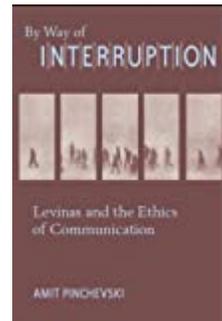




**Amit Pinchevski.** *By Way of Interruption: Levinas and the Ethics of Communication.* Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005. x + 294 pp. \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8207-0376-3.



**Reviewed by** Teresa Henning (Department of English, Southwest Minnesota State University)

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## **Interruption, Dislocation, and Translation: Amit Pinchevski's Ethics of Communication**

Consider these stories of communication offered by Amit Pinchevski:

A human future (as described in William Harben's "In the Year Ten Thousand" [1892]) that contains no books and no speech, for humans have discovered a way to communicate mind-to-mind. This discovery of "perfect" communication allows humans to "elevate" their society and rid it of evil, wrongdoing and suffering (pp. 1-2).

A human past (as described in the Old Testament) where people all share the same language and the same dream, the same hubris, "to transcend themselves" by building a tower to reach to heaven (p. 103). As punishment, God "confused the language" (p. 103).

These stories allow the reader engaging points of entry into Pinchevski's *By Way of Interruption*. The first story opens Pinchevski's introduction and leads to a compelling gloss of the ways contemporary culture possesses a naive faith in "perfecting the work of communication [will] ultimately lead to the creation of a utopian society" (p. 2). In deconstructing the biases that support this position, Pinchevski demonstrates the desire for "trans-

parent communication," where a speaker's meaning is reproduced in the mind of the hearer, relies on a teleos that seeks to "modify the behavior of others" and "improve or even transform the world" (pp. 62-63). This teleos belongs to the speaker (i.e., a subject invested with power and autonomy) and is imposed upon a hearer (i.e., a passive receiver or "Other" that the speaker inscribes meaning upon). This teleos also includes within it communication's demise, Pinchevski believes, since "perfect" communication in this positivistic sense would in fact be no communication at all. Once meaning is transparent, there is no need to speak or write.

Pinchevski attempts to relieve this positivist understanding of communication of "teleos and power" by interrupting it with "ambiguity and otherness" (p. 65), arguing that communication has the best chance of working ethically when "there is the risk of misunderstanding, lack, and refusal of communication" (p. 7). Pinchevski develops possibilities of interruption, ambiguity, otherness, and dislocation by focusing on the work of post-modern theorist Emmanuel Levinas. Drawing on Levinas's distinction between the "Said" (i.e., the correlation

among the Signifier, Signified and Referent) and the “Saying” (i.e., “communication not reducible to the process of transmitting messages” (p. 84), Pinchevski advocates privileging the Saying over the Said as a way of advantaging relations with the “Other” and dislocating positivistic understandings of communication.

In order to privilege Saying over the Said, Pinchevski also adopts Levinas’s definition of communication as contact which comprises a variety of sensory experiences including touch and language. By emphasizing communication as contact, Pinchevski is able to reveal the ways communication is a destabilizing experience for the self because of the ways communication includes “nonideal” contact with the Other (p. 95). When the self comes into contact with the Other, the face-to-face proximity of the experience interrupts the self’s identification (p. 96). By focusing on relations to and with the Other as the foundation for ethical communication, Pinchevski demonstrates the ways that “language as a way of communication upholds the tension between what is addressed and the act of addressing” (p. 95). Such communication requires one to be open to risk, uncertainty, and interruption, and it requires one to respond to and be responded to by others, according to Pinchevski.

The author also explores other possibilities for dislocation of the subject thereby achieving more ethical communication by considering how the act of translation might “stretch communication to its limit” to include breakdowns in communication that allow communication to become an ethical event (p. 67). Pinchevski begins this argument by calling the reader’s attention to the story of Babel. For those who understand and define communication in a positivist manner, the story of Babel offers humans a problem to be overcome—the lack of a shared language. This problem has been so compelling to some that as Pinchevski points out two, if not more, scholarly projects have focused on developing a shared language (e.g., Esperanto and Basic English).

