

# COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

Bodies, Therapies, Senses

Ruth Barcan

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## Case Study: Psychophonetics

Psychophonetics is the name of a mode of embodied psychotherapy developed in Australia in the late 1980s by a psychotherapist named Yehuda Tagar, now based in Cape Town. Originally known as Philophonetics ('love of sound'), and based on Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy and Psychosophy, Psychophonetics combines elements of counselling, coaching and personal development, with applications for healing. Anthroposophy is Rudolf Steiner's humanistic elaboration of Theosophy. As such, its fundamental anatomy is a version of the subtle anatomy schema described in earlier chapters. According to Tagar, 'Steiner's unique contribution to psychology' is the claim that memories are stored in what Theosophists call the life body (also known as the etheric body, or the *chi* body) in the form of sound vibrations. Hence sound work is a major tool of this technique, although it is embedded in a wider context of non-verbal modes, such as visualization, gesturing and body awareness, as well as in a broader cognitive context. (Psychophonetics sessions proceed only after a great deal of preliminary negotiation between client and therapist.)

My own encounter with Psychophonetics occurred over a decade ago, when I did a one-off workshop with Tagar. When I came to consider forms of sound healing for this book, my recollection of this workshop was dim yet compelling. All I could remember of the theory underpinning it was that sounds resonate meaningfully in the child's body well before they are cognitively patterned via language. What I *could* recall was a man with a powerful and precise voice alternately bathing, spraying, assaulting and caressing participants with speech sounds. I could remember little of his person. (In fact, I mis-remembered him as a giant, Dickensian character with a stentorian voice, when actually he is fairly short, with a soft speaking voice.) What I remembered most vividly (and accurately, as it turned out) were explosions like B! B! B!; murmurings of MMMM; the sound 's' whispered then hissed; strange but vivid combinations of sounds (KTCH! BRRNG! XXT!). When I interviewed Tagar in 2007 and heard those sounds again, it was as if my body itself remembered them. According to one of Tagar's colleagues, Robin Steele, it had: 'you carried whatever the meaning of the experience was from 1993'.

Tagar claims that there is little academic literature on the connection, both theoretical and applied, between the sounds of speech and psychotherapy. There is, he claims, a gap between the psychological disciplines and those of phonology, phonetics and linguistics. This might seem odd given that Freudian psychoanalysis — 'the talking cure' — was based on talking and listening. It is true that Freud considered the voice to give clues about the patient's unconscious and he described the specialized arts of listening necessary to the psychoanalytical method.<sup>20</sup> The patient's voice was certainly attended to as a *voice* — stuttering, pausing, coughing and so on were carefully noted — but since psychoanalysis was ultimately a quest to uncover meaning, and the analyst not just an interlocutor but finally a translator and analyst of the patient's symptoms, in the final instance such vocal signs pointed elsewhere. They were important clues to be deciphered — signs of a drama elsewhere. The materiality of the voice is left behind once it has done its job and pointed to the meanings hidden below or inside the speech.

This is, after all, what we ordinarily expect language to do for us. The human voice is distinguished from the cacophony of sounds and noises that constitute everyday existence by an *expectation* of meaning:

What singles out the voice against the vast ocean of sounds and noises, what defines the voice as special among the infinite array of acoustic phenomena, is its inner relationship with meaning. The voice is something

which points towards meaning, it is as if there is an arrow in it which raises the expectation of meaning, the voice is an opening toward meaning. (Dolar 2006: 14, original punctuation)

