or decode it, theorists lay emphasis on how language makes an unavoidable relation with the Other. The first remarkable argument is held by Heidegger. He embarks on the observation that the linguistic autonomy

overwhelms the speaking subject—reversing the traditionally-held situation between man and language. In his writings in *On the Way to Language*, Heidegger takes the experience with language as a reversal of the presentation of the self-consciousness or intention:

What we speak of, language, is always ahead of us. Our speaking merely follows language constantly. Thus we are continually lagging behind what we first ought to have overtaken and taken up in order to speak about it. Accordingly, when we speak of language we remained entangled in a speaking that is persistently inadequate. (1971: 75)

For Heidegger, language speaks before man rather than the other way around.

Language has an upper hand over man, which contradicts the ideas that either treat language as a medium or reflect the pre-existing ideas or the revelation of divinity in Hamman or Benjamin. Heidegger contends that it is a situation

in which language is no longer an instrument under our control; it is no longer anything we can speak. Our relationship to language has been turned inside out . . . it is an event in which the truth of language overwhelms and transforms us . . . as an invasion of the subject that deprives it of its self-possession and self-identity. (Bruns 133)

More bluntly, Heidegger considers language as the confrontation with what is other than the self. The proximity of language, to Heidegger, means “being face-to-face with others and with things” (Bruns 134). Language with an imposing and autonomous character makes an inevitable relation with man. It is a relation with an alien and irrepressible force. Such an account of the dissymmetrical relation with language seemingly corresponds to Levinas’s notion of language which would be discussed in the following section. Yet, David Cousens Hoy sketches out their underlying difference, based on Derrida’s critique of Heidegger: while meaning to

Levinas is almost an impossible possibility, Heidegger aims to deconstruct or transcend the metaphysical mechanism only to reveal his own entrapment in that his theory of language still involves “a theory of truth and reference” founded on the mechanism of sign (Hoy 225).<sup>3</sup> Hence, though Heidegger does awake us to the dissymmetrical relation between the speaker and language, he does not break away from the metaphysical mechanism which in a way secures the mechanism of representation.

Conscious of the representational fallacy, Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot regard language as an ethical relation with the Other—an irreducible force not merely haunting but threatening to dissolve the self. Maurice Blanchot contends that language is based on the poetics of the Outside which is beyond any possible appropriation or reduction in meaning designation. It is especially “speaking” that makes the relation with *auturi*—a dimension of “radical exteriority,” “always Other: the Distant, the Stranger” (57, 63). Speech indicates a relation without common measure between the self and *auturi* and “[t]he other is a speech beyond opposition, beyond negation, and does nothing but the infinite distance of the Other and the infinite exigency that is *auturi* in its presence; that which eludes all power to negate and to affirm” (65). With the unmeasurable dissymmetry, Blanchot names it as a relation of the third kind<sup>4</sup> which is a confrontation with a man “without horizon . . . a being without being, a presence without a present, thus foreign to everything visible

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<sup>3</sup> Heidegger’s scope of the world relies much on the linguistic structure as he maintains that “reference and the referential totality were in some sense constitutive of worldliness itself” (1953: 71-72). However, the reference is not an isolated truth but a relation which comes from the indicating process of the signs. The indicating property of the signs is what Derrida’s critique sets against but Heidegger’s idea of the relation embedded in reference inspires latter theories on the ethical property of language.

<sup>4</sup> For Blanchot, the first relation is based on the law of the same. It refers to the process of adequation and identification to reduce everything to the same. The second relation designates a situation in which “unity is not only demanded, but immediately attained”—the self immersed himself into the absolute Other. The former is derived of its sovereignty while the latter is “the sole absolute.” (66). The third relation focuses on the relation with the Other who escapes common measurement. That contributes to incessant interruptions to the being of the self.

and to everything invisible—he is what comes to me as speech when to speak is not to see” (69). However, with such a relation with *auturi*, Blanchot does not present a “concrete” picture of such a relation but the impossible or the complete Outside that the self is exposed to. It is a relation, according to Gerald L. Bruns, that is “neither cognitive nor ethical but neutral” (141). That is, Blanchot’s neutrality tends to center on his affirmation of language as the attraction of the self to the void as language “opens a neutral space in which no existence can take root” (Foucault 54).

