Language "speaks," to paraphrase Heidegger; it breaks open into words and names beings. Such a statement seems to corroborate the way in which the Western intellectual tradition approaches language, emphasizing usually the importance of speech, or, more recently, writing. Both of those aspects are invested with a sense of activity and highlight the fact that language happens primarily as speaking or writing. In such contexts, listening comes into play only secondarily, to the extent in which language as speech addresses those who listen, and as such demands, calls for listening. Listening then comes to be defined in relation to speaking, as a reception of speech, a readiness to understand and perhaps to respond. However, both Heidegger’s conception of language and Celan’s work readily question such notions of speaking, intimating that speech not only involves listening but that in fact the speaking of language takes place in listening, to the extent that one listens.

In the context of Heidegger’s numerous essays on language as speaking or as saying, it becomes necessary to ask the question whether the modalities of such “speaking” can be exhaustively described only as those of laying open, unconcealing, or letting be by way of words. In those writings, Heidegger implicitly relies on the etymological proximity of Sprache (language) and sprechen (speaking), which becomes most
visible in his famous statement: *Die Sprache spricht,*¹ usually translated as: “Language speaks.” Taking into consideration the lexical closeness of Sprache and sprechen, one would need to render this apparently tautological formulation into English by turning “language” into a verb—“to language”—primarily because the lexical bond between Sprache and sprechen does not mean that Sprache should be read in this context as speech but rather that sprechen happens as more or otherwise than just mere speaking. Most importantly, sprechen cannot be read simply as speaking because, in an “essential” (wesentlich) way, it involves listening. This sense of listening, tracing upon sprechen—the happening of language—leaves language exposed, fundamentally open to otherness.

It is indeed the question of otherness, the importance of others, that makes the pairing of Celan and Heidegger problematic, especially in view of the “popular” opinion about the depopulated and neutral landscape of Heidegger’s thought. The urgency of listening and addressing the other becomes most explicit in Celan’s poetics, even though such otherness does not mark the simple sense of the presence of others in his texts but rather points to a “strange” linguistic trace. Heidegger’s case, however, to use his own words, calls for thinking; not least because the question of relation to others is perhaps the most provoking, that is, the most thought-provoking, aspect of his work.

In the broad context of the resurfacing controversy surrounding Heidegger’s thought, the notion of a listening exposure of language and its significance may not only become helpful in refiguring the proximity to Heidegger’s texts on language and poetry evidenced by Celan’s “The Meridian” but also provide an inroad into the problem of otherness and ethics raised with regard to the German thinker. At the least, the lexical closeness of Sprache and sprechen and the sense of the listening of language which it carries for Heidegger can perhaps allow for a more complex mapping of Celan’s encounter with Heidegger’s meditation on language. This meeting becomes especially interesting because both Celan’s poetry and prose, as critics have pointed out, proffer what might be called a poetics of otherness. By stripping language of any pretenses to knowing or troping others, Celan’s poetry becomes an address to the other, a discourse of “listening.” As a brief example of this discourse, let us take the first stanza of “Ich kann dich noch sehn”:

Ich kann dich noch sehn: ein Echo
ertastbar mit Fühl-
wörtern, am Abschieds-
grat.

1 SEMIOSIS OF LISTENING