



Humanum

ISSUES IN FAMILY, CULTURE & SCIENCE

ISSUE ONE

Quintessentially Human: Language





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A Uniquely Human Art Form

MARGARET HARPER MCCARTHY

Language. We are born into it, already attuned to its rhythm and syntax as newborns. We learn it almost miraculously in our first years, without a thought. We take it for granted. It defies evolutionary accounts of its origin and transhumanist dreams of its replacement. In a word, language is that uniquely human art form of the incarnate spirits we are; for it is only with words—sensuous symbols—that we can speak of the world. Through words—first spoken to us then by us—we communicate with things and with others, giving voice—through the multiplicity of concrete names and languages—to the community of inexhaustible beings in the world and to the inexhaustible community of the One who made it.

The Syntax of Hope

GEORGE STEINER

George Steiner (1929–2020) was an American literary and cultural critic with a particular interest in the metaphysics of language. Born in Paris to Viennese Jewish parents, he moved to the States when he was eleven and completed his education in England, lecturing at both Oxford and Cambridge. A controversial figure from the beginning of his career, Steiner was ultimately perhaps the most influential humanist of his generation. An academic, yet always the outsider, he took the classic texts of the literary and philosophical traditions as maps of the human spirit. A man of great breadth of culture, yet trenchant judgments; his curiosity and intellectual integrity were of sufficient intensity to enable him to champion the work of Heidegger and Pierre Bouffier. Among his most famous books are *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky* (1960), *The Death of Tragedy* (1961), *In Bluebeard's Castle* (1971), *After Babel* (1975), and *Real Presences* (1989).

The following excerpt from is taken from *Grammars of Creation* (Yale University Press/Faber and Faber, 2002), based on the 1990 Gifford Lectures given by George Steiner at the University of Glasgow. It is presented with the permission of Open Road Media.

We have no more beginnings. Incipit, that proud Latin word signaling the start, survives in our dusty inception. The medieval scribe marks the opening line, the new chapter, with an illuminated capital. In its golden or carmine vortex the illuminator of manuscripts sets heraldic beasts, dragons at morning, singers and prophets. The initial, where this term signifies beginning and primacy, acts as a fanfare. It declares Plato's maxim—by no means self-evident—whereby in all things natural and human the origin is the most excellent. Today, in Western orientations—observe the muted presence of morning light in that word—the reflexes, turns of perception, are those of afternoon, of twilight.

There have been previous senses of ending and fascinations with sundown in Western culture. Philosophic witness, the arts, historians of feeling, report on “closing-times in the gardens of the West” during the crises of the Roman imperial order, during the apocalyptic fears at the approach of the first millennium A.D., in the wake of the Black

Death and the Thirty Years' War. Motions of decay, of autumn and failing light, have always attached to men and women's awareness of physical ruin, of common mortality. Moralists, even prior to Montaigne, pointed out that the newborn infant is old enough to die. There is in the most confident metaphysical construct, in the most affirmative work of art, a memento mori, a labor, implicit or explicit, to hold at bay the seepage of fatal time, of entropy into each and every living form. It is from this wrestling match that philosophic discourse and the generation of art derive their informing stress, the unresolved tautness of which logic and beauty are formal modes. The cry "the great god Pan is dead" haunts even those societies with which we associate, perhaps too conventionally, the gusto of optimism.

Nevertheless, there is, I think, in the climate of spirit at the end of the twentieth century, a core-tiredness. The inward chronometry, the contracts with time that so largely determine our consciousness, point to late afternoon in ways that are ontological—this is to say, of the essence, of the fabric of being. We are, or feel ourselves to be, latecomers. The shadows lengthen. We seem to bend earthward and toward the night as do heliotropic plants.

Inhumanity is, so far as we have historical evidence, perennial. There have been no utopias, no communities of justice or forgiveness. Our current alarms—at the violence in our streets, at the famines in the so-called Third World, at regressions into barbaric ethnic conflicts, at the possibility of pandemic disease—must be seen against the backdrop of a quite exceptional moment. Roughly from the time of Waterloo to that of the massacres on the Western Front in 1915–16, the European bourgeoisie experienced a privileged season, an armistice with history. Underwritten by the exploitation of industrial labor at home and colonial rule abroad, Europeans knew a century of progress, of liberal dispensations, of reasonable hope. It is in the afterglow, no doubt idealized, of this exceptional calendar—note the constant comparison of the years prior to August 1914 to a "long summer"—that we suffer our present discomforts.

We have not yet begun to gauge the damage to man—as a species, as one entitling himself sapiens—inflicted by events since 1914. We do not yet begin to grasp the coexistence in time and in space, a coexistence sharpened by the immediacy of graphic and verbal presentation in the global mass media, of Western superfluity, and the starvation, the destitution, the infant mortality, that now batten on some three-fifths of mankind. There is a dynamic of clear-sighted lunacy in our waste of what is left of natural resources, of fauna and flora. The south col of Everest is a garbage dump. Forty years after Auschwitz, the Khmer Rouge bury alive an estimated hundred thousand innocent human beings. The rest of the world, fully apprised of the fact, does

nothing. New weapons soon start flowing from our factories to the killing fields. To repeat: violence, oppression, economic enslavement, and social irrationality have been endemic in history, whether tribal or metropolitan. But this century has given despair a new warrant. It has raised the distinct possibility of a reversal of evolution, of a systematic turnabout toward bestialization. It is this that makes Kafka's *Metamorphosis* the key fable of modernity.

What I want to consider briefly is the impact of this darkened condition on grammar—where I take grammar to mean the articulate organization of perception, reflection, and experience, the nerve structure of consciousness when it communicates with itself and with others. I intuit (these are, of course, almost wholly conjectural domains) that the future tense came relatively late into human speech. It may have developed as late as the end of the last ice age, together with the “futures” entailed by food storage, by the making and preservation of tools beyond immediate need, and by the very gradual discovery of animal breeding and agriculture. In some “meta-” or prelinguistic register, animals would appear to know presentness and, one supposes, a measure of remembrance. The future tense, the ability to discuss possible events on the day after one's funeral or in space a million years hence, looks to be specific to *Homo sapiens*. As does the use of the subjunctive and of counterfactual modes that are themselves kindred, as it were, to future tenses. It is only man, so far as we can conceive, who has the means of altering his world by resort to “if” clauses, who can generate clauses such as: “If Caesar had not gone to the Capitol that day.” It seems to me that this fantastic, formally incommensurable “grammatology” of verb futures, of subjunctives and optatives, proved indispensable to the survival, to the evolution, of the “language animal,” confronted, as we were and are, by the scandal, by the incomprehensibility of individual death. There is a sense in which every human use of the future tense of the verb to be is a negation, however limited, of mortality. Even as every use of an “if” sentence tells of a refusal of the brute inevitability, of the despotism of the fact. Shall, will, and if, circling in intricate fields of semantic force around a hidden center or nucleus of potentiality, are the passwords to hope.

Hope and fear are supreme fictions empowered by syntax. They are as indivisible from each other as they are from grammar. Hope encloses a fear of unfulfillment. Fear has in it a mustard seed of hope, the intimation of overcoming. It is the status of hope today that is problematic.

George Steiner (1929–2020) was a humanist, literary polymath, essayist, and cultural critic.

My Easter Tree: Speech, Humanity, World

PETER J. LEITHART

We have an Easter tree in our backyard. It's a persimmon that drops fruity treats for the deer and coyotes who, late in the summer, wander into the yard from the forest that skirts our property. Last year, a lightning bolt struck the tree and left a black gash in the trunk and one long branch dangling like a withered arm. As the other trees budded this spring, the persimmon stubbornly retained its winter gray. I gave up hope for recovery after my youngest daughter told me lightning is so hot that it instantly boils off all moisture in any tree it strikes. Then, early in April, as we approached the strangest Holy Week in my lifetime, tufts of green appeared in the topmost branches. As I look from the deck on the afternoon of Holy Saturday 2020, scattered leaves are visible on roughly half of the branches. Our persimmon tree seemed to die, then it rose again, and in late summer it will yield fruit for the deer and coyotes to snack on. It's our Easter tree.

What should we make of this sequence of events? Not merely the tree, the lightning strike, the remarkable recovery of a tree thought dead. What do we make of us—my family and me—as we observe this sequence of events? At a minimum, we must say this: Whether by a process of untold millennia of evolution or by a special design six thousand years ago or some other means, there exists in the universe a being that observes trees and lightning and the coming of spring, and represents these under metaphorical description (the tree as “wounded,” leaves as “birth,” the whole sequence as a kind of resurrection); that links these events to a long-told story of a tree, a tomb, a large stone, and food; and that then records these events and these metaphors in visible signs for readers of a journal. There exists in the universe a being capable not only of “bare perception” but of speech, symbol, story, and allegorization.

To suggest such beings do not exist, that these capacities are mere illusions, isn't a serious proposal. One might say this capacity is a gift of natural selection, though the evolutionary advantage would be difficult to make out. Other species, after all, make do without stories or online journals. To say our capacity for linguistic representation

is but a slight improvement on the symbol-making of higher mammals is highly implausible. As Derek Bickerton has argued, humans may not be unique in making and understanding signs, but our sign-making is of a different order. We do not, perhaps cannot, entirely know what goes on in the brains of other creatures, but we can be confident there are no others who write poetry, use maps, make rules and punish rule-breakers, imagine worlds and pass on their imaginings to others.[1] If other creatures like this existed, we would have noticed by now.