According to Blanchot, it is the relation of the third kind, the dynamic relation between the self and *auturi*. He depicts how the experience of language causes fear for the self: “Through fright . . . we leave ourselves, and, thrown outside, we experience in the guise of the frightening what is entirely outside us and other than us” (49). It in a way corresponds to Levinas’s notion of ethics which is concerned with a relation with the Other. Nevertheless, language as the Other to Blanchot is more abstractly portrayed than forcefully emphasized, according to Foucault’s interpretation:

Language . . . with its power of dissemination that effaces every determinate meaning and even the existence of the speaker, in the gray neutrality that constitutes the essential hiding place of all being and thereby frees the space of the image—is neither truth nor time, neither eternity nor man; it is instead the always undone form of the outside.

(57)

Language as the encounter with the outside does not constitute a mutual relation with the self. It, instead, marks its incomprehensible and indifferent nature with the speaker completely overwhelmed and dissolved in the abyssal unknown. Language becomes the neutral when “the one does not enter into what he says . . . just as speech can be held to be neutral when it pronounces without taking into account either itself



or the one who pronounces it, as though, in speaking, it did not speak but allowed that which cannot be said to speak in what there is to say” (Blanchot 303). Obviously, Blanchot locates the neuter of language not in the speaker or what is said but in what is unspeakable. And, it is from the neutral that channels the Other as he states that “[t]he Other is in the neuter, even when it speaks to us as Autrui, then speaking by way of the strangeness that makes it impossible to situate and always exterior to whatever would identify it” (311). Interestingly enough, it is a position which is never reachable or identifiable to us. However, questions might be raised concerning the relation with the neutral. First, could there still be a relation between the neuter and the self while the speaker is totally dissolved or cast out of language or serve as the medium of the unspeakable? How to identify the unidentifiable neutral?

While Blanchot puts emphasis on how language acts as the neutral, a “no man’s land’ itself, Levinas, rather, starts from the idea of language as the relation with the Other, not the indifferent and almost irrelevant neuter. In other words, different from Blanchot, Levinas’s language is examined from the ethical angle. It is an ethical relation with language as the ethical Other. First of all, it is based on the idea that language is divided into the said and the saying. The former refers to the commonly recognized presence in signification as the latter designates the exposure to an-*other*. “The Said, like representation, tends toward the present, toward simultaneity, contemporaneous, the economy of self-presence” (1987b: 22). It refers to the static and determinate in meaning and identification and construes a definite mechanism for self-expression under the premise of the temporal and spatial certainty. “Saying approaches the other by breaking through the noema involved in intentionality, turning inside out, ‘like a cloak,’ consciousness which, by itself would have remained for-itself even in its intentional aims ” (2000b: 48). However, Levinas questions the determinancy of the said since it usually comes “too late and too early” (1987b: 22)

for the being of life. It never catches the moment as life is. In contrast, the saying which rides on the being of life refers to something prior to man's consciousness and in consequence is ungraspable and un-thematizable. It is where the self confronts the Other in language. In other words, it surfaces the reduced and silenced which disturbs the meaning designated in intentionality. But, different from Blanchot, Levinas does not take language as an autonomous, neutral, and even insulating zone but as a relation with the Other which the self is unable to evade.

It is the saying in language that Levinas discerns the ethical relation with the Other. Hence, to understand how the ethical relation is constructed in the saying without falling into the pitfall of intertextuality or the void of the neuter, what is at stake is to understand how the saying contributes to a more comprehensible analysis of language, especially in terms of ethics. Besides, as Levinas means to stress language as the ethical relation with the Other, it is impossible to neglect the self who is consciously and unconsciously confronting the Other. The relation between the self and the Other remains Levinas's focal point.