For Mladen Dolar, this understanding of the voice construes it as a mere tool. In this commonsensical understanding, the material voice is a vehicle, an instrument, of meaning; it does not contribute to meaning so much as enabling it. It is, indeed, 'that which cannot be said' (15). According to Dolar, the question of the materiality of speech trapped both traditional phonetics and post-Saussurian linguistics. Phonetics, he claims, became inextricably mired in the physical and physiological properties of the sounds of language (17); but the Saussurian solution, a search for the 'fleshless and boneless entity' (17) it called the phoneme led it back into 'a certain theology of the voice' in which the voice precedes and is subsumed by the Word. In the Saussurian model of signification, the signifier is essentially arbitrary, important only as a means of distinguishing one word from another ('bat' is not 'cat' only by historical linguistic convention, as we Cultural Studies academics famously tell our first-year students).<sup>21</sup> Phonemes are defined negatively in what is, for Dolar, ultimately a 'theological' conception of language, in which the voice is a mere carrier for meaning. Dolar's wonderful book is an attempt to work backwards, as it were, from word to voice.

In its own, very different, way, Tagar's Psychophonetics is also about the materiality of the voice and the refusal or deferral of interpretation. Psychophonetics is 'not interpretive; it's not instructive; it's not didactic; it's not analytical', says Tagar. Psychophonetics draws on an understanding of sounds and words as *events*, a conception which, according to Walter Ong, typifies oral-aural cultures, for whom 'A word is a real happening, indeed a happening par excellence' (1967: 111). While, as I noted at the outset of this chapter, some contemporary thinkers shy away from (or indeed critique outright) this way of characterizing societies, Ong's description of the word as an event is an apt conceptual frame through which to approach Tagar's therapeutic practice, pointing, as it does, to the relative lack of interest in interpretation in Psychophonetics, in stark contra-distinction to the psychoanalytical tradition. For perhaps the most distinctive feature of Psychophonetics is that it uses the sound of human speech as a significant, meaningful materiality in its own right rather than as a vehicle for cognitive or narrative meaning. Psychophonetics aims not to discover an inner truth about the client — to search for meanings — but to transform the client:

We 'meaningfy' experiences. We don't fix, we don't cure, we meaningfy. The core of healing for us is that a new meaning is given to old experience. It's not just cognitive stuff. It's experiential. But we regard meaning not as an intellectual construct. Meaning is deeply experiential. Even when it is cognitive it is experiential. You cannot give meaning. It has to be created individually.

The subtle body schema, with its focus on the interrelations between and inter-effects of different bodies — implies that there are many potential starting points for therapeutic intervention. For example, a therapy might intervene on the plane of emotions and produce effects on both body and mind. Another might intervene on the plane of cognition, and through that gradually have an impact on the body. Or it might intervene in the body and have effects on the mind. There is a theoretical reciprocity — for example, breathing affects thoughts and controlling thoughts via meditation affects breathing — but in practice different individuals often respond to some starting points more than others.

Psychophonetics's particularity is that it intervenes on the plane of physical vibrations. Words and speech sounds are used for their sound rather than their meaning — or rather, their meaning lies in how they resonate in the body. In this schema the body is not merely a vehicle for the expression of sound; it is *made* of sound. To be more specific, in the Anthroposophical framework in which Psychophonetics is conceived, *one* of the four human

bodies — the life body or etheric body — is made of sound. In Anthroposophy, there are four bodies, of which the life or etheric body is one. The life body is a body of vibrations, and is comparable to *chi*, *prana* or morphogenetic field energy in other subtle systems.<sup>22</sup> As in all subtle anatomy, this body is understood as real and tangible, but invisible to normal sight. All living things, humans, animals and plants have such a body, which is 'the organizational principle of the physical body and the basis of our existence'. That body, known variously as the life body, the *chi* body, or the *pranic* body, is understood to be made of sounds:

The way the psyche lives in the body is organized in sounds. The way our biography is stored in us is organized in sounds. The way our learning lives in us is organized in sounds. In the way that memory in a computer is organized in a digital system which is encoded in some way that can be scanned. In the same way, our memory is stored in sound vibrations.

The meanings embodied in sound are primal, bodily, and beyond the reach of conscious access. But in the process of everyday life we continually make older experiences resonate. When we encounter sounds heard in a meaningful way in earlier times, they chime in the body. The entire body (physical, sensory and energetic) is thus conceived of as a 'centre of communication, a reflector and a resonance chamber for experience'.