Some may object that I have conflated a cluster of distantly related phenomena. For many linguists, “language” names an “instinct” innate to human beings, just as web-making is instinctive to spiders. Language is unique to humans but this “poses no more of a paradox than a trunk unique to modern elephants,” writes Steven Pinker.[2] “Instinct” is the wrong word, though. As Vyvyan Evans has put it, an instinct “has to emerge without training. A fledging spider doesn’t need to see a master at work in order to ‘get’ web-spinning: spiders just do spin webs when they are ready, no instruction required.”[3] In responding to Pinker, Bickerton notes the elephant’s trunk is “a hyperdevelopment of the nose and adjacent parts of the face,” but Pinker doesn’t say “what ingredients went into the making of language.” And besides, Bickerton adds, it’s downright “weird” to compare a complex practice like human language to a body part.[4]

The notion of language as instinct is allied to the reductive, often mechanistic, view that language exists to “translate” thoughts, originally expressed in what Pinker calls “mentalese,” into messages that can be transferred from brain to brain.[5] The communicative power of language is wonderful, but it doesn’t exhaust the various uses to which language is put, as Pinker’s own examples prove. He constructs sentence trees to analyze examples of unintentionally ambiguous headlines and ads like “Child’s Stool Great for Use in Garden” and “We will sell gasoline to anyone in a glass container.” His analysis is grammatically illuminating, but misses a more notable point: There exists in the universe a being with the capacity to communicate ambiguously and laugh at the ambiguity. Pinker is a witty writer, but when he pulls out his sentence trees, he turns humorless. He doesn’t ponder the possibility that some people write such sentences deliberately, for fun. When did we last discover a spider spinning crazily useless webs for the amusement of other spiders?

Moreover, the notion of language-as-message-passing-instinct misses the continuity between everyday language that we use at home, at the store, at work, on the subway, on the one hand, and “higher” uses of language like metaphor, story-telling, allegorization, on the other. Walker Percy pointed out that metaphor-making isn’t an

exotic misuse of literal language but is the heart of linguistic practice.[6] Speech and writing are inherently metaphor-making. “That,” I say, pointing out the window toward our Easter tree, “is an Eastern bluebird.” As literal a statement as one can imagine, and yet there’s a concealed metaphor in the assertion. The sound “Eastern bluebird” is not identical to the feathered, bipedal, flying thing I see lighting on a branch. I have substituted sound for thing, referring to something in the world outside by identifying it with articulated noises. Technically, the trope I’ve used is metaphor, saying one thing (the actual bird) “is” another (the sound of the words). If metaphor is an error, it’s the error that founds language.

Christian theology has particular reasons to endorse a conception of human nature that prioritizes language. Suppose for a moment we’re innocent of the centuries of debate concerning the “image and likeness of God” and can read Genesis 1 with a degree of innocence. After twenty-six verses, we come to the declaration that God created man, male and female, after his image and likeness. We will be inclined to ask, as a way of teasing out what is meant by “God’s likeness”: What is God like? And our main answer will be: He is a speaker, who makes by speaking. We will then be inclined to conclude that a being made “in the image and likeness of God” is a language animal.

The anthropologically-focused creation account of Genesis 2 elaborates this. God places Adam in the garden and speaks to him; the relation between the Creator and this creature, at least, is mediated by language. Adam himself speaks in naming the animals. This is probably not merely a matter of assigning arbitrary sonic labels to things; much more likely, Adam’s names express the character of the thing named. After all, the first thing we hear Adam say is spoken to the woman. It’s a kind of naming, but hardly an arbitrary label. In a poetic flourish, Adam declares her relation to him (bone of bone, flesh of flesh), and the name “woman” (‘ishshah) states her origin with a wordplay on his own name, ‘ish, which is a new, self-unveiling name Adam assigns himself in the presence of the one who corresponds to him.

Since we’re not innocent of centuries of debate concerning the image of God, the claim that humans are “no more than” language animals might strike us as reductive. Surely the human difference has something to do with reason, morality, spirituality. But that objection underestimates what is entailed by existence in the linguistic register. Language isn’t merely a distinctively human response to external stimuli, nor merely a bare capacity to express “mentalese” in sound or visual markings. As Charles Taylor and Rowan Williams have argued in different ways, speech is a bodily

and social reality, and thus a key expression of our existence as social and animal. The capacity for speech is the capacity for self-reflection, for shared attention and exploration, for tradition-formation, for accountability, for meaningful silence, for truth and falsehood, for worship.

Taylor argues, for instance, that language inducts us into a new dimension of experience, a “new space” that is bigger than the lived world of non-linguistic creatures.[7] Words live within a web of language, which has been spoken before we began to speak. Our “present experience is accompanied invariably by the sense that it was preceded by a personal and social history; that it will be followed by a future.”[8] Language arises from and fosters communion, as it enables shared attention. As it gives us the capacity to see as, to see under a description, language gives us a capacity for making value judgments, not merely to recoil at a threat but to reckon it a threat. Moral judgment depends on seeing-as, as does legal judgment, which means that saying “man is a language animal” verges toward the moral conceptions of the image of God. Without the linguistic dimension, the capacity to “see as,” we’d have no “mentalese” to translate.

But we need to take a further step. One might agree with everything I’ve said and still conclude that my Easter tree merely exemplifies the human capacity for fantasy, for projecting my own desire, say, to recover supple youth, onto an unsuspecting persimmon tree. I am the wounded tree, and I piece together and vest with meaning a sequence of incidents in nature. Human fantasies range from my small-scale tree to massive corporate projections like the Bible and Christian dogma. Even that deflating explanation, however, raises intriguing questions about humanity, for it means that there is in the universe a being who fantasizes in this way. If we’re convinced naturalists, then it’s even more astonishing that matter has somehow gained the power to imagine Creators, crosses, and empty tombs, and to see such miracles instantiated in a persimmon tree. In that sheer factual sense at least, matter speaks.

But is that deflation ultimately satisfying? Or should we instead say that the tree, the gash, the lightning, the spring leaves invite interpretation. If I had a more botanical turn of mind, my interpretation would take a different form, no doubt, but it wouldn’t change the fundamental point, which is that nature presents itself so as to provoke interpretation and investigation, and that there is an uncanny fit between the way nature presents itself and the linguistic and interpretive capacities human beings alone possess. Nature seems to give itself to us in symbolic form. It seems almost to speak.

Faces certainly speak. What is physically only a wrinkle of skin around the nose or a down-turn of the mouth expresses disgust or sadness. We read the physiognomy. We read things. Heidegger calls our attention to the way things co-disclose the world that surrounds them. A simple jug, in Taylor's words, "is redolent of the human activities of which it is a part, of the pouring of wine at the common table" or "an actual ritual of pouring a libation."^[9] A "material object" isn't some passive, inert something awaiting intelligent description. Objects are picked out as objects by beings with intelligence, and so become shared objects of investigation and intention.

We don't project intelligence onto the world. The world is intelligible because things are intelligent. Even my persimmon tree exhibits a kind of intelligence. Animals forage and plants "explore their local environments in a bid to procure food." Intelligence implies choice, and one might say that plants learn and choose analogously "by changing information flow via chemical communication."^[10] Likewise, genes aren't bits of matter but a "shorthand symbol for a pattern of recurring elements" that becomes a pattern only when decoded by a partner that "recognizes" the code. In sum, "The material universe appears as an essentially symbolic complex," as "an exchange of 'messages,' a universe of coherent process and temporal stability, of form and motion, an intelligible universe." It is, Rowan Williams says, "no accident that the vocabulary of the natural sciences, not least biology, is littered with linguistic metaphors."^[11] That isn't projection. The world is language-like, and our knowledge of it arises from attention that is analogous to reading. The situation is not: We language animals confront inert, in-significant matter, and impose our terms on it. Rather: We language animals encounter the world as a forest of symbols, stutter to express what we read in nature, and watch and listen for nature to speak back.

I verge again toward theology, as I am wont to do. Theologically, as Williams says, "each situation is a 'word' from God," and the world "a system of reasonable and coherent communications reflecting the infinite diversity of ways in which the one divine Word . . . can be reflected and participated."^[12] In Genesis, creation takes form and is furnished by God's speech, and the Bible indicates that creation echoes the speech of the Creator: Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night brings forth knowledge (Psalm 19). For the Bible, as Johann Georg Hamann put it, human language is always translation of prior divine speech.^[13] I discover and tell a story of my persimmon tree because the tree, the lightning, the gash, the sprouting leaves first spoke to me. When I speak, the speech of God lives within by representation in a new form because, before I spoke, the Creator spoke to the creature through the

creature.[14]

Peter J. Leithart is President of the [Theopolis Institute](#), a Christian think tank in Birmingham, Alabama, and serves as Church Teacher at Trinity Presbyterian Church. He is author of many books, most recently *The Ten Commandments* (Lexham, 2020). He and his wife Noel have ten children and (as of today) thirteen grandchildren.

[1] Bickerton, *Adam's Tongue: How Humans Made Language, How Language Made Humans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009).

