

Learning to Talk: Notes Towards the Very First Step

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Like several others who have been working in philosophy, and like a few painters and poets as well, I have been struck by the thought that what there is to see in a book, when you look at one of its pages is (nothing but) a great number of typographical shapes, arranged in horizontal lines with several horizontal clusters of printed letters along those lines, but otherwise with no detectable pattern to those arrangements. This did not strike me when I learnt to read, but some fifteen years later. Perhaps after I had read Berkeley on the proper objects of sight. The thought that all there is to see on a printed page is a collection of typographical shapes, or arrangements of printed letter, also struck me as dramatic. It seemed both unmistakably true and unmistakably false. True, because if you delete the typographical shapes from a printed page, there is nothing left to look at there, except the white sheet itself. And false, because I had read a great many books already and learnt from reading them, and how could looking at typographical shapes, or arrangements of them, teach you anything about China, of Madagascar, or about Nils Holgersson's wonderful journey through Sweden? And how could looking at the proper objects of sight spread across the pages of my own exemplar of Berkeley's *Three Dialogues* teach me anything about his thoughts about the objects proper to sight?

I then remembered, if that is the word, that I learnt to read and to write after I had first learnt to speak, and that much of what I then learnt was matching printed letters to spoken sounds of the sort we call vowels and consonants. The fog lifted, and I saw that the printed words or sentences came alive because the spoken words or sentences were already alive.

I don't remember how long I was satisfied with that answer. But one day it struck me that the question I had been asking about the printed letters could be asked with even greater force about the spoken sounds. For all we do when we speak, is to produce sounds with what is called our speech organ. I had by then had a course in phonetics, so I had a fair idea about how each of the different sounds of my own language was produced. But there was no mention, in that course, of how making those sounds could be doing

anything above and beyond making those sounds. And how could making certain sounds, facing a friend, make him do something he would not have done had I not made those sounds? How could he, upon hearing the sounds I made, and seeing me looking at the sea, come to know that I needed him to fetch me an almanac and where to find one? For there was nothing else for him to hear than the very sounds I made. So I was back to Berkeley again, this time to his thoughts about the proper objects of hearing.

In a study published some twenty years ago, Elizabeth Anscombe refers to what she, preliminarily, calls Wittgenstein's Theory. The title of that study is *Wittgenstein's Theory?* It is printed in a collection of studies, *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, edited by Irving Block, Blackwell 1981. She presents the putative theory with a quotation from *Philosophical Investigations* (261): 'A sound is an expression only in a particular language game.'

And she writes:

This will be a basic statement of a theory of language only if we regard the task of 'describing the language-game' as one whose point is to show how noises are significant speech. The idea has quite a lot of attraction and it attracted me for a long time. I once thought that that was the main thing, or the most fundamental thing, that was going on in Wittgenstein. Now I believe that the idea of such an enterprise is one which quite quickly goes up in smoke.

That is the very enterprise I am at these days and these months, how sounds are turned into speech. And in my work on it, I shall be guided by (what I take to be) Wittgenstein's idea of a *language game* (that unhappy expression with its scent of pastime or not the real thing).

My idea now, and I have had it for some years, is that the infant, in learning to speak, travels the journey from sound to language. The sounds I am talking about now, are the sounds of his mother and father talking to him, or of his mother and father talking to one another. (It is an infant boy that I shall be talking about, and one reason has to do with the pronouns. With a girl, who would 'she' refer to, mother or daughter?) If I could follow the infant on that journey, even only on some stretches of it, that might give me an inkling of what makes the sounds of speech come alive as speech.

The question I now ask is, I think: What is it that we learn when we learn to speak?

I shall begin with the sounds that the infant may hear and what he may learn from hearing them.

I call the infant boy Nikolai, after one of my grandsons. In what I have to say, there will be one real life story about Nikolai and I shall let you know when we come to that. For the rest I only borrow his name, and the stories I tell will be a mixture of

my own experiences with one or another of my grandchildren together with some imaginations and speculations of my own. To simplify the story I shall, on the whole and grossly unfair to the real Nikolai's real father, leave the father out of the story. And the small farm in the background is rather like the small farm, with its large kitchen, where I myself grew up.