I have already remarked that the metaphor of the body as a centre of communication surfaces in a range of alternative therapies; it is, after all, a metaphor that makes cultural sense in the age of the internet. Another of Tagar's metaphors is that of the computer, used to describe the workings of memory. But whereas the metaphor of the brain as a kind of hard disk is commonplace, Tagar, in keeping with many in alternative medicine, decentralizes the brain in favour of the body as multiple, and he sees memory as dispersed, both spatially and temporally. All memory is stored in the life body, not the brain, he claims. The brain is not a storage device but a transmitter:

The brain *is* a scanning mechanism to a certain extent, and it *is* a communication between embedding and restoring. You know, *memorizing* or *remembering*. This mechanism needs a system, sure. But it's a transmitter — it's not where it is stored.

The connection between random memory and deep memory is much more fluid and continuous than that on a computer, where archived memories are either 'up' (on-screen) or 'down' (on the hard disk). It is, to use Tagar's term, 'alluvial', since all memories vibrate in the life body all the time and are, in that sense, never really fully 'in storage' and are able to be triggered accidentally, mundanely, or subconsciously.

I said earlier that sound, especially music, is widely believed to take you back in time, often to infancy. While this is the case in Psychophonetics, the movement back is not a regression, or a recovery, for in the subtle body schema the past is never, in fact, past. All experience is still present in the body; body-time is not linear but simultaneous: experience 'is simultaneous in the body. It happens all the time; it's not like happened in the past'. All memories vibrate in the life body all the time. Psychophonetics is thus not about searching for the lost object, so much as searching for frequencies that resonate in ways that might transform you in a liberating way:

We don't deal with the past; we deal with patterns in operation. They may have been formed in the past, but we don't dwell on the past; we just look at the forms.

It is also less focused on cognition and narrative than other forms of psychotherapy, and hence relatively immune to the contentious problems of truth and falsity that plague debates about memory.

If memory is stored in sound, then with sound we can access memory. Tagar estimates that there are around two hundred basic sounds in human languages, which can then be combined in an infinite variety of ways, and intoned in different manners:

It's beyond count. If we had to write our sound possibilities in a materia medica, it would break a database. So we don't even try. We rather train the intuition. I'm travelling around with my medicine cupboard; if this were homeopathic, I would need a whole train. But I don't need a train because I make it on the spot and test it on the spot.

Psychophonetics counsellors thus have thousands of sound combinations at their disposal, and they use them as medicines in a quite literal sense, with the therapist 'prescribing' a dose of a particular sound at the end of a psychotherapeutic process in which the client has already gestured, visualized and sensed the issue that they are working with. Tagar elaborated this with a metaphor from naturopathy:

There is sound hidden there — they just don't *know* that their body is desperately trying to do 'D!'. So the 'D!' is not an imposed form — it's like saying you need more haemoglobin, you need more liquids, you need more iron.

On reflection, though, he decided it was more like homeopathy than naturopathy, since the 'remedy' being 'prescribed' is vibrational: 'If you were a homeopath you would prescribe some form of remedy. If you are an aromatherapist you would prescribe some oil. So we prescribe "hmmmm"'. It takes precise sounds to access precise memories:

Compare doing 'BRRRR! D!' with 'D! D! D!' [If a client's body needs 'D'] they prefer the sound because it just does it better. It's like doing a job with bare hands and doing a job with proper tools. You can dig the ground with your fingers, but, you know, take a spade! So we give them the right tools to do the job.

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## CONCLUSION

Sound, in this esoteric conception, is a tool, like a spade. But this tool is not just a pathway to meaning. It does not just represent or signify; it *does* physical things. What it does, what it is and what it means cannot be completely separated. Moreover, sound is the fundamental stuff of which everything is made: the stuff of the body and the stuff of the cosmos. Social, connective, penetrative, sound makes and re-makes bodies, and can be used to draw them together.