[2] This is the analogy proposed by Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), 5.

[3] Evans, "The Evidence Is In: There Is No Language Instinct," [Aeon](#). More fully, see Evans, *The Language Myth: Why Language Is Not An Instinct* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[4] Bickerton, *Adam's Tongue*, 21. Pinker is following Chomsky here, who decries the divergence between treatments of physical and mental development. "No one," he writes, "would take seriously a proposal that the human organism learns through experience to have arms rather than wings, or that the basic structure of particular organs results from accidental experience." Yet the "development of personality, behavior patterns, and cognitive structures in higher organisms" is explained by appeal to "social environment." Why not "study the acquisition of a cognitive structure such as language more or less as we study some complex bodily organ?" (Chomsky, *Reflections on Language* [1975] in *On Language* [London: New Press, 1998], 9).

[5] Pinker, *Language Instinct*, ch. 3.

[6] Percy, *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, And What One Has To Do With The Other* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975).

[7] Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2016), 12.

[8] *Ibid.*, 22.

[9] *Ibid.*, 95-6.

[10] Conor Cunningham, *Darwin's Pious Idea: Why Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 164.

[11] Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 101–3.

[12] *Ibid.*, 121.

[13] Hamann, *Aesthetica in Nuce* in Kenneth Haynes, ed., *Hamann: Writings on Philosophy and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 64: “To speak is to translate—from an angelic language into a human language.”

[14] Hamann, *Aesthetica in Nuce*, 65.

Of Babies, Mothers, and Language

ANCA M. NEMOIANU

Half a century ago, those of us studying child language, also known as psycholinguistics or developmental linguistics, got word of a deeply troubling discovery: a 20th-century feral child. A thirteen-year-old girl, shrouded in total silence, was found with her blind mother by her side in a welfare office. A social worker alerted the authorities, and this is how Genie, the feral child of California, took her place in the literature next to her infamous predecessor of the 18th century, the wolf-boy Victor of Aveyron. A victim of incredible neglect and abuse, Genie had spent her first years of life tied down, in a sparsely furnished bedroom of a house where the father had forbidden her mother and older brother to talk to the girl, the only noises reaching her coming from a partially open window. The child had been kept in that state since birth: no one spoke to her. Not surprisingly, when she was taken to the children's hospital, it was found that she could not speak.

A team of linguists from UCLA came to her aid, valiantly, teaching her language over the next several years. They found proof of what was widely circulating at the time in research circles: that beyond a certain age, coinciding with the onset of puberty, language cannot be acquired with the same level of success and in the same ways infants learn the natural language (or languages) they are exposed to from birth. The deficit was particularly noticeable in the area of syntax, or the stringing of words together into phrases and clauses. Given the stage of thinking about child language acquisition at the time, that represented further proof that we are born with a "device" which allows for a smooth, staged, rule-governed learning of syntax, which, if not put to use in the first years of life, atrophies, leading to an imperfect acquisition of syntax. Indeed, Genie has not acquired an adequate level of syntactic knowledge of English to this day, even though at the time she made rapid progress in learning vocabulary and quickly developed a sophisticated repertoire of non-verbal means of communication.

What struck me at the time and still troubles me is that Genie was deprived of the

miraculous years children have before they start going to school, when, in the process of emotionally bonding with their parents, mostly mothers, and with their help, they figure out the basic outlines of their mother tongue: sounds and intonation, syntax and meaning. Without a doubt, language continues to develop after school age, mainly, though not exclusively, through reading and writing, but the pace and amount of language learning never matches that initial, awe-inspiring burst.

How is language learned? Can great apes learn to use language? How about machines in the age of AI? From Washoe to Nim Chimpsky (humorously called so after the most influential linguist at the time, Noam Chomsky!) to Koko, the 1970s witnessed numerous experimental, almost desperate attempts to show that when it comes to language, there is no difference between children and apes, thus attempting to fill in a missing component of evolutionary theory. However, the most diligent programs of teaching apes a modified version of American Sign Language (ASL) did not take their subjects beyond random concatenations of two to three signs, after excessive prompting and a generous reward system. ASL is a full-fledged grammatical language; what the apes produced and understood at the height of the studies and the top of their language capabilities was not that, but just elements of a protosyntax that stopped there. As Chomsky chimed in, if the apes could learn language, they would learn it in the wild.

Now, fifty years later, the same major efforts are underway towards equipping machines with the ability to understand and produce human language. Deep-learning AI, at the basis of machine assistants, machine translation, and the like, involving pattern matching, requires huge amounts of language data—as well as culture-bound usage information and simple common sense—to produce and comprehend language. A philosopher trying to assuage people's fears of AI said that anxiety could be justified when and only when chatbots can carry out an interaction with all the twists and turns of a human conversation. For the time being, then, we can say with great confidence that language is purely and uniquely human and turn to the issue at hand: how children learn it.

What happens during the first five years of a child's life in the absence of any pathology? More recent research moves those wonder-filled years to the pre-natal months. Right after they are born, and without much face-to-face interaction through language, babies have been shown to recognize their mothers' voices. They appear to distinguish rhythmic patterns as early as 35 weeks of gestation, and at birth they even cry with intonations reflecting the language they heard prenatally (e.g., a rising intonation if they had heard French while in the womb, and a falling intonation if the

language was German). There are those who state forcefully, with scientific evidence, that the pre-natal months are the most important period of development, with all five senses, memory, and learning working at least since the seventh month of gestation. The auditory system is definitely working before birth: the voice of the mother is heard most clearly, without any filter, while the voices outside the world of the baby, such as that of the father, are heard through the swishing amniotic fluid and the baby's strong heartbeat. All in all, the voice of the mother can be said to provide continuity between the pre-natal and natal worlds.

Let's add that soon after they are born, and with little exposure to language, babies recognize as familiar most of the sounds of the language addressed to them and are oblivious to unfamiliar sounds from another language. That, happening as it seems to before they produce any vocalizations, is certainly a head start!

And then the beautiful dance of mother-child conversational interaction starts. Mothers adapt their language to what they intuit as the appropriate level of the child, simplified language, but by no means simple: they modify their intonation, repeat short statements, leave short regular pauses after each turn, leaving space for the non-verbal infant's conversational contribution, sometimes they use diminutives and reduplicate syllables ("doggie-dog"); for instance,

M: You are a beautiful baby. (PAUSE)

M: Yes, you are. (PAUSE)

M: Yes, you are. (PAUSE)

M: You are my beautiful baby.

In other words, they do not mind sounding hilarious to some onlookers and endearingly naïve to others. They do it in the firm conviction that what they do is important work. They smile and cradle their babies and make sense out of muscle twitches that look like returned smiles, and lip configurations that look like attempts to articulate a word. And if and when the babies start cooing and babbling, by the middle of the first year, the nonsense syllables acquire sense in the mother-baby interaction, and conversational enthusiasm rises. Mothers do all this without any coaching, without consulting any YouTube videos or even pediatricians; they do it

instinctually. It definitely helps that their interlocutors are irresistible: they closely and eagerly attend to the mothers' faces, blow bubbles and raspberries, and wet their diapers with excitement. They seem to know that the stream of sounds coming their way is worth paying close attention to, unlike the whirring of a refrigerator or any other environmental sound. Foundational rules that govern a culture's conversation, such as turn-taking (when a conversational turn is over and the conversational partner may jump in), as well as most of the sounds of the mother tongue, and the intonation that signals the difference between a question and a statement are thus acquired before the baby says any words. Genie didn't have any of that.

Where language acquisition is concerned, as well as affect and cognition, the first 18 months of a baby's life are invaluable. That's not enough though: the process cannot stop there, for if it does, this large amount of learning will dissipate. Then the first real decipherable words appear: American mothers, for instance, label objects in their shared environment, the "here and now," redundantly identifiable through gaze and gesture and word, and babies follow. With the rising intonation for a question and a falling one for a statement or exclamation, babies can now turn one word into a question or a statement of identification or a sign of victory: one word and three more "utterances" as conversational contributions. By 18 months, a baby can produce at least 50 words, mainly nouns and some verbs and adjectives, and understand three-four times more. By the age of five, the average child's production vocabulary is 2,000–4,000 words, and ten times more in comprehension.

The apex, though, is the beginning of syntax, when at least two words are strung together. For with incipient syntax, the conversations become more complex, and in the process, children's utterances become longer:

C: doggie

M: Doggie's gone.

C: doggie gone

M: Look doggie's in the yard.

C: look doggie yard.

In his *Phenomenology of the Human Person*, Robert Sokolowski elevates syntax to “the most tangible presence of reason and the most palpable presence of the human person.”^[1] Syntax arises from the joint interaction between child and mother. Its complexity increases with time, so that by the time children go to school, they have under their belts, as it were, the basic grammar of their mother tongue.

Considering how difficult it is to learn a language as an adult—who will hardly ever attain native-like pronunciation and intonation and will be dogged by lingering syntactic challenges—what children accomplish in five short years is nothing short of a miracle. Even a double miracle if the child is exposed to two languages from birth—an invaluable gift that parents can give their children, one that has to be treasured and reinforced with literacy lest it be lost. Genie’s later language development was marked for the rest of her life by the absence of this miracle as the confluence of affective, cognitive, and linguistic conditions necessary for effortless language acquisition were not present in her first five years of life.