For Pinchevski, Babel does not present a problem that requires solving. Rather, Pinchevski approaches Babel from the standpoint of translation, therefore suggesting a way to develop a more ethical manner of communicating that allows for “response-ability” with respect to the Other (p. 74). Further, the story of Babel reveals that “linguistic multiplicity ... is immanent not only between languages but also within each language” (p. 104). According to the author, acknowledging this multiplicity and its source allows for a theory of alterity that goes beyond a grudging respect for difference.

Pinchevski explicates the connection between translation and alterity by referring to the work of German translators Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig. Drawing on Benjamin, Pinchevski notes that languages have a “unique kinship” in that they all “share the intention to express” (p. 132). However, Pinchevski is careful to point out in citing Benjamin that kinship is not the same as likeness and that translation does not “constitute a meltdown of languages” into a single common language (p. 132). Rather, the act of translating one language into another and exploring the kinship of intention “implies involvement with a foreign element, with otherness, which in itself remains elusive” (p. 133). As Pinchevski uses the work of Rosenzweig to demonstrate, the act of translation also creates an “important ethical commitment” for the translator who “allows the foreign voice to express itself in its own tone, tenor and accent” (p. 136), but does not “assign himself or herself to the task of enunciating something in the place of the original” (p. 136).

The act of translation as described and theorized by Benjamin and Rosenzweig is valorized by Pinchevski because it suggests the possibility for an ethical relation with the Other which he defines as “a nonassimilatory relation consisting of exposure to the Other, in proximity, in a nonunifying affinity” (p. 149). For Pinchevski, an ethics of communication hinges upon the tenet that otherness is inherent in every act of communication. Pinchevski believes that by focusing on “borderline incidents at the frontier of linguistic capabilities” he can expose ethical possibilities for creating nonassimilatory relations with the Other (p. 148).

Pinchevski next focuses on two specific borderlines as a means of further developing ethical possibilities—autism and silence. In his chapter on autism, Pinchevski explicates a significant and troubling assumption found in scientific, medical, and psychological discourse that normalcy and sociability are inherent functions of the ability to communicate with others. Pinchevski wonders if such an “indefatigable insistence on proactive communication [is] not hostile in itself” (p. 169). To more carefully expose how an insistence on proactive communication is ethically limiting, Pinchevski turns to the character Bartleby in Herman Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener” (1853). When asked questions, this character politely states that he “prefers not to answer” (p. 174). While Bartleby’s response is maddening to the protagonist, his response is always polite and fails to demonstrate a lack of normalcy or sociability that is associated with medical/scientific/psychological portrayals of the incom-

municative. For Pinchevski, *Bartleby* reveals the need for a theory of communication to allow for the possibility that “communicability and incommunicability are not mutually exclusive” (p. 186).

Shifting the discussion to the concept of silence, Pinchevski expresses his concern that the liberal humanistic rationale supporting claims for “freedom of speech” also relies on an ethically problematic and theoretically naive conception of communication. As Pinchevski demonstrates, rationales offered in support of the right for individual expression not only rely on a concept of the subject as autonomous, unitary, and inviolable, but they are also exclusive and privilege the subject over others (the Other). As a remedy for this liberal but “self-serving” freedom of speech, Pinchevski argues for developing a definition of communication that is responsive and responsible (p. 236). To that end, Pinchevski argues for a definition of communication that privileges silence, listening, and “acquiring sensitivity to the ‘unexpressible’ ” (p. 236).

Pinchevski concludes by helping the reader envision what a theory of communication based on interruption and dislocation will involve. He urges that such an approach cannot be properly methodological and only gesture toward possibilities (p. 242). As a closing gesture towards these possibilities, Pinchevski argues for a theory of communication that is responsive, responsible and is open to the possibilities offered by interruptions and incommunication. To this end, Pinchevski urges that communication be understood “as crossing the border of the common and uncommon, inner and outer, self and Other” and thereby go beyond conceiving of communication as “a common place for secure interaction” (p. 249).