### **III. The Ethical Other**

The concern of the Other is nothing new in history. The concern of otherness or the issue of the Other has been the major concern after the Cartesian *ego cogito*. The self is no longer able to claim his or her monadal or self-sufficient existence, especially from Edmund Husserl's theory of phenomenology and Heidegger's sense of being to Derrida's deconstruction, Lyotard's notion of the differend and Emmanuel Levinas's ethics. It is an irretrievable trend of thinking turning the scope of the world, claiming the invalidity of any self-centered or universal ideas or values. First, "the post-Cartesian turn to 'otherness' is nourished by the broader mutations and dislocations of our age: dislocations manifest in the confrontation between Western

and revitalized non-Western cultures on a global scale, and also in the clash between competing social classes and experiential life-worlds” (Dallmayr x). Difference becomes a significant value in daily life. It arouses people’s attention to and respect for the cultural, social, and even gender differences, allowing the silenced to take a stand and have a say in the social fabric. More significantly, it makes manifest how the so-called universal law or the absolute reason oppresses the different or those who transcend the boundaries. However, there is a fallacy embedded in the notion of difference, which means to keep the boundary between the same and the difference, implying a common ground still existing for the demarcation or judgment. Such a difference which is structured on certain criteria has been reduced, reinforcing the logic of the same. Besides, while the “I” is distraught with his founding ground and routine mechanism, is at a loss how to deal with the other coming from all aspects of life, the “other” might enjoy a short spree in voicing their suppression in terms of their difference. Yet, the bigger question is where to locate the origin of their difference and how to convince others of their inherent heterogeneity. If, fortunately, the “other” does find the rooting ground, would it be regarded as another oppressing source of certain “universality” or be interrogated as a constructed consequence? The “other” does not have less to face than before. The attention to the “other,” apparently, does not work out the concealed problem between “I” and the “other.” Yet, the notable contribution falls on the recognition of the necessity to further explore the issue of the “other,” which is not merely culturally-, socially-, sexually related or concerned, since the difference either presupposes an underlying ground between them or falls into another “universal” category reducing the difference or heterogeneity. However, from the respective predicaments of the “I” and the “other,” it is detectable that both of them have the otherness to face in themselves—the Other, the alter alterity, according to Emmanuel Levinas. The

Other could be with the “I” anytime anywhere, awakening the awareness to the always uncertain or unknown embedded in not only the “other”<sup>5</sup> but the “I.” Hence, the emphasis of the western thinking on the Other conveys an important intension to illustrate how fragile the common ground of the center, or the criteria is. There is a strong attempt to reconsider and reinterpret the relation between the self and the Other while no common ground remains to mark any specific difference.

This is also what makes unique the ethics in the postmodern—the self’s relation with the Other. Ethics used to be considered how one should live and act, based on the rules concerning what is right and wrong. The biggest contribution of ethics has been its potentiality to bring a harmonious and peaceful society or living condition. But, skepticism and anxiety have never been absent in the field of ethics which requires a set of rules for behavior and thinking within a particular group. Where are the rules? What are the values? Is there really a way of living really conforming to ethics? All these questions easily shatter the supposed founding base of any ethical living community. Ethics has undergone its most prominent transition in the age marked by the linguistic indeterminacy. Without a common social grounding, ethics in the postmodern age no longer concerns the social codes to get along with others but a relation with the incomprehensible Other embedded in language.

To help track the ethical route, efforts of different thinking try to figure out the possible fundamental structure. First of all, ethics and morality have been looked upon as two sides of the same coin. Both of them are intended to map out a structure or rules for a social gathering based on a harmonious relation in which every one would be equally judged and treated. Philologically speaking, both “ethics’ and

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<sup>5</sup> Here, it does not mean that the “other” does not contribute to the otherness which is an irresistible trend in theoretical mapping. On the contrary, the “other” could act an important clue inducing the awareness to the existence of the Other, the absolute alterity, a nature which could not be measured with any pre-supposed values or standards. That is, the concern with the “other” should be done in a different angle.

‘morality’ have their roots in a word for ‘customs,’ the former being a derivative of the Greek term from which we get ‘ethos’, and the latter from the Latin root that gives us ‘mores,’ a word still used sometimes to describe the customs of a people” (Singer 5). In a debate between Thrasymachus and Socrates, described by Plato, while Thrasymachus claims that “morality is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger party,” Socrates tries to convince him that “no one in any kind of authority . . . in his capacity as a ruler, considers or enjoys his own advantage, but the advantage of his subject, the person for whom he practices his expertise” (Plato 21, 26). Morality, not clearly distinct from ethics, is taken as what is commanded by the ruler and to be obeyed by its people. Such a viewpoint is hardly possible in modern times.<sup>6</sup> The origin of ethics underwent more serious exploration and study in the eighteenth century, especially the efforts coming from Rousseau, Hume, and Kant. Like Rousseau, who thinks that man with a noble mind is satisfied by the bounty of nature and bears no reason to quarrel with other inhabitants in the world, Hume also believes that the origins of ethics are established on certain natural feelings or sentiments; yet, there should be a set of ethical terms established to discern good from bad sentiments, hoping that “by such universal principles are the particular sentiments of self-love frequently controlled and limited” (Hume 38). Different from Hume and Rousseau, Kant does not agree to any connection between feelings and ethics. The “pure moral law” given by reason alone should be the highest guiding principle for ethics on the grounds that all human beings are rational beings. Kant believes that