At the time when the 20th-century feral child was discovered, two major theoretical paradigms came head to head: Skinner’s “behaviorism” and Chomsky’s “generative-transformational grammar,” with its accompanying “innateness hypothesis.” Both made strong claims about how language is learned. In order to advance his theory, Chomsky had to demolish the prevailing behaviorist theory, with its claim that the child comes into the world a blank slate on which language is inscribed through stimuli, operant conditioning, and reinforcement—a theory that held sway in many learning environments. And demolish he did, without retort from its author. With Chomsky’s critique of behaviorism, the pendulum now swung in favor of the notion that, given the paucity and imperfection of the language stimulus, one needs to assume that a child is natively equipped with a sort of abstract set of language rules that take in the language the child is exposed to and fit it together gradually into a more adult-like shape. Chomsky’s early Language Acquisition Device was supposed to do just that. It was supposed to contain, at least in its early incarnation, the abstract syntax Chomsky developed for English. In effect, the pendulum had swung to the other extreme: away from a thoroughly empiricist behaviorism with its repetition and imitation in the here and now (à la the ape language experiments) to a nativism of innate abstract brain structures waiting to be activated by the language of exposure.

In the 1970s, so intense was the debate that, depending on where you stood, two words became taboo: “behavior,” redolent of Skinnerian operational conditioning and “tendency,” smacking of Chomskian innateness, of instinct. As a novel and intriguing

way of looking at language learning, promoted aggressively in the academy, the new theory won out, and it lingers to this day in some form or another; many linguists subscribe to it, or at least to its most recent incarnation, which is not essentially different. Thousands of experiments assuming Chomsky's innate universal grammar, controlling variables to the best of the researchers' ability, and measuring bits and pieces of language were carried out during the subsequent decades; some tried hard to prove the theory, many could not prove it no matter how hard they tried. Behaviorism did not return as such, but in response to Chomsky's grammar, with syntax at its heart, the focus in some linguistic circles switched to language in the context of usage, to socialization through language. At the same time, quite a few longitudinal studies were carried out by mothers-researchers, looking at day-to-day linguistic behavior, systematically, without many assumptions, trying to figure out how the process unfolds naturally. However, not even in mother-baby longitudinal studies could we hear the amazement of discovery. Instead of marveling at what they were uncovering by close observation, the researchers were more keen on inserting themselves into the theoretical model regnant at the time.

This is the pendulum movement of theories: as we all want universal, all-encompassing explanations of human behavior, we produce sweeping, bold theories, only to be cut down to size by actual human behavior—diverse, quirky, delightful, unpredictable, at times magical. Today, few would go into the details of what is innate about language, nor would anyone deny some level of imitation and repetition in language acquisition. But the process of language acquisition cannot be constrained by a theory. Babies are more complex than that. It is not hard to see that the pendulum of the theoretical foundations of language acquisition is now somewhere in the middle, where it should be. For no one can deny that without exposure to language, children would not acquire language. Even cryptophasia, the interesting and still mysterious phenomenon of twins developing a secret language, or the development of creoles spontaneously arising from parents' simple pidgins, occurs on the margins of normal mother tongue acquisition. But "exposure" is qualitatively different from behaviorist stimulus. Similarly, without an inborn tendency to attend to communicative language and to test hypotheses about how language works and what the relationship between words and the world is, language will not be acquired or will be delayed considerably. But what is at work here is quite different from a language acquisition device.

Language is acquired and developed only when babies are exposed to communicative language, language that is addressed to them: not to overheard language, for Genie

must have overheard some language in her captivity; nor to TV language, as in the case of a hearing baby of deaf parents who wanted to give their offspring the gift of vocal language. In order to acquire language, children have to be talked to by their mothers (and fathers and siblings and other adults), who have to take the time to interact with them face to face, to treat them as conversational partners; mother and baby have to attend jointly to their environment and talk about it. We have to give babies credit for coming into the world equipped for exactly this kind of activity and, under normal circumstances, eager to figure out language and put it to good use. Someone observed that babies are the only mammals who at birth lift their eyes with an intense gaze, interested and ready to learn.

It goes without saying that the language development process continues beyond the first five years, for after the acquisition of literacy, language and particularly vocabulary growth, but also more complex syntax (displayed in writing), have a second flourishing. What happens to language in the first five years, however, between mothers and babies is never replicated.

Anca M. Nemoianu is a linguist who has studied the miracle-filled process of child language acquisition for many years and has taught linguistics to students at the Catholic University of America for almost as many years.

[1] Robert Sokolowski, *Phenomenology of the Human Person* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 39.

Many Tongues, One Spirit: How Language is Natively Catholic

ERIK VAN VERSENDAAL

“And they were amazed and wondered, saying, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?’” (Acts 2:7-8).

The miracle that accompanies the sending of the promised Spirit of truth (Jn 16:13) signifies and inaugurates the Church’s universal mission to co-accomplish the Father’s purpose of joining all things together in the Son (Eph 1:10). On hearing the inspired disciples, those assembled in Jerusalem to observe Pentecost, among them Parthians and Egyptians and Romans, can each confess, “we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11). Remarkably, the descended Counselor neither infuses the hearers with facility in St. Peter’s rustic Aramaic, the Lord’s own mother-tongue, nor unites all the crowd in a new vernacular hitherto unspoken by man. Instead, he pleases to safeguard all the diverse languages of the earth when he comes to build these pilgrims up “like living stones” into his own temple on the foundation which is Christ (1 Pt 2:5; 1 Cor 3:11, 16). But when in remembering this event we cast an eye back to Scripture’s other monumental building, the Tower Nimrod laid in his monstrous project to bridge the ever-greater abyss between God and man, we might ask why the Holy Spirit would employ, rather than bypass or abolish, a mark of division in the human family as his elected means of establishing our new unity with God and with one another. Is linguistic variety not a remnant of the judgment that cast down, confused, and scattered that presumptuous people who sought to make a name for themselves, to divinize themselves, with their all-assimilating skyscraper in the land of Shinar? Shouldn’t salvation undo that punishment, that primordial diaspora, which to this day alienates one nation from its neighbor? Or might it be that this punishment was a saving grace for the very reason that the plurality of languages is rooted in nature, and is thus available for being sanctified and everlastingly preserved?

The goodness of linguistic difference seems at first too obvious to warrant vindication. We are inclined to affirm it without hesitation, perhaps because it is a fact of life, or because we are accustomed by regnant opinion to praise any distinguishing trait as an assertion of self-willed dignity: sheer difference as indifferent to any end. Perhaps, more thoughtfully, we recognize that each language bears within itself the memory and character of the people born into its cadences and grammar and idioms, and so cannot be uprooted without harm to that people's way of being. But why wouldn't participating in the same culture and so invoking the same lexicon not be the needful guarantee of universal fraternity? What interest could the Church have in protecting and promoting the tongues of the nations?

In a stimulating and weighty essay, "Babylonian Transcendence: The One Logos and the Many Languages," the late Catholic philosopher Ferdinand Ulrich plumbed this theme with a meditation both Biblical in outlook and ontological in method.^[1] These present remarks, far from a sufficient account of Ulrich's text, merely take their bearings from the insights he offers there. Those who had the privilege to converse with Professor Ulrich in person attest that he himself had a wondrous gift both for finding himself at home in languages other than his own and for making space to welcome strangers into his native German. He demonstrated by his living example how the boundaries between languages can at once be perfectly opened and perfectly upheld with a hospitality animated by charity.

The Polyphony of All Flesh

To begin, let us take for granted the guileless standpoint that any given noun refers and really attains to the nature it names. Any single language's vocabulary thus reflects the kinds of things that are or could be, their characteristic properties and works, and the tiers of interdependent relationships among them. Each language is copious because the world itself is plentiful. But why such a quantity of beings at all? According to Aquinas, the universe could not be an epiphany of divine goodness were only a single created essence, however noble, brought into existence.^[2] No finite nature, nor even any number of natures, could capture the measure of God's perfection. Yet only an abundantly-varied and mutually-coordinated multiplicity of essences befits the inexhaustible fecundity of being, that primordial gift which God freely delivers for the sake of freeing each thing to be itself together with all others. We recognize how God's triune causality is thoroughly generous already in the unity-in-diversity of creation, to which the unity-in-diversity of each language responds and corresponds.

We can only hold that human language is faithful to that which it names if the mind is originally disposed toward receiving things as they are. Were it not the case that the speaker's mind genuinely has access to the radical depth of that which he knows—i.e., its form—language would be nothing more than a superficial contrivance for forcefully systematizing anarchic experience. Yet the first reason why persons can grasp any nature is that the intellect always belongs in intimate contact with, or is pervasively illuminated by the radiance of, that same gift of being by which each and every essence is actualized. No nature is sheerly opaque even to human reason, and, since saying a thing truly follows upon knowing it, no nature is finally resistant to being named. This “connatural” communion between mind and being means there is an inclination in things to be gathered up in the human word that is met by man's own unbounded desire to know and to give voice to what he knows. Notice how affirming the mind's universal power to conceive what is, far from a hubristic posture, relieves the suspicion that naming is but a fictive act of violence. For if it falls to man to utter that which he perceives, he can only do so by first obediently and gratefully consenting to the thing's own veritable self-revelation. Only such humility before reality, moreover, lets me trust that you behold and understand the same things I do, that the words we exchange mean for both of us what they mean for each of us.

