



## When Our Lips Speak Together

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# When Our Lips Speak Together

Luce Irigaray

Translated by Carolyn Burke

If we continue to speak the same language to each other, we will reproduce the same story. Begin the same stories all over again. Don't you feel it? Listen: men and women around us all sound the same. Same arguments, same quarrels, same scenes. Same attractions and separations. Same difficulties, the impossibility of reaching each other. Same . . . same. . . . Always the same.

If we continue to speak this sameness,<sup>1</sup> if we speak to each other as men have spoken for centuries, as they taught us to speak, we will fail each other. Again. . . . Words will pass through our bodies, above our heads, disappear, make us disappear. Far. Above. Absent from ourselves, we become machines that are spoken, machines that speak. Clean skins<sup>2</sup> envelop us, but they are not our own. We have fled into proper names, we have been violated by them.<sup>3</sup> Not yours, not mine. We don't have names. We change them as men exchange us, as they use us. It's frivolous to be so changeable so long as we are a medium of exchange.

How can I touch you if you're not there? Your blood is translated into their senses.<sup>4</sup> They can speak to each other and about us. But "us"? Get out of their language. Go back through all the names they gave you. I'm

1. See translator's "Introduction," n. 3.

2. The two definitions of *propre*—"clean" and "proper"—suggest that female meanings are cleaned up and closed off by patriarchal naming systems.

3. Irigaray creates a neologism, *env(i)olées*, to suggest that women's lives (*vie*) and desires (*envie*) are violated (*violée*) and made to vanish (*envolées*) through the imposition upon them of proper names.

4. The play on *sang* ("blood") and *sens* ("meaning," "sense") extends the analogy between sexuality and writing. Blood is at once metaphorical and literal, a source of female sense and sexuality.

waiting for you, I'm waiting for myself. Come back. It's not so hard. Stay right here, and you won't be absorbed into the old scenarios, the redundant phrases, the familiar gestures, bodies already encoded in a system. Try to be attentive to yourself. To me. Don't be distracted by norms or habits.

Now normally or habitually, "I love you" is said to an enigma: an "other." An other body, an other sex. I love you: but I don't quite know who or what. "I love" slips away, it is swallowed up, drowns, burns, disappears into nothingness. We must wait for the return of "I love." Perhaps for a long time, perhaps forever. What has become of "I love"? What has become of me? "I love" lies in wait for the other. Has he swallowed me? Spat me out? Taken me or left me? Shut me up or thrown me out? How is he now? No longer (part of ) me? When he tells me, "I love you," does he give me back myself? Or does he give himself in this form? His? Mine? The same? Another? But then what have *I* become?

When you say I love you—right here, close to me, to you—you also say I love myself. Neither you nor I need wait for anything to be returned. I owe you nothing, you owe me nothing. This "I love you" is neither a gift nor a debt. You don't "give" me anything when you touch yourself, when you touch me: you touch yourself through me. You don't give yourself. What could I do with these selves, yours and mine, wrapped up like a gift? You keep both of us as much as you open us up. We find ourselves as we entrust ourselves to each other. This currency of alternatives and oppositions, choices and negotiations, has no value for us. Unless we remain in their order and reenact their system of commerce, where "we" has no place.

I love you: body shared, undivided. Neither you nor I severed. There is no need for blood spilt between us. No need for a wound to remind us that blood exists. It flows within us, from us. It is familiar, close. You are quite red, and still so white.<sup>5</sup> Both at once. You don't lose your candor as you become ardent. You are pure because you have stayed close to the blood. Because we are both white and red, we give birth to all the colors: pinks, browns, blonds, greens, blues. . . . For this whiteness is no sham, it is neither dead blood nor black blood. Sham is black: it absorbs everything, closes up and tries to come alive, but in vain. . . . The whiteness of this red appropriates nothing. It gives back as much as it receives, in luminous mutuality.

5. Irigaray's use of "red" and "white" differs consciously from the traditional Western opposition of these terms as symbolic of passion and purity. In general, she tries to create a locus in writing where such "opposites" may coexist, in a new way.

We are luminous. Beyond “one” or “two.” I never knew how to count up to you. In their calculations, we count as two. Really, two? Doesn’t that make you laugh? A strange kind of two, which isn’t one, especially not one. Let them have oneness,<sup>6</sup> with its prerogatives, its domination, its solipsisms: like the sun. Let them have their strange division by couples, in which the other is the image of the one, but an image only. For them, being drawn to the other means a move toward one’s mirage: a mirror<sup>7</sup> that is (barely) alive. Glacial, mute, the mirror is all the more faithful. Our vital energies are spent in this wearisome labor of doubling and miming. We have been destined to reproduce—that sameness in which, for centuries, we have been the other.