Nikolai's World of Sounds

What sounds are there for Nikolai to hear? The infant Nikolai lives with his mother and father on a small farm on the coast of a North Norwegian island. The sounds and activities at and around that place will be quite like those at and around a small farm close to the sea in Western Norway, or in the Outer Hebrides, the Orkney Islands, etc. And here are some of the sounds that belong to Nikolai's place:

- the waves beating against the beach
- the wind whistling around a corner of the house
- a gale howling between the various constructions of the farm (fences, poles, sheds, etc.)
- the bleating of sheep
- the weak bleating of a newborn lamb
- the barking of the dogs
- the clanking of lids and casseroles
- water boiling
- the splashing of tap water against the sink
- footsteps across the kitchen floor, up or down the stairs, etc.
- his own crying
- his mother and father talking to each other
- sweet words
- angry words
- laughter
- various cries of the different seagulls, the terns, the oyster catchers, the crows, the different twittering of tits, finches, etc.
- etc.

If the infant, Nikolai, is about twelve to sixteen weeks old, and if it is late spring or early summer, he may well have heard all of those sounds already, where 'those sounds' are those sounds as his parents, their neighbours, etc., identify them.

The people and the animals of this place live in a world that is also a world of sounds. Only occasionally is there no sound to be heard. About such a moment, and about August, I think, Hamsun wrote: 'He sat there between his two ears, listening to the silence.'

Each of the sounds hinted at above has a particular source, and most of them are identified by their sources, such as the weak bleating of a newborn lamb, footsteps across the kitchen floor, the infant crying from its cot, etc.

If footsteps across the kitchen floor, in this house, sound different from footsteps across the floor of the best room, and likewise for the other rooms, it will take close familiarity with this house to identify the sound of footsteps across a wooden floor as footsteps across the kitchen floor, that is, to identify them as that by those sound alone. (Imagine it to be a warm and quiet summer day, with all the windows open, and you standing outside with your back to the house wall, looking at the reflections on the sea, or at some other, equally quiet object in that direction. Thus placed you have only the sounds themselves to go by.) And you have to be a sheep farmer yourself, or someone equally familiar with the life of sheep, to have earned the right to identify a sound as ‘the weak bleating of a newborn lamb’, that is, to be able to hear from the bleating alone that it is the bleating of a newborn lamb, and so that a lamb has just been born. (If all is well, the weak bleating of the newborn lamb will be followed by a louder and more rumbling bleating of its mother, greeting its newborn before it begins to lick it.)

If Nikolai, twelve to sixteen weeks old, has heard all or most of the sounds listed above, he will be able to identify only a few of them by their sources. And for each of the sounds whose source he does not know, we can be fairly sure that what he hears, when he hears that sound, is a Berkeleyan sound, similar to and different from other Berkeleyan sounds, but with no perceived connection to anything not a sound.

The Sound of Tap Water Hitting the Sink

But there are a few sounds that Nikolai is thoroughly familiar with, both with the sounds proper and with their sources or ways of production. One such sound is the particular sound of tap water splashing against the sink (particular to this particular tap and sink perhaps). When his mother changes his nappy, she does so on the kitchen bench where he is laid down on his back on a soft, folded towel close to the sink. Lying there in that position and a few times every day, he has come to know the routines of his mother’s attending to him, from her removing his wet nappy to her putting on the dry one.

One adult description of the routine would be: unfastening the wet nappy, holding his two ankles together in one grip, lifting his feet high enough to raise his bottom and lower back, drawing the wet nappy out from under him, folding the wet nappy and fastening the bundle with a knot, throwing the bundle into a bucket, turning on the tap water, regulating it to skin temperature, wetting a piece of soft cloth in the running water, turning off the tap water, washing his bottom and his lower back

(taking care to get into every fold), drying him with a soft towel (taking care to get into every fold), letting him lie naked in the air for a while (to complete the drying and to let him enjoy the greater freedom of movement for his thighs and his feet) and all the while talking to him and playing with him, then covering his bottom and lower back with a thin layer of zink salve (taking care to get into every fold), lifting his feet again to raise his bottom and lower back, moving the dry nappy into place under his bottom and lower back, fastening the dry nappy.

I do not know how Nikolai, at eight or twelve weeks, will segment his mother's activities. But my guess is that the interval where he lies with his bottom naked, free to kick his feet about and his mother playing with him, will stand out as a period of great satisfaction, and therefore as one, clear segment (its beginning announced when she approaches the end of drying him and its end announced when she reaches for the box of salve).

If his mother is looking at him talking to him for most of the sequence, I imagine that the bit (as perceived by him at twelve weeks or so) where *she turns away (from him) and then the splashing before she turns back (to him)* with a wet cloth in her hand (ready to wash him), that that bit will also stand out, perhaps experienced as novel, the first part of it perhaps slightly upsetting, at first.

