

# Preface

Around the world, humans whistle their language  
Some live in mountains, others in forests  
Whistling is used to speak across distances  
This means of communication makes a person one with nature  
One can express love and every aspect of life  
The melody resembles birdsongs  
It tells the story of the people, of their lands and of human language.  
Extract of a corpus collected by the author with various whistlers.

This monograph addresses a fascinating and little-known language practice based on whistling. Whistling is one of the multiple modes of expression for some local languages. Whistling does not replace but instead complements ordinary speech, often under different circumstances. It profoundly modifies the phonetic system of the local speech: the voice is replaced by a whistle, which carries the information. This drastic transformation consists of the emulation of selected acoustic cues of standard speech. Therefore, whistled speech is adapted both to the structure of each language—namely its syntax, grammar, and phonology—and to the articulatory constraints of whistling. The advantage of this procedure, from the user’s perspective, is not only a vastly increased audible range but also, under certain circumstances, a degree of secrecy toward outsiders. This work is a follow-up of a previous monograph on this subject by Busnel and Classe (entitled “Whistled Languages”) published in 1976. Thirty-eight years later, a great deal of additional research has been performed, and several discoveries have provided new insights into the phenomenon. As we will show, during the last 12 years, new instances of whistled languages have regularly been found, thanks to extensive fieldwork. Moreover, we now understand better the processes of whistled speech perception. However, with the modernization of the countryside throughout the world, the traditional activities that justify this special speech register are frequently disrupted, and whistled forms of languages have become endangered oral practices.

The description provided in this book consists of an account of the authors' own investigations supplemented by a large pluridisciplinary bibliographical review. The manner in which the various aspects of the subject are described in Chap. 2 (Historical sketch) results from the collaboration between two authors (Meyer and Busnel). The other chapters have been written by Meyer. The original idea to propose this new monograph to the editor came from Busnel. Meyer decided to write it in homage to the different world cultures he visited and to Professor Busnel, who is in his 100th year of life and is still in close interaction with Meyer, following his research with different collaborators around the world. Among these collaborators, Dr. Laure Dentel is the most significant. Other outstanding collaborators are Professor Colette Grinevald, Dr. Fanny Meunier, Dr. Denny Moore and the speakers of various languages. The last 12 years of research on this subject were made possible thanks to the financial support provided by various institutions such as the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (BDI-CNRS grant, France), the Fyssen Foundation (Post-doc grant, France), the Endangered Language Documentation Program (Post-doc project IPF0136, SOAS-University of London), the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (PDJ grant, CNPq Brazil), the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration (EURIAS Fellowship, Lyon Collegium; Marie Slodowska-Curie Fellowship, project Icon-Eco-Speech) and by prizes including a 2006 Rolex Award and the scientific prize of Paris-Jeunes-Aventures (Mairie de Paris).

The general structure of the book makes it accessible to both the general reader and specialists of various domains, with a primary emphasis on linguistic, acoustic, cognitive, ethnologic, and environmental features.

Whistled Languages

A Worldwide Inquiry on Human Whistled Speech

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2015, IX, 182 p. 63 illus., 24 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-662-45836-5