the pure moral law lets us perceive the sublimity of our own  
supersensuous existence and subjectively effects respect for their higher

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<sup>6</sup> Morality in modern times is no longer what the ruler could decide because “modernity set out to free man all ‘historical influences and diversions that ravage his deepest essence’ so that—it was hoped—‘what is common to all, man as such, can emerge in him as his essence’” (Bauman 82). The morality in modern times is believed to be innate in man.

vocation in men who are conscious of their sensuous existence and of the accompanying dependence on their pathologically affected nature.

(1994: 40)

Up until 18<sup>th</sup> century, theorists are searching for the universal guiding rules for human deeds, no matter based on human sentiments or universal reason. Yet, their views on the origins of ethics did not last long before theorists in 19<sup>th</sup> century and early twentieth century doubted the reasonableness to talk about ethics regardless of the social, economic and even cultural status quo. Karl Marx, though not directly commenting on morality and ethics, comments how man's life is modulated by the material circumstances as well as economic situations. Darwin, from his observation of animal behavior, makes similar argument in ethical thinking by asserting that man, like animals, would gain their moral instincts from experience and reason, intellectually speaking.

Nietzsche, the founder of the overman philosophy, is the one to renounce the idea of morality which, he thinks, is originated from and produced by the herd instincts. It is what hinders the potential to achieve "the higher man, the higher soul, the higher duty, the higher responsibility, and . . . the wealth of creative power and mastery" (Nietzsche 1954: 446). Nietzsche ostensibly turns back to the monadal self who believes himself to be the epistemological center. But, actually, Nietzsche's overman, totally different from the Cartesian self, is compared as the Dionysian character. It is a force driving him beyond the confinements of self-consciousness and going near the state of madness. Besides, Nietzsche's going beyond the morals could mark a new start for ethics, especially in terms of the theoretical trend after the vein of deconstruction. For one thing, Nietzsche's idea inspires and encourages people to assert themselves in one way or another, releasing them from the grid of the moral rules or ethical standards. For another, there is something uncontrollable and

unpredictable within the self, which makes vague the boundary of the self, in a state *other* than oneself. That could be a significant transitional point for the development of ethics which is no longer confined to the pursuit of the ideal moral situation which is founded on human sentiments, universal reason, experiences or social instincts. The increasing moral uncertainty remarks the ethical route.

The morally-concerned ethics has been diverted toward the Other-oriented one, which is especially obvious in the conflict of modern ethics, as observed by Zygmunt Bauman. The modern society is characterized by the fact:

It constantly but vainly tries to ‘embrace the unembraceable,’ to replace diversity with uniformity and ambivalence with coherent and transparent order—and while trying to do this turns out unstoppably more divisions, diversity and ambivalence than it has managed to get rid of. (5)

The concealed conflicts and ambiguity in modern ethics designates a fact that the moral condition is irrational, aporetic, non-universal, since no common grounding for the moral codes is possible to be imposed on the individual. Bauman stresses that “given the ambiguous impact of the societal efforts at ethical legislation, one must assume that moral responsibility—being *for* the Other before one can be *with* the Other—is the first reality of the self, a starting point rather than a product of a society” (13). It is a significant turn in ethical configuration, reversing Emile Durkheim’s sociology of morals which is based on “a rule-guided moral code, defining obligations and duties for each individual according to categorical imperatives and Durkheim’s additional consideration of the driving forces of individual moral behavior—the desire to fulfill the moral obligation” (Junge 106). No longer believing in the capability of modern society to equip every individual with appropriate moral rules while carrying out their social obligations, Bauman takes the responsibility to the Other as the point of departure for the postmodern ethics and

regards pre-societal ethics as the emblematic praxis in postmodern society. It is the situation as Rekha Mirchandani observes two notable changes in postmodern ethics:

First, it embraces a project of ethics, a rejection of morality in Kantian sense of a systematized approach to pressing questions, in favor of an ethics that replaces formality with practicality and focuses on the autonomous individual as the source of those ethics. . . . Second, postmodern ethics stresses the inception of new ethical questions and problems characterizing postmodern epoch . . . . Postmodern ethics challenges how we think about our social relations (and what makes them legitimate) in a new, risky, time-space distanced consumer society. ( 106)

What characterizes the postmodern ethics lies in the empirical life experience of the autonomous individual in the temporally and spatially transformed society, a risk society in Beck's terms. Mirchandani thinks of Bauman as the typical figure in postmodern ethics as Bauman takes into account the social condition suffused with uncertainty and risk.

Yet, drawing on Levinas's ethical idea, Bauman, in another sense, takes the Other as the person sharing a social relation with the other and means to transcend the dyad in Levinasian ethical configuration by bringing in Georg Simmel's notion of the Third to his social perspective, which reverts the ethical thinking back to the track of morality. That is, Bauman sticks to a concrete and practical sense of society and the necessity of moral responsibility in his societal observation. However, as Bauman interprets that Simmel thinks that it is from the vantage point of the Third that the 'objective criteria' of interests and advantages points can be set, Bauman further reveals the impossibility of reason in the postmodern ambience, since "[r]eason cannot help the moral self without depriving the self of what makes the self moral:



that unfounded, non-rational, unarguable, no-excuses-given and non-calculable urge to stretch towards the other, to caress, to be for, to live for, happen what may” (Bauman 247). Bauman believes that moral responsibility “is there before any assurance or proof and after any excuse or absolution” (250). Nevertheless, his anti-reason does not bring Bauman to another extreme—the postmodern philosophy of “everything goes,” commonly associated with nihilism. Instead, he resorts to another ambiguous basis—human conscience as the only way to guarantee the postmodern responsibility. It is called the moral conscience which “commands obedience without proof that the command should be obeyed; conscience can neither convince nor coerce” (Bauman 249), but it is the last site that people could place their bet in terms of moral thinking. It is obvious that Bauman relies on Levinas’s notion of the Other to talk about the postmodern ethics but ends up with a notion of human conscience to base the moral responsibility, which strikingly diverges from Levinas’s ethical configuration. It is from the self’s relation with the Other that Emmanuel Levinas means to redefine what ethics is, with a strong attempt to break away from the metaphysical totality. The Other, hence, does not refer to any specific individual. The reciprocity or social interaction is not restricted to or end with the person-to-person relation. Rather, the relation with the Other is embedded in or integrated into the actual social relations, designating the rudimentary human conditions. That is, the ethical relation, according to Levinas, does not necessarily happen in the actual relation with other people in social milieu. He traces the relation back to the inevitable confrontations or occurrences in life. First of all, Levinas makes unique his ethical perspective which is centered on the non-reciprocal or asymmetrical relation between the self and the Other. Besides, with nonreciprocity and asymmetry, it is pivoted on the infinity and exteriority which could not be reduced or exhausted with meaning imposition or intellectual integration.

Rather than falling into the fallacy of totality, Levinas proposes the idea of non-in-difference since difference is an idea which presupposes a plane of comparison and easily lapses into the totalizing thinking. Moreover, looking upon the Other as an infinite and non-in-different alterity, Levinas presents the pure or absolute passivity of the self. The non-in-different and irreducible Other which launches the self to an infinite alterity thwarts the self's comprehension or conception. The Other, making invalid the self-sufficient and autonomous ego, causes enormous disquiet and fear, and passivity and vulnerability are what features the self in the ethical relation. The self is no longer entitled to the privilege to comprehend or recognize the Other but could only passively respond to the Other. More importantly, to elaborate the self's passivity and vulnerability, Levinas maintains that the self's response to the Other occurs pre-consciously, before the conscious awareness of the Other—a preconscious responsibility. The following are the focal points that are conducive in understanding the ethical relation with the Other, non-thematizable, self-disquieting and pre-conscious.