I also imagine this bit to gain in structure as more of its components enter into his perception of it. So that a later step (four weeks later? six weeks?) may be written out like this: *She turns away (from him) towards the water tap, she (somehow) makes the water splash, wets the cloth in the splashing water and then (somehow) makes the splashing stop before she turns back (to him) with the wet cloth in her hand (ready to wash him).*

Compare Nikolai's two perceptions (as I have ventured to imagine them). In his first perception, he perceives his mother (only) as she relates to himself, as she acts with respect to himself: She turns away from him and, after a stretch of splashing sound, turns back to him again with a wet cloth in her hand to wash him. In his second perception, bits of her world other than himself have been brought in. She does not only turn away (from him), she turns away towards the tap (that (whatever) object, perhaps first noticed because she turned towards it), the plashing starts and stops because of something that she is doing (with the tap perhaps (her hand is on it)) and the wet cloth that she returns with (to wash him) is wet because she held it in the splashing water.

In his first perception he sees her (e.g.) turning back to him with the wet cloth, to wash him. There is perception of intention, that is, of acting, but no perception of causation. The splashing is just a stretch of sound in between her turning away from him and her turning back to him again. In his second perception the splashing is understood (seen?) to be brought about by something his mother does, that is, by acting. Though what she does to bring about the splashing is not seen. (Her (right) hand is on the tap and she moves

her (right) arm. Or something like that. Does her moving of her arm produce that splashing sound? From his place on the kitchen bench he can see the water, whether as running or as a column of water, but not the bottom of the sink.) He can see her taking a dry piece of cloth (how does he recognize it as being dry?) and hold it in the water for a short while (disturbing the shape of the water column while doing so). He understands that holding the cloth in the water is what makes it wet, and he understand that that is why she is holding it there, to make it wet. If so, there is perception both of intention, i.e. of acting, and of causation (of a non-classical sort). (To Nikolai there will, I guess, be nothing in common between making a piece of cloth wet by holding it in water and making the rattle rattle by hitting it. Or between either and disturbing the shape of the water column by holding one's hand in it. The scheme of *someone making something happen*, may yet be present in all three perceptions).

And with Nikolai's second perception, with his mother's doings at the tap brought in, the sound of tap water (hitting the sink) will also stand out with a simple soundshape to it. Between his mother turning on the tap water and her turning it off again, there will be the straight splashing of the tap water (hitting the sink directly), then the more scattered splashing of it when his mother has brought her hands with the towel into the running water, working the cloth there, and then back to the straight splashing again.

His Mother Caring for Him

The scheme underlying Nikolai's second perception is, in my understanding of it, the same as the scheme underlying his first perception: that of *his mother going about caring for him*.

The second half of his first perception, of his mother turning to him with a wet cloth in her hand (to wash him), rushes straight into that scheme. (Being washed by her is being caressed by her. It also makes the pain or the discomfort go away. And water of skin temperature is an old friend, not completely forgotten.) The first half of his first perception, her turning away from him, is more recalcitrant to that scheme. It rather strains it. What will relieve that strain, is his discovery that when she turns away from him, towards the tap, she does so to prepare for the washing. She turns away to bring about the splashing in order to wet the cloth. When he discovers that, his first perception fits fully into the scheme, that of his mother going about caring for him. And so does his second perception.

And so, when his mother's making the water splash comes alive within his own world, as her preparing to wash him, it will, I believe, alert him to what she is doing at the tap and also kindle his interest in how she goes about doing it, that is, making the water splash.

His mother will assist him in that quest. It is one of the several contingencies of Nikolai's life, that a few days after he has reached the second (level of) perception, she carries him to the kitchen bench to show him how she makes the water splash. (It is another contingency that she has not done so before, or perhaps too early for him to catch on. It is such contingencies that make for the criss-crossing of the several paths along which he travels while learning about the world of his mother and her doings in it, and so of his own world.) She holds him so that he will command a full view of the water tap and the sink, and of her operations on the tap. She places her right hand on the tap, takes a firm grip and turns her hand clockwise. Water rushes out of the tap and hits the bottom of the sink with a splash. Nikolai laughs with his eyes sparkling and his hands and feet kicking about. She then turns the tap anticlockwise. The splashing stops and there is no more water coming from the tap. Nikolai's laughing also stops, his hands and feet come to a rest and there is a grave look in his face.

His mother repeats her demonstration a couple of times, and each time he shifts from laughter to seriousness as the water shifts from splashing to disappearing. He reaches for the tap and his mother holds him so that he reaches it. But he doesn't as yet know how to make the water splash. He just holds his hand there making some ineffectual movements with it. From which his mother gathers, and she knows his strength, that he has not really seen how she did it. Only that she did it moving her hand while holding on to the tap.