If man can name whatever exists by virtue of knowing it as it is, and if each being has but one nature, why would he ever pronounce more than a single word to signify a given thing? Form is not the sole principle of diversity in creation. Each corporeal substance also presents itself by means of its matter, through the distinctive harmony of its complex, changing surface. On Ulrich's view, the many-faceted body of created things is neither a brute fact nor an absurd happenstance, but the extreme seal of the gratuity with which God releases being into its generative fullness. Each thing's kenosis into the moving, growing differentiation of its members is no fragmenting fall, but the rightful course along which it lovingly perfects its own God-beloved goodness, and so represents in action the creative bestowal upon which it continually depends. What has this to do with language? While the concept is the very form of the thing as apprehended by the intellect, the human person, as embodied spirit, comes to understand essences only on the basis of his sensory experience of concrete wholes in their self-becoming. When he gives voice to his understanding with his tongue and breath, his idea, which Aquinas after Augustine referred to as the “inner word” or “the word of the heart,” undergoes what we could call an incarnation.^[3] This audible enunciation of the known form reflects the manifold material exteriority of the named thing in a different mode. Man not only intimately bears the form of a material thing in spirit, but embraces it as a whole, and with the whole of himself, by vocalizing its

name in the flesh. There is an analogy between an individual corporeal substance that rightly manifests its nature in its unique body and the unique pattern of syllables through which an individual spoken word expresses its meaning. Each spoken, written, or remembered human word can only indicate a universal hylomorphically—that is, from within the proper limits of the language in which it has its place. Such boundaries are no hindrance to expression, then, but instead make expression, and even understanding, possible in the first place. Indeed, a word that sought to represent a body's numerous determinate aspects exhaustively would be too idiosyncratic to signify anything (witness the thunderclap that opens James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*). Yet something of matter's exuberant diversity is echoed when a given substance is articulated in numerous concrete languages.

True to Mystery

Even as the word's communication transcends the transmission of physical stimuli, its sound or script is deeper than an indifferent cipher for an idea that could be relayed by any other vehicle. If any human word is appropriately circumscribed, why does this particular ordering of vowels and syllables denote the thing it does? Consider how a word's very sound can evoke the meaning it signifies—perhaps all words are onomatopoeic at root. The assignation of this word to this thing is more than arbitrary. At its best, it is aesthetically apt: the formulated sound could always be otherwise, but is just right as is—it rings true. This versatile convenience of the spoken word's "body" again recalls the gratuity of being that saturates and is refracted throughout the overflowing variety of the material realm. Naming is always foremost a poetic act insofar as man's response to real things calls for a kind of creative finesse in finding the right phonic pattern to suit the substance it means to express.

The fittingness of linguistic diversity is bound up, then, with the positive elasticity of matter and with matter's docile correspondence to form. But why does each language have its own word even for spiritual realities that stand above matter's fluidity? When Dante meets Adam in *Paradiso*, our first father explains to the pilgrim how and why man's appellations for God shifted and transformed down the ages:

That man has language is the work of Nature,

But that his language should be thus or so,

She leaves to you to choose it as you wish.

Before I went to banishment below

I was the name on earth for the high Good

That now has clothed me in the robe of joy;

And then they called it El—right that they should,

For mortal use is like a branch's leaves:

Where one may fall, another springs to bud.[4]

Adam hands down to his descendant how linguistic development is akin to organic metamorphosis. Each body of language belongs to a time-bound culture, and both reflects and mediates that culture's own manner of abiding in the world. A given people's speech grows out of and is colored by the place in which they dwell and by the kind of life this locale calls forth from them. This makes sense of the common experience that one thinks and even perceives differently when inhabiting a foreign language. Even the name by which a people understands and addresses the divine is affected by their incarnation in a unique setting and by their habits of being there. Yet human language shows its materiality not only in being unique in every case, but also in transforming as one generation passes into the next. We find recorded in the etymological connections across language-trees something of the genealogy of that cultural differentiation that comes along with being naturally embodied, but also the radical unity that abides this branching. Every human language is carried forward as a tradition, and all these unfolding traditions look back together to a common, generous "nativity."

Adam's discourse on the various titles man has used to invoke God since Eden calls to mind the "divine names" theme prevalent in classical and medieval thought. Associated above all with its most magisterial representative, Dionysius the Areopagite, this teaching holds that we say God in many ways because he absolutely transcends our power to conceptualize and hence to verbalize him. Our analogous naming of God magnifies him, therefore, by confessing him as the infinitely-excellent cause of all perfections we know in the finite order. Might this endless outpouring of

names by which each people gives thanks to the Creator shed further light on why difference among human languages is fitting? Explaining a sense of mystery as super-abounding truth, Josef Pieper writes: “St. Thomas does not hold the thesis that neither God nor things are knowable. On the contrary, they are so utterly knowable that we can never come to the end of our endeavors to know them. It is precisely their knowability that is inexhaustible.”

[5] Each created thing bearing its own one nature can be spoken in many tongues not only because the principle of matter positively produces such variety, but, most basically, because there is an ontological richness to each thing that by forever exceeding our utterance, forever elicits it anew. If, as Ulrich is always fond of recalling, being is “the likeness of divine love” (Aquinas), this super-comprehensible fullness that belongs to each thing’s singular act of existence is the stamp of the Creator who sends being and remains causally present in his gift. The languages in concert interpretatively unfold each creature’s God-bestowed, God-like inexhaustibility.

Logos is Common (Heraclitus)

Man vocalizes his understanding in speech because his intellect generously depends on his senses, but, still more obviously, he does so to share this understanding with his neighbor. Beyond humanly bringing the world to light, speech is at the service of uniting you and me in a common grasp and embrace of reality, and indeed in our mutual recognition that we grasp and embrace reality together. Human knowing has its natural locus in dialogue. Because we are embodied, we generate, and so are sheltered in a family, race, and species of which there are many members. We are constituted socially, rightly desire to dwell in community, and seek to impart our understanding to one another in speech and to enter more deeply into things through the mediation of one other’s words. Human language thus reveals the communal character of personal intelligence and how it is oriented to the reciprocal presence of friends in the flesh. Learning one’s mother-tongue at home is itself an initiation into knowing reality through dialogue, fitting because all knowledge, above all of God, is a mode of conversation, and thereby of mutual indwelling. Yet if meaningful speech is what allows me to be interiorly present to you and you to me, why, again, should I want you to have a native language other than my own?

Sharing a single language is undoubtedly the primary natural mode of social relation. However, each human language is universally hospitable to any human speaker. Man is so constituted that he can be admitted into any other concrete language, so that speaking a second language grants a heightened experience of the native intimacy

each person shares with every other. The joy of living out this ontological intimacy as a person consists precisely in learning to see and, yes, to speak like the unique stranger whom I discover to be my neighbor, my kin. “In loving conversation each hears the other in his very own language, and each so speaks in his own proper language that he has entered into that of the other and is heard in the other’s language.”[6] Participation in the foreigner’s experience and understanding through sharing his language—a possibility rooted in being’s generous availability to every mind—presents an especially vivid image of the fellowship of each with all that is the Father’s coming kingdom of charity.

The Babel-ian temptation is to render the face-to-face hospitality involved in bringing a guest into one’s own language superfluous through neutralizing the need for patient listening in order to inhabit another’s speech, and through suppressing dependence on the interlocutor’s receptivity in order to be heard. Whether this nullification of linguistic (dialogical) difference takes the form of instructional programs, economic policies, or technological interference, the temptation haunts us still—often enough under the banner of difference. Rightly glimpsing that no people is made to be alone, the latter-day Nimrod nevertheless refuses to accept that each culture is porous to living exchange with every other only through remaining itself. Fearing that works alone suffice for salvation, he seeks to solve the problem of human division lovelessly, devising a formally-unifying framework that actually entrenches each of its subjects all the more inescapably in the despair of ever reaching his neighbor. So doing, he effectively rejects our incarnate existence, wearing thereby the sign of the anti-Christ (cf. 1 Jn 4:3). On Pentecost, meanwhile, the Roman heard the Galilean’s Aramaic as Latin. “The languages no longer exclude one another, but each opens into itself for the other by virtue of the Spirit of truth and love that breathes within it. In the Pneuma of the one Word each language has room in itself (not beside itself) for the other languages.”[7] As the Spirit was shed abroad in their hearts, speaker and hearer were united through the Logos in an exchange of enkindled charity, and yet, marvelous to say, each one’s tongue remained inviolately unconsumed.

Erik van Versendaal received his PhD from the Pontifical John Paul II Institute (Washington, D.C.) and is a Philosophy Tutor at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts.

[1] “Die Babylonische Transzendenz: Der Eine Logos und die Vielen Sprachen” in Ferdinand Ulrich, *Logo-Tokos: Der Mensch und das Wort* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 2003), 351–505.

[2] Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, 72.

[3] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, q.34, a.1.

[4] Dante Alighieri, *Paradise*, trans. Anthony Esolen (New York: Random House, Inc., 2005), 285 (Canto XXVI.130–138). In his note on the passage, found on p. 473 of the volume, Esolen comments: “To wish to speak a never-changing language is to wish not to be an embodied being but a god.”

