
In By Way of Interruption, Amit Pinchevski offers a radical rethinking of the very idea of communication. As he points out, traditional theories of communication have exhibited a bias toward one of four conceptual models: communication as influence, communication as control, communication as culture, and communication as critical discourse. According to Pinchevski, what these models have in common is a thorough disregard for the Other. Whatever insights they provide are ultimately predicated upon a blindness to alterity. This is not to suggest that such theories are without scholarly value. It is, however, to say that the various understandings of communication they offer are severely limited. Moreover, they have serious ethical implications, since a disregard for the Other ultimately constitutes a form of violence, however subtle and unapparent. Pinchevski seeks a way out of this dilemma by offering a theory of communication based not on the practical ideals of effective transmission, successful persuasion, or rational justification, but rather on the ethical notion of interruption.

The notion of interruption is based primarily on the work of French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, and secondarily on the work of literary critics Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida. According to Pinchevski, communication is always and forever incomplete and imperfect, and were we to actually have successful communication, there would be no further need to communicate. We know from practical experience, however, that we are in constant need of communication. It follows, therefore, that the practical ideals that have hitherto governed our attitudes toward communication are not just elusive, but detrimental to communication itself.

Rather, what we need to keep communication going is an appreciation of the differences between us. Understanding begins not when we have achieved a perfect unity of minds, but rather when our orientation toward seamlessness and harmony is interrupted by the unassimilable voice of the Other. Here, Pinchevski incorporates Levinas’ crucial distinction between the Said and the Saying. The Said can best be understood as the formal, logical dimension of communication. By demarcating the boundaries of meaningful discourse, it necessarily includes and excludes. The Saying, however, is the pre-rational dimension of communication that frequently gets excluded by the regulatory regime of the former. Pinchevski insists that the hegemony of the Said must be effectively questioned and dislocated so that the voice of alterity, that which resides within the realm of the Saying, might be permitted to thrive.

To illustrate his argument, Pinchevski first explores the modern obsession with universal languages, the most famous of which have thus far been Esperanto and Basic English. His historical scholarship here is impressive. It reveals quite starkly the naïve conviction, still prevalent today, that greater understanding and improved communication between people of different cultures will somehow lead to peace and harmony. Pinchevski draws from the literary critic Tzvetan Todorov’s Conquest of America: The Question of the Other (1984) to demonstrate the poverty in this line of thinking. In fact, greater understanding may only be a means for more effective domination, as was the case with Hernándo Cortés and his merciless colonial takeover of the Aztecs. Had the two parties communicated through the supposedly neutral languages of Esperanto or Basic English, it is highly doubtful that they would have pursued a peaceful form of interaction.

Pinchevski further illustrates his main argument by considering the case of autistic individuals. Autistic individuals characteristically prefer isolation within a predictable,
unchanging environment. They construct an inner, private world into which they retreat and from which they seek comfort and nourishment. Their distrust of the “real” world reinforces their dependency upon their inner experiences and consequently contributes to their unwillingness to communicate on public terms. Pinchevski’s analysis reveals a solid grasp of recent research on autism. However, he goes further and provocatively challenges the conclusions of that research, arguing that the attempt to contain and classify autism as a disorder is merely symptomatic of an authoritarian system of knowledge. Such systems depend upon the binary categories of normal and abnormal, relegating to the latter all that which does not readily fit into the rigid scheme of the former. Rather than regard autistic individuals as incapable of communicating, Pinchevski insists that we have an ethical responsibility toward such individuals as Others, a responsibility that entails a radical openness. Herein lies the ethical core of Levinas’ philosophy of communication.

What kind of practical ethical implications follow from this view? Pinchevski goes straight to the heart of modern liberal politics, arguing that the preoccupation with the individual and with rational justification of political claims fosters an arena of dialogue from which the voice of the Other is excluded. Without suggesting that democracy, liberalism, and rational debate ought to be subverted altogether, Pinchevski offers an immanent critique of these ideals aimed at drawing our attention to the perpetual exclusion of the voice of the Other. Our ethical task ought to be to subject existing democratic institutions to ongoing systematic critique, identifying excluded voices and, when necessary, witnessing on their behalf.  

*By Way of Interruption* is a work that clearly belongs in the Continental tradition, especially given Pinchevski’s reliance upon Levinas, Blanchot, Derrida, Todorov, and Lyotard. This reliance, however, seems to beg the question of how he might have treated such concepts as truth, incommensurability, and, indeed, communication itself, had he engaged with recent Anglo-American philosophy of language. One wonders, for instance, whether a consideration of the work of Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam, and Robert Brandom might have forced a rethinking of his negative critique of the ideals of truth and rational justification. In keeping with the Continental tradition, however, Pinchevski’s book avoids the sort of excessive abstraction typical of Anglo-American philosophy and is admirably tied to very real social and political concerns. It is, after all, first and foremost a work of ethics, one with obvious practical implications. Its style is clear and lively, and cheerfully free of overbearing technical jargon. It is a highly intelligent contribution to the philosophy of communication, an area that deserves greater attention in Canadian communication studies. Those who greatly admire the work of John Durham Peters will likely regard *By Way of Interruption* with similar admiration. It is therefore a warmly recommended book.

Jason Hannan
Carleton University