But from that day on we may describe what Nikolai hears, when he hears the splashing of tap water against the sink, as 'the splashing of tap water against the sink'. Though it may take three or four years before he himself can describe what he then hears in those words.

The Sounds of Kitchen Work and the Sounds of His Parents Talking

When Nikolai has caught on to sounds having sources, or being produced in a certain way, such as the tap-tap of someone walking on the kitchen floor, or even the different tap-taps of his mother or his father walking on the kitchen floor, the splashing sound of tap water hitting the sink, the voices of people speaking, the bleating of sheep, etc., he still has a long way to go to hear the voicing of his father and mother as his father and mother talking together or saying things to each other. Hearing their voicings, he may look up and see them facing each other, perhaps also noticing that they are taking turns in their voicings. And without hearing any of the sounds they make as words, he may perhaps still hear their voicings as slow or rapid, and perhaps as glad, grave, etc., when he both hear their voicings and see their faces and their postures. But there is nothing in their voicings to connect them to

anything in the kitchen world as he knows it, at twelve weeks or at six months, or to anything in the farm world. It looks and sounds more like (what we would call) a ritual that his parents perform from time to time.

But the very striking sound of tap water hitting the sink, that sound does connect with what he has seen his mother doing, most of the days. It connects with both short and long sequences of her doings. With the longer sequences there will be different other sounds to reveal which of the longer sequences the sound of tap water-hitting-the-sink now belongs to. One of the short sequences he has witnessed every day and now knows by heart, at six months perhaps, is his mother turning on the tap water, washing her hands in it with a piece of soap, turning the water off again and then drying her hands with a towel. The only sound that belongs to this sequence is the particular scattered and uneven splashing that his mother produces by washing her hands in the running water. So that, when lying in his cot, perhaps looking at a fly crawling along its upper edge, when he hears that particular, scattered splashing sound, it tells him what his mother is now doing, though he does not see her doing it. And when that splashing stops, he knows that she has just turned the tap towards shut, and that what she will then do, is to dry her hands with the towel.

Then there is the longer sequence when his mother washes potatoes in the tap water (the splashing sound is different then, shifting between the scattered and uneven splashing and the strong and even splashing of the tapwater hitting the sink unhindered), then drops them into a casserole, one by one, holds the casserole under the running water for a little while, places the casserole on the stove with a short, hard sound, places the lid on the casserole with a short clank and turns on the plate with a short click. And then, for a while, there is nothing but silence coming from the stove, not until the water begins to boil, first with a deep and even murmur, and then with rapid cracklings until the lid begins its rapid jumpings with their rattling sound. Etc.

Again, Nikolai may be lying awake in his cot or sitting with his toys under the kitchen table, seeing nothing of what is going on but hearing it all.

If he also knows this longer sequence by heart and hears his mother washing the potatoes in the running tap water, that will be enough, at least in this household, for him to know what will happen next, all the way until she turns the plate off and draws the casserole aside, perhaps taking off the lid. The fairly regular shiftings between the scattered and uneven splashing (of his mother washing the potatoes in the running water) and the straight splashing (when she drops the potato into the casserole and reaches for another one), that fairly regular sequence belongs to one long sequence only in this household, in his lifetime (be it nine or twelve months).

And if there is some special treat for him somewhere within that sequence, say from his mother having placed the casserole on the plate and turned it on to the rattling of the lid, that might make him catch on to that

long sequence somewhat earlier than would his natural curiosity alone. The treat might be lifting him out of the cot or up from the floor to carry him around and sing for him, or to show him things, such as moving a silver spoon in the light to make it lighten up in flashes. And when the rattling of the lid begins, he might understand that as the lid telling them that now is the time for looking after the casserole again. (Whenever that lid begins to rattle, his mother will leave him for the casserole). And he understands why she puts him back into the cot again, or onto the floor. That is what I imagine might be the case, about the treat and about his understanding of the rattling lid.

Nikolai (six months old say) is lying awake in his cot, half listening to his mother at work at the kitchen bench. Then the sounds of work stop, there is the tap-tap of his mother walking somewhere, he hears a door being opened, it's the door from the kitchen to the hall, and then being closed again. And after that there is only silence coming from the door or the floor. And Nikolai knows that his mother has walked out of the kitchen, and that she is now in the hall or outside somewhere, perhaps in the shed looking after the sheep. – I imagine that Nikolai will take notice of the sounds of his mother leaving the kitchen, even if it causes him no anxiety, and that he will know that she will be gone for a little while. And that he will be waiting to hear that same door being opened and closed again and the tap-taps of his mother's steps on the kitchen floor.