#### **A. The Sensibility**

If the Other *speaks* in a language, incomprehensible and unrepresentable, then in what way is the self awakened to the ethical relation with the Other? Drawing on Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's notion of being and time<sup>7</sup>, Levinas starts

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<sup>7</sup> Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's notion of being and time have great impact on Levinas's ethics which aims at breaking from the grid of the metaphysical thinking and grounds his ethics on the experiential world. First of all, Husserl's phenomenology, as Levinas interprets, is the thinking that discloses how meaning is generated, focusing on how the personal or self-conscious intentionality is engaged in the meaning of the object. That is, "[h]uman experience is not some self-transparent substance or pure *cogito*; it is always intending or tending towards something in the world that preoccupies it. . . . Phenomenology is a way of becoming aware of where we are in the world, a *sich besinnen* that consists of a recovery of the origin of meaning in our life world, or *Lebenswelt*" (Levinas 1986: 14-15). Obvious as the divergence between Levinas and Husserl, the influence of the latter is apparent in rethinking the meaning-generating process as well as the importance and immediate impact of the life's actuality on man. Secondly, Heidegger's notion of being goes beyond Husserl's conscious intentionality. The being, a neutrality "on the other side of good and evil" (De Boer 108)

with the experiential reality—the sensible. It defamiliarizes what is seen, heard or perceived by getting rid of the presupposition or pre-requisition of the meaning-imposition. To retrieve the irreducible Other, Levinas's idea of the sensible does not end with Husserl's phenomenology which, he thinks, is susceptible of the transcendental reduction as "the unavoidable philosophical itinerary leading toward a realm of intelligibility," "the ascent to the 'I think,' which is assured of its noetic being and in which, the things of the world are constituted . . . for interpreting the appearance of 'just things' in their constitution by the *cogito*" (1994: 96-97). Levinas appreciates Husserl's salvaging the knowledge from being the outcome of the imposition of the universal predicatives or a priori category by thinking that the empirical perceptions should provide the fundamental base for the generation of meanings. However, Husserl's emphasis on the communal interaction between man's consciousness and the world lapses into the fallacy of the epistemological totalization as well as the self-centered dominance in the experiential world. Similarly stressing the sensible like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty insists on the objectivity of the experiential world and the intersubjectivity in which "the *knowledge* of the alter ego that breaks egological isolation" (Levinas 1994: 101). Levinas comments that, for Merleau-Ponty, "the carnal manifests its ambiguity or is ambivalence of extension and interiority, and in which the *felt* [*senti*] that is there before us is *ipso facto* a *feeling* [*sentir*]" (1994: 98-99). That is, contending that sensibility is an original mode of being which could not be reduced to the synthesis of its pure nature and the intentionality, Merleau-Ponty takes the sensible as the field for the interaction between the subjective cognition and the objective world. Unsatisfied with

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refers to the totality of man's existence, taking into consideration the presence beyond one's consciousness breaking the self's complacency. Hence, the notion of being might be the significant inspiration that Levinas portrays the pre-conscious relation with the Other. Yet, the difference from Heidegger is that Levinas does not take the notion of being as the totality of the self but a point to break away from the self-centered consciousness or recognition.

Merleau-Ponty's notion of sensibility, Levinas finds that intersubjectivity and reciprocity still imply the establishment of the common ground for the sensible. That is, "perhaps a certain priority granted to the ambiguity of the sensible as a form of consciousness in which the mental element of the apprehension of things and the spatial element of the corporeal gestures of taking, in that very apprehension, go together" (Levinas 1994: 114). Hence, though making allowance for the objectivity of the sensible, Levinas thinks its otherness is compromised with the uniqueness of the Other unrecognized. The Other not merely rebels against the universal idea or concepts but goes beyond the sensible, i.e., "the vision turning back into non-vision, into insinuation of a face, into the refutation of vision within the sight's center, into that of which vision, already assuming a plastic form, is but forgetfulness and re-presentation" (Levinas 1994: 115). Avoiding falling into the pit of the transcendental reduction, Levinas's preservation of the otherness goes from the sensible to the unknowable. The sensible, evoking the recognition of the unrepresentable, is the access to the absolute alterity, instead of ending with the noetic identification. It is an opening to the mysterious which is *embodied* but transcends the sensible. The self's relation with the visible, audible or perceivable is reverted beyond any adequation or reasoning. Levinas names it as the ethical nudity that is deprived of any form, content or theme. The sensible is the premier trace of the Other as sensibility refers to "an exposure to others, a vulnerability and a responsibility in the proximity of the others, the one-for-the-other, that is, signification . . . the way that signification signifies before showing itself as a said in the system of synchronism, the linguistic system" (2000b: 77). Sensibility is then compared to the linguistic mechanism. The ethical relation is embodied in the language of the sensible in a way that Levinas simultaneously expands the idea of language and connects the immediate expression of the Other to the saying of

language. The sensible makes a more inevitable language that requires the self to respond.

