**“The Way to Language” by Martin Heidegger**

“The Way to Language” was Heidegger’s contribution to a lecture series titled “Language” and sponsored jointly by the Bavarian and Berlin art academies in 1959. In it, he explicates the way in which language is central to his philosophy. Language almost comes to take on the importance of Being itself in that it is revealed as a showing, the essence of which is the *saying*, which allows things to appear for us. This “way-making” nature of thy saying, Heidegger calls *propriation*.

The Rift-Design

Right at the beginning, Heidegger asks whether we even need a way to language. Are we not already *in* language? Yes we are, but are we “within language in such a way that we experience its essence”? At this point, Heidegger formulates the aim of his talk as being to “*bring language as language to language.*” What exactly this means will be revealed as we progress.

Beings are experienced as what comes to presence. This reflects Heidegger’s phenomenological pedigree. As far as language *is*, language is then a being which comes to presence, or *shows itself*. How does it show itself? As speech. Speech in turn, refers to speakers who, through that speech, have their own presencing. This presencing is to that which matters to them (the thing about which they are speaking) and also to their fellow human beings. The spoken also depends on that which is unspoken – that which is “denied speech.”

Here Heidegger creates a new word which he wants to stand for the “unity in the essence of language that we are seeking”, the *rift-design*. The rift-design is “the totality of traits in the… essence of language, the well-joined structure of a showing in which what is addressed enjoins the speakers and their speech, enjoins the spoken and its unspoken.”

Saying and Propriation

However, speech and what is spoken show themselves as “the sort of thing through which and in which something comes to language, that is to say, comes to the fore *whenever something is said*.” And what is this? The *saying*. Heidegger distinguishes between saying and speaking. One can speak a lot but say nothing and say much while remaining silent. So what is saying? Saying, as a speaking to one another, is a “mutual showing of something”. It is, in fact, the essence of language.

Now, the saying, as a showing, is not attributable “either exclusively or definitively to human doing” – rather, like all showing which is a “coming to presence or withdrawal to absence”, it is a *self-showing*. This means that all saying is always “preceded by a thing’s letting itself be shown.” This in turn means that speech is not just hearing, but is a hearing *in advance*. Heidegger is claiming here that all speaking is predicated on first having already listened to language. So, does language speak? Remembering that all speaking is saying, and all saying is showing, language does indeed speak by “pointing, reaching out to every region of presencing, letting what is present in each case appear in such regions or vanish from them.”

What Heidegger is getting at here is that it is only through language that things appear in the fullness of what they are. Language opens the path to an encounter with the things around us. Without language we would be no more than beasts. In this, we typically have language around the wrong way. Language is usually thought of as a mere symbol standing in for the things themselves, the “supplementary linguistic expression of what shines forth”, but actually it is that by which the things reveal themselves to us, “all shining and fading depend on the saying that shows.”

How does saying arise? Heidegger coins another term to describe this process, *propriation*. In Heidegger’s words; “Propriating dispenses the open space of the clearing into which what is present can enter for a while, and from which what is withdrawing into absence can depart, retaining something of itself while all the while in withdrawal.” It “gathers the rift-design of the saying and unfolds it in such a way that it becomes the well-joined structure of a manifold showing.” It is therefore tempting to conclude that propriation is Being but Heidegger wants to resist this. Propriation’s relation to Being is rather that “Being lets itself be thought… from out of propriation.”

What about the “way” in Heidegger’s opening question? The way to language unfolds essentially in language as saying via propriating. Indeed, propriating *is* the way; but that’s not all, propriating also *clears* a way. To clear a way isn’t just to go from place to place, rather it is to create or render the way, in essence, *being* the way; “propriation is thus the saying’s way-making movement toward language.” And here we have the formula stated at the beginning of the lecture explained; “Such way-making brings language (the essence of language) as language (the saying) to language (to the resounding word).”

What is particularly interesting about propriating is that it isn’t human beings who propriate. Rather, Heidegger sees propriating working through humans; “Propriation propriates human beings for itself, propriates them into usage.” The way-making movement of the saying (propriation) is that which first opens up the path allowing us to follow the path (way) to language. This is an interesting feature which Heidegger has mentioned before; the idea that language is the master of human beings, not the other way round.

At the end of this lecture we see the central role accorded to language in Heidegger’s philosophy. “Language is the house of Being because, as the saying, it is propriation’s mode.” Propriation can only propriate as language (that is, saying) and since it is only through language that *any*thing (including Being) can show itself to us, Being is in a very real sense housed in language.

A Note on Enframing and Propriating

Enframing (the essence of technology which sets upon human beings challenging them to order everything that comes to presence as standing-reserve), because it is a showing which reveals itself through language, is also a kind of propriation; however, at the same time, it also distorts propriation because it forces language into a calculative form. “Speech, when posed in this fashion, becomes information.” Enframing creates for itself a formalised language which moulds the human being into a “technical-calculative creature”.