Etc. Etc.

If we call the sounds of his mother, or his father, working in the kitchen 'the kitchen sounds', and the sounds of the workings or goings on outside as 'the farm sounds', the kitchen sounds and the farm sounds will come to tell him a great deal of what his mother or his father is doing that he does not see them doing, or about what they have been doing or are about to do, or about what else is going on outside or in the sheds, long before his mother's voice, or his father's, will tell him anything about what they are doing, or have been doing or are about to do, or about what else is going on.

And yet there is no sound closer to him than the sound of his mother's voice, or his father's – except perhaps the wilder voicings of his own crying. Even at nine or twelve months, when there is much more to learn about the world from listening to the kitchen sounds or the farm sounds than from listening to his mother's voice, or his father's, even then his mother's voice, and his father's, is closer to him than any kitchen sound or farm sound.

His mother's voice is close to him because she is. And of the kitchen sounds that he also attends to, I imagine that he attends to them mainly because of what they tell him about his mother, her whereabouts and her doings.

But long before the kitchen sounds have come to tell him much, there will be a shift in Nikolai's way of crying, at around eight weeks, when his up

to now somewhat wild crying is transformed into a soft, talk-like crying. Soundwise, in intonation, pitch, rhythm and articulation, it sounds so much like talking that it will be natural for his mother and father to hear it as a plea or a request. Not only as the plea or request that a mother will perhaps always hear in her baby's crying, be it soft or loud, but as Nikolai's intended plea or request.

In trying to understand that shift, we must first try to describe Nikolai's life with his mother, and her life with him, during those first eight weeks or so. But before I do that, I shall tell a real life story that may answer, or go some way to answer, a reasonable objection to the story I have told so far.

Nikolai Solves a Problem Way Ahead of His Words

The objection I am thinking of, goes somewhat like this: The Nikolai you have told us about has not as yet learnt to talk. Infants often learn to obey simple orders or requests before they say their own first word. Such as the infant's father saying, sitting on his heels, 'Come here', and the infant obeying by crawling towards its father, where it is received with a good hug. But Nikolai has not even come that far. And that considered, have you not given him too many and too clear concepts, too many and too clear thoughts, perceptions, understandings, etc., of what his mother is doing, of the uses of various implements, of what causes what, etc.?

And now for the story that, I think, serves as an objection to that objection. This time it is about the real Nikolai, our grandson. The real Nikolai is now four years old, and I believe he was 18 months when I watched him solve a very real and very practical problem.

Whereas I do not remember the exact number of his months, it may also have been 17 or 20, I do remember that he had just learnt to walk the stairs of his grandparents' house by holding on to the handrail. Only a few days earlier his technique had been to sit on his bottom and bump his way down, stair by stair, and to crawl or climb his way up. I believe he was still quite proud of being able to walk the stairs, with one hand on the handrail, just the way his grandparents walk the stairs.

The other thing I remember quite clearly and that belongs to this story, is the words he then mastered. He spoke some five, six or seven words, and I remember four of them clearly: 'mom' and 'dad', 'there' and 'bye-bye'. I don't remember if 'look' (at me) was one of the other two or three. When he said 'there' he would also point, asking us to look at what he pointed at, or to fetch it to him, or wanting us to accompany him to that place (the situation would, more often than not, tell us which request it was). He said 'bye-bye', waving, as did his parents, when leaving the house. He also said 'bye-bye', waving, to his toys when he was leaving them to do something else. And he said 'bye-bye', waving, when he wanted a situation to end. Nikolai had also been trained to obey a few commands, given to him in words that he did not himself as yet make use of. If his father was dressing him for outdoor activities, he might point to Nikolai's shoes, saying 'Fetch the shoes', or just 'the shoes', and Nikolai would fetch the shoes. Or his father would say 'the jacket' and Nikolai would fetch the jacket. And there were a few more words, all being used in the manner of Wittgenstein's builders, where his father was the builder and Nikolai his assistant. There were also the warning 'no' and the smiling 'yes'.

And that was about all. That was Nikolai's equipment of words when he met with the problem that I shall now describe.

Our house is a two-floor house. The living room, the kitchen, etc., are on the first floor, one flight of stairs up from the ground floor where there is a playing room with all sorts of toys etc. in it. We were in the living room, Nikolai with his day-to-day family and his grandparents, when Nikolai wanted to go to the playing room. He asked me to go with him, not in so many words but by pulling my trousers gently and pointing towards the stairs. It is the gentleness of that pulling that makes a message of it, 'Come with me'. (He was not trying to drag me along.) And his pointing told me whereto. So there is a syntax to it as well. He walked to the stairs and waited for me to join him and go first, exhibiting his good understanding of the task ahead. I walked the stairs slowly with one hand on the handrail and he walked behind me, with one hand on the handrail.