## **B. The Face as Indication of the Ethical Bond**

The Other *speaks* and addresses in the manner of face—the premier indication of the ethical bond. Levinas remarks:

The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face. This *mode* does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its ideatum—the adequate idea. . . *It expresses itself.* (Levinas 1979: 51)

The face is the immediate expression which goes beyond any generalization or categorical understanding. Without lapsing into any form or image which would be subsumed under certain measurement or idea-association, the face presents Levinas's attempt to break away from the grid of difference which implies a common ground of comparison or judgment. The face is an expression of the Other resisting any reduction or thematization as "[t]he face is signification, and signification without context. . . the face is meaning all by itself. . . It is what cannot become a content" (Levinas 1985: 86-87). In face of the Other, the self is awakened to a being-other-than-self which exists prior to self-consciousness with the Other serving as the centrifugal force. Besides, the face takes the initiative in the ethical relation while the self could only passively react or respond to it. "The face is a hand in search of recompense, an open hand. That is, it needs something. It is going to ask you for something. . . It is a new way of speaking of the face" (1988: 169). There

is a demand of response without knowing what is meant to say. The response implies an inevitable responsibility that the self is obliged to. To sum up, the face is the expression itself, making impossible any signifying process which at the same time disquiets the self-centered consciousness or recognition of the self. Yet, it designates the self's passivity and responsibility by demanding an inevitable and irreplaceable response.

### **C. Diachrony**

While the ethical language designates the immediate but ungraspable face of the Other in the sensible, diachrony is the way Levinas further elaborates on the ethical relation with the Other as well as the face. Levinas's diachrony, originally a temporal notion, reveals not merely the relation with the unthematizable Other but Levinas's efforts in re-examining and redefining the notion of time. No longer treating time as a linear process, Levinas is apparently and greatly inspired by Bergson and Heidegger. Basically, both of them refute the traditionally-conceived order of spatialized time and hold that there should be a juxtaposition of time in which the past, the future, and the present are not disconnected from each other. The present coexists and interacts with the memory of the past as well as the anticipation of the future. Different temporal phases are seemingly interwoven with each other. But Levinas, doing more than what they aim to manifest, comments:

Time is then neither a projection of being toward its end, as in Heidegger, nor a mobile image of the immobile eternity, as in Plato. It is the time of fulfillment, a complete determination that is the actualization of all potentiality, of all the obscurity of the factual in which stands the subjectivity of man alienated in his technical activities. (2000a: 95)

Levinas takes time as the manifestation of the self's relation with what the present

could not totalize. Time, in Levinas's terms, designates "the future of being-toward-death, a future defined exclusively by the unique relationship of being-to-death as being outside oneself, which is also being whole, or being properly oneself" (2000a: 44). Time is the self's relation with the being outside oneself instead of the possibility or memory of the being. It is different from "[t]he temporalization of time. . . is indeed recuperated by an active ego which recalls through memory and reconstructs in historiography the past that is bygone, or through imagination and prevision anticipates the future" (2000b: 51). The time explicating such an ethical relation is termed diachrony, featuring in the situation that "the negativity of a temporal anarchy, this refusal of the present, of appearing, of the immemorial, commands me and ordains me to the other, to the first one on the scene, and makes me approach him, makes me his neighbor" (2000b: 11). Diachrony here refers to a force which could be neither severed nor integrated. It addresses the self, making an irresistible demand for the self's responsibility. It is a relation with the Other—characterized by the separate inseparation and unrelated relation as it would be elaborated in the following discussion.

In the ethical relation, Levinas demonstrates that the sensible is the first language of the Other, while the notions of the face and diachrony indicate Levinas's effort in revealing the immediate and non-totalizable expression of the Other as well as the ethical relation construed. Interestingly, he juxtaposes the spatial and the temporal, face and diachrony, to mark the uniqueness of the ethical relation, and at the same time remolds the notions of space and time, implying their interwoven, rather than distinct, relation.