[5] Josef Pieper, *Guide to St. Thomas*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 160.

[6] Ferdinand Ulrich, *Logo-Tokos*, 371-372. Faithful translation, countenancing and delighting in every term or turn of phrase that resists translation, is thus more truly a “labor of love” than is typically acknowledged.

[7] *Ibid.*, 488.

Learning Language in the Womb of the Family

SUSAN WALDSTEIN

“Unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 18:3)

Children seem to naturally encounter and relate to the world with an affection that reflects the Creator’s. “Behold it was very good” (Gen 1:31). Can the way children learn teach us an epistemology of love?

Swiss zoologist Adolf Portmann and educator Maria Montessori^[1] both refer to the first year of human life as a kind of **second year of pregnancy**, taking place in the womb of the family, the “**social uterus**.”

It is within this social setting that the infant achieves three major accomplishments his first year: upright posture, language, and the development of thought.^[2] None of these can be learned well in the mother’s womb. Human interaction is so essential that most **feral children**, who have been raised by animals and later rescued by humans, never learn language or upright posture. In this article we wish to consider the astonishing achievement of learning a language.

Many evolutionary biologists assume that human speech developed from lower animals’ sounds. They try to trace the transformations necessary in mouths, tongues, and larynges that make human speech possible. They fail to recognize the essential difference between animal sounds and human language. Human words are manmade signs. They mean something. They represent the natures of things. We use them in combinations to communicate to others what we see, understand, desire, fear, or wonder about.

Animal sounds like lion roars and bird courtship calls express the inner states of the animals and these “communications” and responses to them are unique to a species and develop spontaneously by nature. Humans, on the other hand, do not have a ready-made language that develops by nature. They must learn it by their own intense

effort.

I. Phases in Language Development

Infants already begin learning their native language in the womb. They recognize their mother's voice, their native language, and even nursery rhymes that they have heard in the womb.

Processing the speech stream begins before birth, as soon as the auditory system becomes functional at approximately 25 weeks gestation. Neonates ... can also already distinguish: 1) the sounds of their mother's native language from the sounds of other languages, 2) their mother's voice from the voice of other adults speaking the same language, and 3) speech content that is familiar (e.g., a nursery rhyme recited by their mother) from similar, but unfamiliar content.[3]

One experiment establishing the native language preference learned in the womb took place with forty French four-day-old infants. They were played tapes of French or Russian while sucking a pacifier after a baseline of no sound. The infants became more animated and sucked more vigorously when they heard the French. Infants displayed no difference in activity when they were exposed to two foreign languages.[4]

Another experiment involved 28 mothers reciting the same poem to their babies between the 33rd and 37th week of gestation. The babies were then played tapes of the poem and of another poem they had never heard. The known poem resulted in lower fetal heart rate, whereas the unknown poem had no effect on heart rate. This suggests that the babies could distinguish between the poems and found listening to the one their mother had recited calming. [5]

After birth, children not only have to learn to recognize and make the specific sounds of their native language (phonology), they also need to learn the meanings of words (semantics), as well as the typical arrangement of words in a sentence of their native language (syntax). All of this happens within the community of parent or caregiver and baby in the first year.

The first year of life is a crucial period for infants and their caregivers to coconstruct a communication foundation using gaze, vocalizations, and gestures in dynamic interactions. Language learning occurs in the context of infants' communicative interactions and the quality of these interactions strongly

predicts later language abilities.[6]

By the third or fourth month, infants begin to use their mouth to make many different sounds. They begin to babble. By the ninth month, they can produce all the sounds necessary for speaking in any human language. As they learn their native language, they will drop many of these sounds from their “vocabulary.” They will have to relearn how to make these sounds if they wish to learn a foreign language.[7]

By the sixth month, before babies speak their first word, they already recognize a number of words signifying persons and objects like “mama” or “banana.”[8] They understand words that name the parts of the body.[9] They distinguish nonlinguistic sounds like coughing from meaningful words. The growth of infants’ word vocabulary is strongly bound to the amount of time their mother or father spends talking to them.

Infants differ substantially in their rates of language growth, and slow growth predicts later academic difficulties. In this study, we explored how the amount of speech directed to infants influenced the development of children’s skill in real-time language processing and vocabulary learning. All-day recordings of parent-infant interactions at home revealed striking variability among families in how much speech caregivers addressed to their child. Infants who experienced more child-directed speech became more efficient in processing familiar words in real time and had larger expressive vocabularies by the age of 24 months.[10]

By the ninth or tenth month, infants begin to imitate words and inflection patterns from the people around them. This is a long and intense process, lasting years. The imitations are very weak to begin with. Children clearly understand the meaning of many words before they can say them. They passionately desire to communicate and can become frustrated when adults fail to understand them.[11]

At the same time that he learns the sound of his native language and the meaning of its words, the infant also learns its syntax or language pattern. English speakers, for instance, must learn that adjectives usually precede nouns; by contrast, Spanish speakers learn that adjectives follow nouns. Already at two months, babies can recognize such word order patterns.[12] At nine months, babies were found to listen longer to sentences where a pause in speaking was made between the subject/noun and predicate rather than to sentences where the pause was not connected to the grammatical structure.

The actual acquisition of speech—which follows the production of sound toward the end of the early postnatal period—is the imitative adoption of a complete, preexisting social apparatus, a process that is deeply intertwined with the child’s life as a social being and continues for a long time with great intensity.[13]

An average human child has a vocabulary of a thousand words at the age of three often without much special effort on the parents’ part.[14] At three, children are intensely curious about the world around them. Language is far more for them than an activity useful for acquiring things. They are constantly asking questions, describing things, making up stories, communicating and receiving love, and even wondering about the Creator. This rich and varied use of language is distinctively human. In this vein, Portmann comments on the difference between human language and animal communication.

No one underestimates the wealth of animalian means of communication, as revealed by behavioral research.... Nowhere, however, do we find the possibility for using a word as a “sign,” freely disposable, independent of a particular situation.[15]

II. Ordinary Language and Common Conceptions

The Thomist philosopher Duane Berquist used to say, “Unless you become like a little child, you shall not enter the Kingdom of Philosophy.” The things children learn in their first years of life contain the seeds of all human knowledge. They are the common conceptions of ordinary language which represent reality as we meet it in our daily life.

In an article on “The Three Sources of Philosophy,” Charles De Koninck says that the common conceptions are “the first inescapable source of philosophy”[16] because our intellects depend on the things understood for knowledge. These first conceptions are what babies first grasp as they learn to name things in their native language. Words symbolize the common natures of the things around them, as children understand them. De Koninck reflects on the certitude of these first common conceptions.

There is a direct proportion between the inescapable certitude of the things most commonly known and the difficulty of describing or defining them. Yet, if we did not have such preexistent knowledge, we would ask no question about anything, nor would we communicate with one another except by sniffs and grunts.[17]

Common conceptions are not preexistent in us at birth as fully formed concepts and propositions, but “by an inclination of nature that is prior to any deliberate and constructive endeavor to learn.”[18] My eighteen-month-old granddaughter just said her first three-word sentence, “Oh, Mama, dog!” She will learn much about dogs and their instincts and varieties as she grows up, but she will never lose that first grasp of what a dog is.

As soon as we can grasp what a whole is and what a part is, we understand “A whole is greater than a part.” No reasoning is necessary or even possible here because there is nothing prior to reason from. This grasp of common conceptions of natures, of what things are, though understood only partially, and the first principles of reason are part of the “equipment” of human nature. They make it possible to proceed from such partial knowledge to the more complete and precise knowledge of philosophy or science.

A great danger in philosophy and science is to cut oneself off from the first common conceptions. Philosophical systems, like Kant’s or Hegel’s start from words, defined very formally, which already depend on much elaborate philosophical reasoning. [19] Even Aristotle or St. Thomas can become a system if one takes their definitions as the starting points and forgets to keep looking at the object of the definition. When one begins with “prime matter” and “substantial form” instead of with green apples turning red, one begins to demonstrate inside a system instead of deepening one’s grasp of reality.

Scientists risk this danger when they take the symbol for the thing itself. De Koninck warns, “If we substituted time, as the physicist defined it, for the time seized by our common conception there would be no time left: no past, no present, no future.”[20] A **definition of time** attributed to many physicists including Albert Einstein and Donald Ivey is “what clocks measure.” The admittedly mysterious being of time is reduced to a measurement that can be represented by a t . Since one can manipulate algebraic symbols like t in any way one wishes, physicists do not flinch from having negative time or time that slows down or speeds up. What this could mean in light of time as we actually know it, measuring our lives from past to present to future, is not thought through.

III. Children Understand the Unity of Knowledge and Love

Children affirm and rejoice in all they encounter. They are fascinated by nature guides because they love to learn the name of everything they observe. My grandsons used to

love to catch the orange and brown lizards in our Florida lanai with a little net, put them in a clear plastic box, and watch them with intense interest. Now they have graduated to catching grey rats and even occasional corn snakes to their grandmother's discomfort. Children like all weather: rain, snow, or sun. It is all exciting, unless it prevents them from going outside. Taking a walk with a small child can be very annoying for an adult because they constantly stop and look, picking up anything of interest: every leaf, stone, stick, insect, or animal is cause for attention and wonder. Luigi Giussani calls this curiosity, "an open disposition, full of positive affirmation, nothing other than an original sympathy with being, with reality."^[21] However, this curiosity can be so easily lost.