After about half a minute in the playing room, Nikolai set his eyes upon a plastic bowl filled with lumps of plasticine. The bowl, still in use, is 17 cm. in diameter and 7 cm. deep. It is made of hard plastic, with two opposite ears for handles. Nikolai walked towards the bowl, took hold of it and lifted it, supporting the ears from below by the palm of his hands, and walked to the hall. 'Do you want to play with that in the living room?' I asked, and he nodded. (So he understood the word 'living room' as well (though hardly 'living' or 'room'), if he didn't learn it there and then, perhaps together with the word 'play'. Or perhaps he simply understood the point of my remark, or what question I had occasion to ask, since we usually played with the playing room things in the playing room.) I followed him. A few steps, a few extoddler steps, from the stairs, he stopped, and stood there, looking at the stairs.

He had the looks of someone thinking hard. And, apropos 'a penny for your thought' and all that, it was not hard to tell what his thoughts were about. He had met with a genuine, practical problem. He needed both hands to carry that bowl up the stairs and he could not walk the stairs without one hand on the handrail. It took him five seconds or so to solve it. He walked the few steps to the bottom stair, stopped, bowed forward with his arms stretched out and placed the bowl on the second stair (the bottom stair but one). Remaining in that position, he turned his palms around the bowl's ears, from facing upwards, as they did when he carried the bowl, to facing downwards so that he could rest his palms on the bowl's ears. With his palms thus turned, he supported himself on the ears while stepping from the floor to the bottom stair.

Standing on the bottom stair, and remaining in that bowed position, he now turned his palms the other way, from facing downwards on the bowl's ears to give him support to facing upwards under the bowl's ears so as to enable him to lift the bowl and place it on the third stair (the bottom stair but two). And thus he worked his way up the 14 stairs, walking up the stairs with the bowl in his hands.

That was the technique Nikolai invented on the spot, switching between palms up, ready to lift the bowl, and palms down, ready to support himself on that same bowl. He could not carry the bowl upstairs without holding it between his two hands. And he could not walk the stairs without supporting himself with one hand on the handrail. And so, with a turn of his palms, he turned the bowl he was to carry upstairs into the support he needed to walk the stairs carrying the bowl.

I leave it to my reader to try to work out Nikolai's thoughts and perceptions the moment he stopped before the bottom stair, recognizing the problem (the impossibility even, given the techniques that he then mastered). Then think about the thoughts and concepts involved in solving the problem. And then compare with the conceptual resources at his disposal in the five or seven words that he masters, 'bye-bye' (always together with waving his right hand), 'there' (always together with

pointing), etc., or the nine or twelve words that he has learnt to obey, 'the shoes', 'the jacket', etc. How far will those words guide him in solving his problem?

From Loud Outbursts to Soft Requests

The first sound that Nikolai hears, after his birth, is the sound of his own crying. But his own crying will be in the midst of a great tumult: air having just rushed into his lungs, making him cry, having himself just come out of his mother's tract, with its pushings and pressures against his head and chest, the sudden weight of it all, etc. It may all have been too chaotic for the sound of his own crying to stand out as a separate experience. After his umbilical chord has been cut and the body end of it tied into a knot and pushed back into its own hole, and after being washed and dried, Nikolai will be handed over to his mother. The tumult is over. He has now reached calm waters.

His mother will hold him so that she can see his face and so that she may hope that he will see hers. She will greet him and talk to him, and perhaps it is her voice that does it. He may well recognize it as the voice he has heard so often before, from the calm of her womb. He will open his eyes and they will stray a bit before they hit upon his mother's eyes. And meeting her eyes, he will let his own eyes stay with hers for a little while before his own eyes close again and he falls asleep. And for the short moment when their eyes meet, I want to give him a short thought, 'So that's where the voice comes from', leaving it open whether we should let 'that' refer to his mother's eyes, her face, her speaking and moving mouth or some impressionistic configuration of it all. That short reverie aside, if there is anything in this first meeting that points to what Nikolai later will come to recognize as his mother, it is her eyes meeting his and her voice speaking to him.