But how can I say “I love you” differently? I love you, my indifferent one? That would mean containing ourselves within their language. They have left us only absences, defects, negatives to name ourselves. We should be—it’s already saying too much—indifferent, detached.<sup>8</sup>

Indifferent one, keep still. If you move, you disturb their order. You cause everything to fall apart. You break the circle of their habits, the circularity of their exchanges, their knowledge, their desire: their world. Indifferent one, you must not move or be moved unless they call you. If they say “come,” then you may go forward, ever so slightly. Measure your steps according to their need—or lack of need—for their own image. One or two steps, no more, without exuberance or turbulence. Otherwise, you will smash everything, their mirror, their earth, their mother. And what about your life? You must pretend to receive it from them. You are only a small, insignificant receptacle, subject to their power alone.

So, we could be indifferent. Doesn’t that make you laugh? At least, here, right now? We, indifferent? (If you roar with laughter always, everywhere, we will never talk to each other. And we will continue to be violated by their words. Instead, let’s reappropriate our mouth and try to speak.) *Not* different, that’s true. Still—that would be too easy. And that

6. “Oneness,” like “sameness,” refers to the masculine standard that takes itself as a universal and collapses sexual difference.

7. Irigaray claims that man uses woman as a mirror in which he narcissistically seeks his own reflection. Her “speculum” would permit a different mode of “specula(riza)tion,” curved to the female (see Irigaray, *Speculum, de l’autre femme* [Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974], pp. 165–82).

8. Here, Irigaray plays with the various meanings of *indifférente*. At first, the loved one is seen as “detached,” and this “masculine” sense of female indifference is used ironically. Then, *indifférente* comes to mean “nondifferent,” or “undifferentiated” from each other. The force and consequences of the lovers’ detachment from the old systems of language and sexuality are described in the following paragraphs.

“not” would separate us again in order to define. Thus separated, “we” does not exist. Are we alike? If you will, but that’s rather abstract. I don’t really understand “alike.” Do you? Alike from whose point of view? In respect to what, what standard or third term? I touch you, that’s enough to know that you are my body.

I love you: our two lips cannot part to let *one* word pass. One single word that would say “you” or “me.” Or, “equals”: she who loves, she who is loved. Open or closed, for one never excludes the other, our lips say that both love each other. Together. To articulate one precise word, our lips would have to separate and be distant from each other. Between them, *one word*.

But where would such a word come from? A word correct, enclosed, wrapped around its meaning? Without a crack, faultless.<sup>9</sup> “You.” “Me.” Go on, laugh. . . . Without an opening, that would no longer be you or me. Without lips, it is no longer us. The unity, truth, and propriety of words comes from their lack of lips, their forgetting of lips. Words are mute, when they have been uttered once and for all, neatly tied up so that their sense—their blood—can’t escape. Like the children of men. But not ours. Besides, do we need or desire a child? Here and now, in our closeness? Men and women have children to embody their closeness and their distance. But we?

I love you, childhood. I love you who are neither mother (pardon me, mother, for I prefer a woman) nor sister, neither daughter nor son. I love you—and there, where I love you, I don’t care about the lineage of our fathers and their desire for imitation men. And their geneological institutions. Let’s be neither husband nor wife, do without the family, without roles, functions, and their laws of reproduction. I love you: your body, here, there, now. I/you touch you/me; it’s quite enough for us to feel alive.

Open your lips, but do not open them simply. I do not open them simply. We—you/I—are never open nor closed. Because we never separate simply, *a single word* can’t be pronounced, produced by, emitted from our mouths. From your/my lips, several songs, several ways of saying echo each other. For one is never separable from the other. You/I are always several at the same time. How could one dominate the other? Impose her voice, her tone, her meaning? They are not distinct, which

9. *Sans faille* plays the masculine demand for univocal speech, in which the female is seen as “fault” or “lack,” against the feminine desire for an open mode of signification. The text will enact the multiple meanings of *faille*: geographical fault or opening and sexual/linguistic/philosophical experience of duality. *Faille* also restates the central figure—the female lips, oral and vaginal, which are simultaneously open and closed.

does not mean that they are blurred. You don't understand a thing? No more than they understand you.<sup>10</sup>

Speak just the same. Because your language doesn't follow just one thread, one course, or one pattern, we are in luck. You speak from everywhere at the same time. You touch me whole at the same time. In all senses. Why only one song, one discourse, one text at a time? To seduce, satisfy, fill one of my "holes"? I don't have any, with you. We are not voids, lacks which wait for sustenance, fulfillment, or plenitude from an other. That our lips make us women does not mean that consuming, consummating, or being filled is what matters to us.