For anyone modestly familiar with postmodern theory, Pinchevski’s book makes for a compelling read. The author contextualizes his critique of a positivist understanding of communication with cultural references as well as stories and metaphors. The use of these devices makes Pinchevski’s book approachable even for novices to postmodern theory. For instance, to help the reader understand that language includes something other than or beyond the Said (i.e., signification), Pinchevski makes reference to the Jewish custom of teaching young children letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The letters are first dipped in honey and then licked by the child so the child will associate “the letters of the Torah with sweetness” (p. 92). Pinchevski uses this analogy to emphasize that language is a means for making contact before it is a way of making meaning—a contact as tactical and intimate as a

child’s first contact with the Hebrew alphabet. Similarly poignant analogies make Pinchevski’s text one that any teacher of writing, speech, or language/communication arts would find compelling.

In his conclusion, Pinchevski expresses the concern that his explication not fall prey to simplifying the arguments of Levinas in such a way that they become formalized and thematized (p. 242). In fact, the author avoids this trap adroitly, especially in earlier chapters, by giving multiple explanations or translations of the key figures he discusses. These chapters also resist providing clear, reducible conclusions or encapsulations of postmodern theory, thereby preserving both the ambiguity and non-hierarchical preferences of the works the author cites.

Another key strength of Pinchevski’s work is that his critiques of both the utopian impulse surrounding theories of communication and the liberal valorization of free speech seem especially apt not just for face-to-face interpersonal communication (which seems to be Pinchevski’s focus) but also for web-based (e.g., Youtube, Facebook, Myspace, blogs, email, spam, chat rooms, etc.) and mass media forms of communications. For instance, Pinchevski’s focus on proximity, contact, and intimacy present interesting possibilities regarding the strange mix of utopian impulses, intimacy, and rebellious disregard for others found on in a variety of digital rhetorics. Would these attempts at communication simply be classified as yet another example of a love for the freedom of speech? Or are they something more? Who is Other and subject in these attempts at communication?[1] These questions extend Pinchevski’s work in important ways and, in turn, complement the already compelling read.

Now, some might argue that Pinchevski’s critiques of positivism and liberal humanism are nothing new. Certainly, Pinchevski himself places his critiques within a larger conversation of past critiques. While Pinchevski’s work is positioned within the context of such critiques, it is important to note, however, that his project goes far beyond these conversations.[2] His self-described purpose is to enlarge communication scholars’ definition of the term “communication” to account for the ethical possibilities suggested by aspects of communication—such as interruption, silence, and misunderstanding—often viewed as barriers to communication, and Pinchevski is highly successful in achieving this radical purpose.

Nevertheless, while the radical insight Pinchevski achieves by focusing his ethics on the ways disruptions in communication allow for a nonassimilatory relationship with the Other is admirable, Pinchevski’s chapter

on autism seems unsupportive of this point. Sources Pinchevski uses to represent the discourse of autism are dated, especially given his attempt to demonstrate the way medical and scientific discourse embraces an exaggerated and potentially violent positivistic understanding of communication. Pinchevski apparently does not see a need to discuss ways medical and scientific discourse on this topic has changed (or not) in the last two decades.

Despite interruptions and likely resistance in response to portions of Pinchevski's *By Way of Interruption*, the text is well written, compelling, and theoretically important. Readers not well versed in postmodern theory will find Pinchevski's work approachable and interesting yet theoretically challenging. Readers who feel inclined to disagree, resist, or interrupt Pinchevski's work will feel that they have room to do so and will benefit from the experience as it requires them to grapple with compelling questions associated with postmodern critiques of communication such as: What exactly does

it mean to be a subject? An Other? What constitutes an ethical response to the Other? How can one conceive of communication in a manner that allows for alterity and "response-ability" to the Other? What can a postmodern communication theory rooted in interruption and dislocation reveal about old and new forms of communication such as web-based and mass media forms of communication? These questions are important ones, and Pinchevski's answers to them are certainly worth considering.

#### Notes

[1]. See James Poniewozik, "Customer, Sell Thyself," *Time*, February 12, 2007, 68.

[2]. Here I am thinking of Stanley Fish's *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It's a Good Thing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), which Pinchevski does cite, as well as Richard Rorty's *Objectivism, Relativism, and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), which Pinchevski does not cite.

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