After both mother and child have had a good sleep, both resting from their different hardships, and when the nurse judges that both are ready, she will bring Nikolai to his mother again, for his mother to feed him from her breasts, for the first time, and for Nikolai to feed himself by sucking his mother's nipple, for the first time. His mother will guide him towards her nipple and Nikolai will let himself be guided. He is too close to his mother's breast to see the breast or the nipple, but when his lips touch the nipple, he will suck. And the milk will begin to flow. (If all goes well. And in this paradigmatic and somewhat stylized story all goes well, as it perhaps should, in a paradigmatic story).

It is now that Nikolai's mother will fully receive him. It is now that she has become fully present to her new station in life and fully receptive to the presence of her newborn. She will talk to him while receiving him in her arms, she will talk to him while guiding him to her nipple and perhaps also a little while when he is sucking. And Nikolai will sense the sweet milk and the sweet voice, both flowing from the same source. The sweet milk belongs

to that sweet voice and that sweet voice belongs to that sweet milk. Now and then Nikolai will make a pause, resting his cheek against his mother's breast, smelling the sweet milk while his mother is stroking his back and saying sweet words to him. If there is anything in all this that points to what Nikolai will later come to recognize as his mother, it is the flow of sweet milk from her nipple together with the presence of her sweet voice.

For several weeks Nikolai's own voice will be heard only in his crying. Skipping the wild crying of colic pain, there will be two or three causes of his crying. They will be causes before they turn into occasions.

When he pees into his nappy, the warm liquid around his thighs and bottom (his nappy will not absorb it all) may well feel pleasant and homely even, for a while. But slowly his urine will begin to eat into his skin and cause a singeing pain, faint at first but gaining in strength, and at some point make him cry. And when Nikolai cries, his mother will come to his cot. Bending over it, she will talk soothingly to him while her right hand goes in between his nappy and his thigh to check the state there. With his mother talking to him in her sweet voice, Nikolai's crying has already softened. And finding his nappy all wet, his mother lifts him out of his cot and places him on his back on the kitchen table. Etc.

Nikolai will also cry when the gnawing sensation of hunger becomes strong enough. And when Nikolai cries, his mother will come to the cot. Bending over it, she will talk soothingly to him while making sure his nappy is dry. And with his mother there, tending to him and saying sweet words to him, Nikolai's crying will soften and cease even before she lifts him out of his cot and sits down to feed him.

She will guide Nikolai's lips to her nipple and he will suck hungrily. And he will come to learn that his mother's sweet milk is what quenches his hunger, there is no distinction between hunger and thirst here, and with that he will come to learn that his hunger is hunger for that sweet milk, or for sucking that sweet milk, or for sucking that sweet milk from his mother's nipple while resting his cheek against her warm breast, etc. If it makes sense to attribute one rather than another of those descriptions to him, at six weeks say. (If we do try to make such distinctions, at six weeks say, we do so in the light of who he will become, six months later say.)

After eight weeks or so, there is a marked shift in Nikolai's crying. It isn't loud and wild, as if forced out of his pain or hunger. It is still a crying, but soft and with a touch of articulation to it, talklike, almost as if he is calling upon his mother (to relieve him of his pain or hunger).

What has brought about this shift in his crying? I shall make a bid at answering that question. It is my first bid at it, and the answer will be an interim one.

After I do not know how many weeks, it could be less than two or more than seven, Nikolai has come to learn that when he cries, whether of hunger or of pain, his mother will come to his cot (to tend to whatever there is to

tend to). Having learnt that, he will come to learn that she comes to his cot because he is crying. That is the beginning of one story. There is another beginning, where we skip the distinction between regularity and cause (whether we think of the perception of regularity as preceding the perception of cause, as perhaps I did in my first beginning, or the other way round, which in some cases is the better story, and I do not know that this is not such a case) and say that Nikolai has learnt to trust (from her responses to his cries) that when he cries, his mother will come to his cot (etc.).

When his mother comes to his cot because he cries, she does not just appear at the cot. She lifts him up to feed him or she lifts him up to relieve him of his pain and give him a dry nappy on. And that may well be how Nikolai learns to distinguish between his hunger and his pain, from how she then tends to him. If so, when he cries from hunger, he may well know that (now) he is crying for his mother to feed him. And when he is crying from pain, he may well know that (now) he is crying for her to relieve him of his pain. And if so, there is already a call in his (still loud) crying, now a call for his mother to feed him and now a call for her to relieve him of his pain. So that, when she comes to the cot because of his crying for her to feed him, he may well know that she comes to the cot to lift him up for to feed him. (And likewise when he cries from pain, *mutatis mutandis*.)