Kiss me. Two lips kiss two lips, and openness is ours again. Our "world." Between us, the movement from inside to outside, from outside to inside, knows no limits. It is without end. These are exchanges that no mark, no mouth<sup>11</sup> can ever stop. Between us, the house has no walls, the clearing no enclosure, language no circularity. You kiss me, and the world enlarges until the horizon vanishes. Are we unsatisfied? Yes, if that means that we are never finished. If our pleasure consists of moving and being moved by each other, endlessly. Always in movement, this openness is neither spent nor sated.

They neither taught us nor allowed us to say our multiplicity. That would have been improper speech. Of course, we were allowed—we had to?—display one truth even as we sensed but muffled, stifled another. Truth's other side—its complement? its remainder?—stayed hidden. Secret. Inside and outside, we were not supposed to be the same. That doesn't suit their desires. Veiling and unveiling, isn't that what concerns them, interests them? Always repeating the same operation—each time, on each woman.

You/I then become two to please them. But once we are divided in two—one outside, the other inside—you no longer embrace yourself or me. On the outside, you attempt to conform to an order which is alien to you. Exiled from yourself, you fuse with everything that you encounter. You mime whatever comes near you. You become whatever you touch. In your hunger to find yourself, you move indefinitely far from yourself, from me. Assuming one model after another, one master after another, changing your face, form, and language according to the power that

10. At this point in the text, the speaker addresses not *toi*, the loved one, but *vous*, the men whose language shows no comprehension of these new female speakers, who, in turn, cannot grasp their discourse.

11. Irigaray plays on *boucle* ("buckle") and *bouche* ("mouth"), to suggest that the female buccal exchanges are endless, their circularity open.

dominates you. Sundered. By letting yourself be abused, you become an impassive travesty. You no longer return as the indifferent one. You return: closed and impenetrable.

Speak to me. Can't you? Don't you want to any longer? Do you want to keep to yourself? Remain silent, white, virginal? Preserve the inner self? But it doesn't exist without the other. Don't tear yourself apart with choices that have been imposed on you. *Between us*, there is no rupture between virginal and nonvirginal. No event that makes us women. Long before your birth, you touched yourself, innocently. Your/my body does not acquire a sex by some operation, by the act of some power, function, or organ. You are already a woman; you don't need any special modification or intervention. You don't have to have an "outside," since "the other" already affects you, it is inseparable from you. You have been altered forever, everywhere. This is the crime that you never committed: you disturb their love of property.

How can I tell you that your sexual pleasure is in no way evil, you stranger to goods? There can be no fault until they rob you of your openness and close you up to brand you as their possession; practice their transgressions, infractions, and play other games with the law. When they—and you? speculate with your whiteness. If we play this game, we let ourselves be abused, damaged. We are alienated from ourselves to support the pursuit of their ends. That would be our role. If we submit to their reasoning, we are guilty. Their strategy—deliberate or not—is to make us guilty.

You have come back, divided: "we" are no more. You are split into red and white, black and white. How can we find each other again? Touch each other? We are cut into pieces, finished: our pleasure is trapped in their system, where "virgin" means one as yet unmarked by them, for them. Not yet a woman in their terms. Not yet imprinted with their sex, their language. Not yet penetrated or possessed by them. Still inhabiting that candor which is an awaiting, a nothing without them, a void without them. A virgin is but the future for their exchanges, their commerce, and their transports. A kind of reserve for their explorations, consummations, and exploitations—the future coming of their desires. But not ours.

How can I say it? That we are women from the start. That we don't need to be produced by them, named by them, made sacred or profane by them. That this has always already happened, without their labors. And that their history constitutes the locus of our exile. It's not that we have our own territory, but that their nation, family, home, and discourse imprison us in enclosures where we can no longer move—or live as "we." Their property is our exile. Their enclosures, the death of our love. Their words, the gag upon our lips.

How can we speak to escape their enclosures, patterns, distinctions and oppositions: virginal/deflowered, pure/impure, innocent/knowing. . . . How can we shake off the chains of these terms, free ourselves from their categories, divest ourselves of their names? Disengage ourselves, *alive*, from their concepts? Without reserve, without the immaculate whiteness which keeps their systems going. You know that we are never completed, but that we can only embrace each other whole. That “part by part”—of the body, of space, of time—interrupts our blood flow. Paralyzes us, petrifies us, immobilizes us. Makes us very pale, all but frigid.