Despite the fact that critics mostly figure Levinas's argument of language as the ethical Other in a rather abstract or transcendental manner, DeLillo's trilogy, is particularly inspiring in presenting a sensible, embodied contour of language

constructed in the postmodern age. Consisting three of his major works which spans a decade, *The Names* (1982), *White Noise* (1985), and *Mao II* (1991), the trilogy sheds light on how language acts as an Other in daily life and how the self reacts in the ethical confrontation. For the former concern, DeLillo, remarkably, goes from three different aspects to sketch the saying of language. First, DeLillo depicts the language of sensibility as man's sensory perception of the wor(l)d including the visible, the audible, and the readable. This is the first language of the Other that man is demanded to respond to. In addition, the otherness of language is further shown in the names which are meant to designate the world, marking the arbitrariness of the naming process. Man's obsession with the names or words becomes a yearning to solve the mystery of the *natural* language lying behind the man-made one. Yet, language as sensibility goes in two directions: one leads to the language man invents to impose on and comprehend the world; the other raises the awareness of the body which is an-other speaker that we have to respond to. There lies a corporeal language which is no less difficult to decipher. Death, to DeLillo, makes the most forceful representative of the corporeal language. It *speaks* in a wordlessly but disquieting and even life-threatening manner. It is not merely self-diminishing but self-*othering*. This leads to the more profound concern of DeLillo's: if there is any possibility sustained to anchor the self.? Hence, the third one is pivoted on the language of the image, which is duplicated, fabricated, disseminated and even abused in the postmodern age to the extent that DeLillo furthers the saying of language as the base to explore the possibility of individuality in the postmodern age. As the *natural* and bodily language demonstrated a haunting and threatening Other, the self is marked with passivity and vulnerability. The language of the image designates DeLillo's notable efforts in reverting the ethical concern back to the self and explore how the self possibly situates himself in ethical relation. That is, the analysis in



these perspectives actually accounts for the ethical journey of the self from the state of being haunted by the Other through the phase of self-Othering to the possibility of individuality.

As the otherness of language designates the ethical relation instead of an endless self-referring signifying system or a self-contained land, it is impossible to neglect the self. Moreover, such an exploration of the self would be worthwhile in another sense, since it makes a dialogue with the much-debated idea of the self in the postmodern milieu. While Lyotard terms the postmodern condition as “the incredulity towards the grand narratives,” Frederic Jameson, Foucault, and even Deleuze are considering the self no longer autonomous, self-sufficient and rational. They separately bring out the viewpoints on the impossibility of the modern ego, or the self lapsing into the contingent or nomadic fabrication. Hence, such a dialogue is important to discern if the self is just dissolved or submerged in the ethical relation with language or if there is still any anchorage for the self. Remarkably, the examination of the otherness of language is conducive in exploring the self in the postmodern milieu.

## **Conclusion**

Language has been one of the focal points in both theoretical mapping and literary presentation. Their analyses or explorations fail to make any definite answer to what language refers. However, their efforts do point out a fact that language serves as man’s confrontation with something uncontrollable and incomprehensible, although different theorists bring up different perspectives. That is a trend which no longer insists on the exploration of language itself but probes into the relation between man and language like Heidegger, Blanchot and Levinas. They mean to depict such an acute experience that man has to confront in everyday life. However,

different from Heidegger who still persists in the reference of truth in language and Blanchot who views language as a neutral zone where man is almost dissolved, Levinas takes the saying in language as the ethical Other who could not be reduced or totalized in any presupposed ideas or conceptions. Such an ethical relation with language could be demonstrated by Levinas's notions of sensibility, face, and diachrony which respectively stand for a relation built on empirical life instead of transcendental or metaphysical thinking, a confrontation without reciprocity but with a demand for responsibility, and an irreducible and unthematizable otherness. Pivoted on language as the ethical Other, Levinas would do much help in shedding light on Don DeLillo's observation and meditation on language which similarly starts with the sensible reading of the wor(l)d and is *embodied* in everyday life. Language is more than the words, the sounds, and even the silences but the absolute alterity in reality.