Growing up often means growing more practical, focused, and utilitarian. We no longer even see much that surrounds us. It takes a special effort to notice the purple finches in the oak tree outside my study window, the sunlight gleaming on the upper twigs, the wispy cirrus clouds high in the sky, or the dried brown leaves blowing around on the grass below the oak. Often all I see is my computer screen.

The current trend of keeping a nature journal is a marvelous remedy for this "forgetfulness of being." It is a pedagogical tool to teach us to become like children, attentive again to all that surrounds us in nature. It is a taking in without devouring, a becoming richer without impoverishing another. It teaches us to love what we know.

IV. Recovering the Unity of Knowledge and Love

In a recent article in *First Things*, [N.T. Wright](#) speaks of "an epistemology of love."

It requires taking creation seriously, which for the Christian means receiving creation as what it is, the gift of love from the good and wise creator. Our delighted, sensitive, respectful, and curious exploration of creation is the response of love to the love we have received.^[22]

This is far from our rationalistic culture's idea of how to seek objective knowledge. No feelings or values should interfere with reason. Luigi Giussani critiques this position by pointing out an absurd conclusion. As soon as a person becomes passionately interested in any question or subject, he is no longer capable of achieving objective knowledge about it. Giussani suggests an image to show the opposite is true. Our interest in a subject is like a lens that brings the object closer to our mind so that we

can know it better.[23]

Even in natural science, our affection can lead to deeper knowledge. It can open us to investigating new kinds of questions. It can lead to studying the thousands of patterns of snowflakes, the elaborate arrangement of colors and forms in a peacock's tail, or the mating flights of dragon flies because they are beautiful.

In *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis calls for “a new Natural Philosophy.” He compares the goal of science of earlier ages, “to conform the soul to reality,”[24] to that of contemporary science, “to subdue reality to the wishes of men.”[25] Francis Bacon and Descartes set out modernity's program of pursuing knowledge useful to man, and its success has been prodigious. Most scientists work within a materialistic framework that regards questions about goodness, beauty, meaning, forms and purposes as nonsensical. C.S. Lewis compares our Model of the Universe to a stencil. “It determines how much of that total truth will appear and what pattern it will suggest.”[26] The stencil principally allows measurements of quantities and quantitative relationships to appear. Every phenomenon must finally be reduced to forces and the arrangement and motions of particles so that the phenomenon can eventually be controlled and manipulated for the comfort and pleasure of man.[27]

Children are not interested in measurement. They do not want to control the world but to explore it and enjoy each thing's unique properties. They can help us recover an epistemology of love that seeks to understand and delight in the word spoken into each creature that gives it its qualitative richness.

Wonder is awe before reality with a longing to penetrate it more deeply and savor it with admiration. The child can teach us wonder, because he takes in what is offered without presuppositions that restrict what he sees or prevent him from following the given or the sign to its Source. He learns with joy; he is attached to the reality he discovers. It molds his soul. Guissani thus comments on Jesus's words that tell us to “become like little children” (Mt 18:3):

He was not holding up childishness as an ideal, but instead the openness of soul that nature automatically grants children, because it is such a necessary condition for the development of the human; like every value, in the adult it is achieved with difficulty.[28]

This openness of soul is what makes us human, rational animals. The child's astonishing work in the acquisition of language flows from a thirst for union with

being in knowledge. It is the embodiment of “the epistemology of love.”

Susan Waldstein teaches theology at [Franciscan University of Steubenville](#). Her area of special interest is the interface of theology and biology in such topics as evolution and hierarchy in nature.

[1] Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*, 4th ed., trans. Claude A. Claremont (Madras, India: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1963), 61: “Man seems to have two embryonic periods. One is pre-natal, like that of the animals; the other is post-natal and only man has this.”

[2] Adolf Portmann, *A Zoologist Looks at Humankind*, trans. Judith Schaeffer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 19–62. Hereafter cited as Portmann (1990).

[3] D. Levine, K. Storther-Garcia et al., “Language Development in the First Year of Life: What Deaf Children Might Be Missing Before Cochlear Implantation,” *Otology and Neurotology* 37, no. 32 (February 2016): 56–62.

[4] Jacques Mehler, Peter Jusczyk et al., *Cognition* 29 (1988): 143–78.

[5] A. DeCasper, J. Lecanuet, M. Budnel et al., “Fetal Reactions to Recurrent Maternal Speech,” *Infant Behavior and Development* 7 (1994): 49–63, at 57.

[6] Levine (2016), 57.

[7] Portmann (1990), 88.

[8] Levine (2016), 57.

[9] Ruth Tincoff and Peter Jusczyk, “Six-month-olds comprehend words that refer to parts of the body,” *Infancy* 17 (2011): 432–44.

[10] A. Weisleder and A. Fernald, “Talking to Children Matters: Early Language Experience Strengthens Processing and Builds Vocabulary,” *Psychological Science* 24, no. 11 (November 1, 2013): 2143–52.

[11] Portmann (1990), 88.

[12] D. Mandel, D. Kemler, D. Nelson, P. Jusczyk, “Infants Remember the Order of Words in a Spoken Language,” *Cognitive Development* 11 (1996): 181–96.

[13] Portmann (1990), 88.

- [14] Robert Agros and George N. Stanciu, *The New Biology* (Boston: New York Science Library, 1987), 81.
- [15] Portmann (1990), 89.
- [16] Charles De Koninck, "The Three Sources of Philosophy," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 38 (1964): 13–22, at 18.
- [17] *Ibid.*, 14–15.
- [18] *Ibid.*, 13.
- [19] *Ibid.*, 16.
- [20] De Koninck, 16.
- [21] Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, trans. John Zucchi (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 127.
- [22] N.T. Wright, "Loving to Know," *First Things* 300 (February 2020), 25–34.
- [23] *Ibid.*, 26–28.
- [24] C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1971), 77.
- [25] *Ibid.*, 77.
- [26] C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 223.
- [27] Measurement can, of course, be a necessary and helpful method of learning about nature; it just cannot be the only way.
- [28] Luigi Giussani, *Il Senso di Dio e l'uomo moderno* (Milan: Bur, 2010), 28.

Autism: An Unexpected Journey

MEREDITH DANIEL

Ten-month-old Simon sat on the floor next to a basket of books, intently gazing at page after page. The books held his attention, even as I called to him, “Simon, there’s a train outside! Do you hear the train? Simon. Simon! Simon, do you hear the train?” He didn’t look up at me. The windows were open on that beautiful May morning as I visited with my friend and her daughter, Isabella, in my home. Even without being prompted, Isabella perked up, engaged her mom with eye contact, and proclaimed a toddler’s version of “Choo-choo!” She was born one day before Simon, and as I watched her interact with her mom that morning, my heart sank.

I had noticed for some time that Simon was lagging in his development, not mastering motor skills like his peers. He wasn’t measuring up to his older brother, who had been ahead of the curve on his milestones. I had secretly congratulated myself that my first-born was award-winning, but this son? He wouldn’t even look up when I called his name. I imagined that it would be okay if he crawled and walked later than normal, and it was fine with me if he wasn’t the fastest kid in the neighborhood. But his spotty communication with his mama started to tie me up in knots.

As he passed his first birthday and eventually started walking, it wasn’t that he didn’t communicate with me, it was that it was only on his terms. He was sweetly affectionate, generous with snuggles and smiles, but there were times when he wasn’t available, and it was then that I needed him. I grasped tightly to the idea that I needed him to see me and connect his heart to mine, but the louder I chanted his beautiful name, “Simon! Simon Benedict!” the more absorbed he seemed to be in his favorite stack of books.

It was another day in May when Simon was nearing his third birthday that my husband and I received the definitive diagnosis which collected his global delays into a single word: Autism. It sure made sense, given his language delays and idiosyncrasies,

repetitive behaviors, and unawareness of social customs. Although the diagnosis fit what we were seeing in Simon, it was devastating to have to admit that this was going to be a lifelong struggle which he would not outgrow.

In his early years, we ran ourselves ragged, literally chasing after him every time we were outside or at a social gathering. Our commands to stay close in public were either unheard or filtered out as he ran toward whatever seemed more fun. He was eventually joined by two more brothers, growing our family to a total of four young (wild!) boys. His interest in knocking down a sitting baby or twisting his little brothers' ears brought on stress and frustration, not just for me but also for my husband and the poor little boys who learned to duck and hide whenever he approached them.

The real difficulty in helping Simon to grow and develop was that he didn't understand or respond to us in the same way as his brothers. Not only was he slower to develop speech to communicate his thoughts and feelings, but he didn't receive language in the same way as the rest of us. At times, he was encased in his own world, oblivious to our calling him into communion. With the help of speech therapists, we worked with him on following multiple-step commands, but for him it was hard to follow more than one step without becoming distracted. Now, at age thirteen and with an added diagnosis of ADHD, his mornings involve a lot of hand-over-hand reminders of each step in his routine so that he can be ready for school on time. His difficulty with receptive language has made us try to communicate with him in ways he more easily understands, such as pictures, written schedules, or, often, bribery!