Wait. My blood is coming back from their senses. It’s getting warmer inside us, between us. Their words are becoming empty, bloodless, dead skins. While our lips are becoming red again. They’re stirring, they’re moving, they want to speak. What do you want to say? Nothing. Everything. Yes. Be patient. You will say it all. Begin with what you feel, here, right away. The female “all”<sup>12</sup> will come.

But you can’t anticipate it, predict or fit it into a program. This “all” can’t be schematized or mastered. It’s the total movement of our body. No surface holds: no figures, lines, and points; no ground subsists. But there is no abyss. For us, depth does not mean a chasm. Where the earth has no solid crust, there can be no precipice. Our depth is the density of our body, in touch “all” over. There is no above/below, back/front, right side/wrong side, top/bottom in isolation, separate, out of touch. Our “all” intermingles. Without breaks or gaps.

If you/I are reluctant to speak, isn’t it because we are afraid of not speaking well? But what is “well” or “badly”? What model could we use to speak “well”? What system of mastery and subordination could persecute us there<sup>13</sup> and break our spirits? Why aspire to the heights of a worthier discourse? Erection doesn’t interest us: we’re fine in the lowlands. We have so many spaces to share. Because we are always open, the horizon will never be circumscribed. Stretching out, never ceasing to unfold ourselves, we must invent so many different voices to speak all of “us,” including our cracks and faults, that forever won’t be enough time. We will never travel all the way round our periphery: we have so many dimensions. If you wish to speak “well” you constrict yourself, become narrower as you rise. Stretching, reaching higher, you leave behind the

12. The syntactically startling *le toute* here is probably an oblique reference to Lacan’s designation of women as *pas-toutes* (“not-alls”) in *Le Séminaire XX: Encore* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975). See “Cosi fan tutti” (*Ce sexe*, pp. 85–101), in which Irigaray asserts that psychoanalysis, in the voice of Lacan, excludes female expression from its discourse. The present text converts the *pas-toutes* into *toute*, a female mode of speaking “whole” and “all.”

13. “There” refers to the locus of language as an ideological space whose geography is explored in this paragraph.



limitless realm of your body. Don't make yourself erect, you abandon us. The sky isn't up there: it's between us.

Don't fret about the "right" word. There is none. No truth between our lips. Everything has the right to be. Everything is worth exchanging, without privileges or refusals. Exchange? Everything can be exchanged when nothing is bought. Between us, there are no owners and no purchasers, no determinable objects and no prices. Our bodies are enriched by our mutual pleasure. Our abundance is inexhaustible: it knows neither want nor plenty. When we give ourselves "all," without holding back or hoarding, our exchanges have no terms. How to say this? The language we know is so limited. . . .

You'll say to me, why talk? We feel the same thing at the same time. Aren't my hands, my eyes, my mouth, my lips, my body enough for you? Isn't what they say to you sufficient? I could say yes, but that would be too easy. It has been said too often to reassure you/us.

If we don't invent a language, if we don't find our body's language, its gestures will be too few to accompany our story. When we become tired of the same ones, we'll keep our desires secret, unrealized. Asleep again, dissatisfied, we will be turned over to the words of men— who have claimed to "know" for a long time. But *not our body*. Thus seduced, allured, fascinated, ecstatic over our becoming, we will be paralyzed. Deprived of *our movements*. Frozen, although we are made for endless change. Without leaps or falls, and without repetition.

Continue, don't run out of breath. Your body is not the same today as yesterday. Your body remembers. *You* don't need to remember, to store up yesterday like capital in your head. Your memory? Your body reveals yesterday in what it wants today. If you think: yesterday I was, tomorrow I will be, you are thinking: I have died a little. Be what you are becoming, without clinging to what you could have been, might be. Never settle. Let's leave definitiveness to the undecided; we don't need it. Right here and now, our body gives us a very different certainty. Truth is necessary for those who are so distanced from their body that they have forgotten it. But their "truth" makes us immobile, like statues, if we can't divest ourselves of it. If we don't annul its power by trying to say, here, now, right away, how we are moved.

You are moving, You never stay still. You never stay. You never "are." How can I say you, who are always other? How can I speak you, who remain in a flux that never congeals or solidifies? How can this current pass into words? It is multiple, devoid of "causes" and "meanings," simple qualities; yet it is not decomposable. These movements can't be described as the passage from a beginning to an end. These streams don't flow into one, definitive sea; these rivers have no perma-

ment banks; this body, no fixed borders. This unceasing mobility, this life. Which they might describe as our restlessness, whims, pretenses, or lies. For all this seems so strange to those who claim “solidity”<sup>14</sup> as their foundation.