When Nikolai cries, his mother cannot tell, not from his crying alone, whether he cries from hunger or from pain. She goes to his cot to find out and then to take care of what ails him. That is, to take care of him. And that may well be how Nikolai himself understands her coming, perhaps before he learns to distinguish his hunger from his pain. And perhaps so that we may speak of a scheme underlying his perception, and understanding, of each of his mother's various doings (that he perceives and understands): *She is taking care of me*. And perhaps so that we may speak of his concept, or his understanding, of his mother as: *(She is) the one who takes care of me*. And of himself as: *I (am the one who) need(s) her to take care of me*.

So, Nikolai cries, and he knows or trust that his mother will come to the cot to relieve him of what ails him. And that she will do so because of his crying. But she will not always come at once. She may be in the middle of something that she cannot just leave. So she says 'Wait a bit'. Perhaps it is his surprise at that response that will quiet him for a while, the first and the second time. (I feel quite sure that Nikolai will take his mother's 'Wait a bit' as her response to his crying. She does not come at once, but her voice does, and at the same place in this sequence.) Nikolai will soon learn that when his mother says 'Wait a bit' in response to his crying, and it does not matter how he hears her 'Wait a bit' as long as he hears it as the same and at the same place each time, she will not come at once, but after a short while. And that will be enough for his crying to stop, for a short while. And he will lie waiting, for a short while. And his mother's 'Wait a bit' is beginning to work like a word, a word that says wait a bit.

Nikolai has learnt to trust that when he cries, his mother will come to his cot. And she will do so at once, unless she says 'Wait a bit'. Then she will not come at once, but after a little while. But Nikolai has learnt something else as well, somewhere in the course of his first eight weeks.

He has learnt that the first, faint pain, that does not really hurt, will gain in strength until it really hurts. And likewise for the gnawing hunger. And having learnt that, he will also have learnt, or soon come to learn, that the faint pain that doesn't hurt announces the stronger pain that does. And that the weak gnawing announces a stronger gnawing.

What is more natural then, than to cry when he feels the faint pain, so that his mother will tend to him then, and so rescue him from the attacks of the stronger pain? And likewise for the weak gnawing. (If Nikolai cries before the singeing pain attacks, and his mother then sets about changing his nappies, she should find more urine around his thighs and his bottom and less of it absorbed into his nappy. A philosophical story (a story told to make a philosophical point) may be gainsaid by experience.)

The faint pain is now more like an occasion for crying than its cause. His crying is certainly not forced out of him now, by the strong pain or the hard gnawing. It is too soft, too articulate and too talklike for that. Nikolai now cries ahead of the strong pain. He has taken hold of his own crying himself and so timed it that his mother will tend to him in good time to avert the attack of strong pain. And if she now says 'Wait a bit', that response will work even more like a word now, since there is now no hardship attached to waiting a little while. The faint pain will remain faint for a little while.

His mother will now hear his soft and talklike crying as a plea or a request. And a plea or a request it will be. And this story will be my story until I come across a better one or can think of a better one myself.

One last thing, though. If my story holds, it explains why Nikolai's crying switches from a loud outburst to a soft pleading. But why talklike?

Certainly, his crying will be more convincing to his mother as a plea or a request, if it is not only soft but also quite articulate and talklike. But why should *Nikolai* try to make his soft crying talklike as well? He is hardly out to convince his mother. Hardly. But he is out to become like his mother, and his father, that is, to do what they do and in the way they do it. That striving will give shape to his life for years to come. But there isn't much else he can do now that way, than trying to articulate his soft crying so that it sounds more talklike. At eight weeks, it is his mouth, with its lips, tongue, etc., that is his most skilled organ. With it he both sucks and modulates his crying. And he will try to articulate his soft crying so that it sounds more like the murmur of his mother and father talking.

Nikolai is now at the inside of his first language game. The short description of which is this: When Nikolai cries softly and talklike, his mother will come to his cot and tend to him. If instead she says 'Wait a bit', she will not come at once, but in a little while. And he will lie quietly

waiting, for a little while. (There are two words or expressions in this language game, Nikolai's soft and talklike crying (saying, for example, 'Come and help me') and his mother's 'Wait a bit', even if that bit is spoken only now and then.)

Except for the soft and talklike crying, this is just how it was before the switch, I do not know for how many weeks. It was then that this language game was being prepared with 'Wait a bit' surfacing as its first component.

Nikolai has still a long way to travel before he catches on to even a tiny bit of his parents' talking to each other. That will require another switch, from being at home in his own life with his mother to catching on to a few bits or patterns in the life between his mother and his father. That is the task I am working at now. And after that, I shall have to go back to the very first step again.