Speak, nevertheless. Between us, “hardness” is not the rule. We know the contours of our bodies well enough to appreciate fluidity. Our density can do without the sharp edges of rigidity. We are not attracted to dead bodies.

Yet how do we stay alive when far from each other? That’s the danger. How can I await your return if we don’t remain close when you are far away? If something palpable, here and now, doesn’t evoke the touch of our bodies? How can we continue to live as ourselves if we are open to the infinity of our separation, closed upon the intangible sensation of absence? Let’s not be ravished by their language again: let’s not embody mourning. We must learn how to speak to each other so that we can embrace across distances. Surely, when I touch myself, I remember you. But so much is said, and said of us, that separates us.

Let’s quickly invent our own phrases, so that everywhere and always, we continue to embrace. We are so subtle that nothing can stand in our way; nothing will keep us from reaching each other, even fleetingly,<sup>15</sup> as long as we find means of communication which have *our* density. We will walk through obstacles imperceptibly, without damage, to find each other. No one will see a thing. Our lack of resistance is our strength. For a long time, they have appreciated our suppleness for their embraces, their impressions. Why not use it for ourselves? Rather than let ourselves be branded by the—settled, stabilized, immobilized. Separated.

Don’t weep. One day we will learn to say ourselves. And what we say will be far more beautiful than our tears, totally fluent.

Already, I carry you with me, everywhere. Not as a child, a burden, or a weight, no matter how loved or precious. You are not *within me*. I do not contain you or retain you in my stomach, my arms, or my head. Nor in my memory, my mind, or my language. You are just there, like my skin. A certainty that exists beyond all appearances, all disguises, all designations. I know that I live because you duplicate my life. Which doesn’t mean that you subordinate your life to mine. Because you live, I feel alive, so long as you are neither my reply nor my imitation.

How can I say in another way: “We exist only as two?” We live as two

14. See “La Mécanique des fluides” (*Ce sexe*, pp. 105–16), in which Irigaray suggests that Western discourse takes “solidity” and “solids” as bases for the determination of meaning, thereby neglecting the “fluids” that more appropriately express the female.

15. *Même fugitives* also hints that the lovers will meet as runaways or fugitives from the enclosures of the old order.

beyond images, mirages, and mirrors. Between us, one is not the “real” and the other, her imitation; one is not the original and the other, her copy. Although we can be perfect dissemblers within their system, we relate to each other without simulation. Our resemblance does without semblances: in our bodies, already the same. Touch yourself, touch me, you’ll “see.”

No need to fashion a mirror image to be “a pair,” or to repeat ourselves a second time. We are two, long before any representation of us exists. Let these two which your blood has made, which my body evokes for you, come together alive. You will always have the touching beauty of “the first time,” if you are not congealed in recreations. You will always be moved for the first time, if you are not immobilized in any form of repetition.

Let’s do without models, standards, and examples. Let’s not give ourselves orders, commands, or prohibitions. May our only demand be a call to move and be moved, together. Let’s not dictate, moralize, or war with each other. Let’s not want to be right, or have the right to criticize each other. If you/I sit in judgment, our existence comes to a stop. And what I love in you, in myself, no longer takes place for us: the birth that is never completed, the body never created once and for all time, the face and form never definitively finished, always still to be molded. The lips never opened or closed upon one single truth.

Light is not violent or deadly for us. The sun does not rise or set simply. Night and day are mingled in our gazes, our gestures, our bodies. Strictly speaking, we cast no shadow. There is no chance that one might become the darker double of the other. I want to remain nocturnal and find again in you my softly luminous night. Don’t think that I love you as a bright beacon, lording it over everything around you. If we separate light from night, we give up the lightness of our mixture, we solidify all those differences that make us so simultaneously whole. We build walls between us, break off into parts, cut ourselves into two, and more. Although we are always one and the other, at the same time. If we separate ourselves that way, we “all” stop being born: without limits or shores other than those of our moving bodies.

And we won’t stop speaking to each other until the limiting effects of time intervene. Don’t worry. I can continue. Despite all the manufactured constraints of time and space, I still embrace you unceasingly. If others make of us fetishes to separate us, that’s their business. Let’s not become immobilized in these borrowed concepts.

If I say again and again: *not, nor, without . . .*, it’s to remind you, to remind us, that we can touch each other only when naked. And that to

find ourselves and each other, we have a great deal to take off. So many images and appearances separate us, one from another. They decked us out according to their desires for so long, and we adorned ourselves so often to please them, that we forgot the feel of our skin. Removed from our own skin, we remain distant. You and I, divided.

You? I? That's still saying too much. It cuts too sharply between us: "all."