Although Simon has difficulty receiving language in ordinary ways, he nevertheless has a fascination with sound. So intense is this fascination that it's disrupted household harmony more than once. When his brother Joseph, two years his junior, was just learning to sit up, two-year-old Simon regularly helped him back on the floor with a shove. Simon's fascinated expression after this offense made him impossible to discipline. He didn't hear our corrections but, rather, seemed to revel in the shrill sound his brother was making. Over the years, he has often tinkered with sounds on toys to discover cause and effect, filling his sensory system with the auditory stimuli he craves. His early "baby bowling pin" adventures seemed to be the start of his experiments in controlling sounds. At the time, while he examined cause and effect with his brother's crying, seemingly lacking empathy, we desperately searched for a way to end the madness and keep the baby safe.

As a mother who planned from the beginning to homeschool her kids, Simon's challenges moved me to look deeply within myself and acknowledge my need for more

support. Instead of being taught at home, he has taken us on many adventures, including therapies, different schools, and respite care. When he was first in preschool, I wanted so badly to know everything that he experienced each day, so I asked what many moms ask when their children come home from school: “What did you do today?” His answer never, ever made sense. It served instead as a springboard for him to sing a song or piece together a nonsense sentence that didn’t apply to the situation. He certainly never answered my question directly. One day, when he was three and seemed to be enjoying his preschool routine, he came home and said, “Jayden, come get your stick!” At last, a story from his day! I eagerly pieced together a few facts I knew about preschool: each child had a wide popsicle stick with his or her picture on it; as the children moved to different stations, they brought their sticks; and there was a girl named Jayden in his class. I had it! A teacher had told Jayden to take her stick as she moved stations, and Simon was repeating the exact words for me. It seems a tiny thing, but to me, it was momentous. He was communicating to me in his way, and I was decoding and understanding him.

His preschool report to me that day was an example of echolalia, a unique way that he sometimes uses language. It showcases an intelligence that isn’t obvious to people who first meet him. Echolalia is common in people with autism, who repeat a phrase or sentence picked up earlier. Sometimes he will repeat a question that has just been asked as he processes it. Usually, Simon brings a remembered sentence from a show or book and plugs it into a situation where it fits. Oftentimes at dinner he’ll say something that sounds stilted given the family conversation, but we’ve learned to ask him where the words are from, and he can almost always tell us. One of my favorites is, “Mommy, you’re a master chef!” This may not be perfectly applied, but the context is right and the sentiment sweet.

One evening when he was five and I was helping him to get ready for bed, he spoke to me in a somewhat robotic voice, “Don’t worry, things’ll get better.” I was touched at his thoughtfulness as he repeated it over and over. Zipping through the room, his older brother informed me that Mom Asparagus utters something very similar in a VeggieTales cartoon. Though I was slightly disappointed that it wasn’t unique, I marveled that Simon had applied the phrase correctly, using it in his own way to share a moment of tenderness. As I later watched the clip of Mom Asparagus sitting on the bed and singing to her son who had had a hard day, I realized that Simon may have been connecting the affectionate exchange between mother and son in the show to our relationship. Even though he didn’t use his own words, the discovery of his meaning in the borrowed words was perhaps more touching than any other “I love

you.”

In the past few years, we have welcomed two daughters into our family. Simon, then, has four younger siblings who have all in turn been good preschool playmates for him, teaching him how to play and talk with other children. His siblings have been the best therapy, accepting him as normal and finding him curiously fun. They also know when to duck and hide from the occasional ear twist or head swipe, which we continue to discourage.

Our journey with our son is not one that we would have chosen had we been given a list of abilities and disabilities in a child. We long to communicate with him, with his soul, and to enjoy meaningful conversation, but the way his brain functions does not allow him to engage with us in this way. He has difficult behaviors that make for some very challenging moments, and I can't count the times I have asked God to heal him and to bring him out of the fog that seems to keep him at arm's length.

But the suffering of this journey is being transformed by grace. At times I feel that it's my Simon, not the Cyrenian, who walks under the heavy burden of the Cross, always struggling against his body and mind to do or say the right thing. And when I approach him in his difficult state, hoping for patience to deal with him, I shoulder the Cross that I, too, have been given. Messy and sometimes disappointing, raising a child with autism is painful work. My cries to God in the early days after his diagnosis to “heal and change Simon, reroute my path, make this easier!” have been transformed under the weight of the Cross next to Simon and Jesus. My prayer has become, “Change my heart. Help me to understand and love this child. And thank You.” It seems that, slowly, the patient, long-suffering Lamb of God is teaching me the value of hidden communication and unexpected gifts. My own weakness has been revealed to me in uncomfortable ways along this path, but the revelation is the gift. Without knowing it, Simon is helping to refine his mother in fire. Then again maybe he does know it, and he smiles to himself when I'm not looking.

Meredith Daniel writes from Silver Spring, Maryland, where she lives with her husband and six children.

Words and Wonder

DAWN EDEN GOLDSTEIN

McWhorter, John, *The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language* (New York: Perennial, 2003).

John McWhorter's bestselling *The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language* amounts to a literary bait-and-switch, albeit one of a pleasant and highly informative kind.

At first, the book presents itself as a faithful undertaking of the mission suggested by its title and subtitle. McWhorter in his introduction promises the reader that he will tell "a fascinating story" concerning how "one original language has developed into six thousand." But a mere three pages later, the author hints that he has in fact another mission in mind: namely, conveying to the reader a sense of how the diversity of languages is akin to the diversity displayed by nature itself:

Stephen Jay Gould has told us that evolution is geared not toward progressive "fitness" but toward simply filling available ecological niches. Bacteria, toads, wallabies, and orangutans do not fall on a cline of increasing closeness to God; all four are equally well suited in leading the lives they lead. In the same way, language evolution is not geared toward improvement. Instead, languages change like the lava clump in a lava lamp: always different but at no point differentiable in any qualitative sense from the earlier stage.

Hence, McWhorter says, "the process" by which languages change "is better termed transformation than evolution" (emphasis in original).

This is an interesting claim, not least because McWhorter brings God into it.

The Christian, or at least the Thomist, can lay aside the assertion, carried over from Gould, that orangutans are no closer to God than bacteria. It is true in the sense that each pursues its natural purpose equally well; however, it is not strictly true, as those

creatures that come closer to having reason—or that assist creatures that do have reason (that is, human persons)—fall higher on the scale of nobility (see *Summa theologiae* I, q. 65, a. 2).

With that part of McWhorter’s claim having been dismissed, what remains is his implication that the diversity of languages is analogous to the diversity that we see in nature. This is recognizable to the Thomist as a linguistic application of Aquinas’s explanation for “the distinction and multitude of things”: “Goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided and hence the whole universe together participates the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever” (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 47, a. 1).

Moreover, Aquinas (and indeed the whole of Jewish and Christian tradition) holds in common with certain secular academics such as McWhorter that diversity in nature is in fact good and beautiful—and this is where McWhorter intends to go with his argument. As *The Power of Babel* progresses, the author shows that languages do not fall so much into neat categories as they do into spectra or (in a word he uses often) “continua” comprised of thousands upon thousands of dialects. Ultimately, “dialects are all there is.”

In fact, despite his tantalizing promise to detail a history that dates to “one original language,” McWhorter does not really intend to divulge the vocabulary of humanity’s Ur-tongue. (Interestingly, he does add an epilogue, “Extra, Extra! The Language of Adam and Eve,” perhaps at the urging of an editor wishing to ensure readers would not feel cheated. But although he hypothesizes about what the grammar of such a language would have resembled, he says it is in fact impossible to deduce any vocabulary words that the earliest humans might have used.)

What McWhorter really wants is to give his readers a sense of language as a mirror of the cosmos itself, so they might respond to its goodness and beauty as we would respond to the goodness and beauty of nature. In other words, the author seeks to effect a kind of linguistic re-enchantment.

I can understand why McWhorter would not foreground his desire to give readers a sense of awe for the world of linguistics. To those who market books, a call for linguistic re-enchantment must sound numbingly abstract and nebulous compared with a potential solution to a mystery that dates back to the dawn of human civilization.

Yet the author’s agenda of amazement should strike a powerful chord with

Humanum’s readership—at least those willing to excuse his highly conversational tone, which is littered with references to turn-of-the-millennium network TV. It resonates not only with Aquinas’s teachings on the goodness of creation but also with Joseph Ratzinger’s teachings in *The Spirit of the Liturgy* concerning liturgy and logos.

For Ratzinger, the word (logos) of the liturgy is the worshiper’s point of contact with the eternal Word (Logos) that gives meaning to the cosmos (see Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, 151). By this means, “the theme of creation is embedded in Christian prayer.” Whether or not McWhorter is acquainted with Ratzinger’s thought, the author’s insights concerning how a single language developed into a spectrum—with its subliminal echo of Plotinus’s notion of the One and the many—suggest that the human logos is a cosmos unto itself. From there, it is a small step for some budding theologian to dissertate on how, in worship, the continuum of goodness that is the cosmos of human logos enters into dialogue (dia-logos, as Ratzinger would say) with the Logos who created the continuum of goodness that is the cosmos of nature.

In the last chapter of *The Power of Babel*, McWhorter finally shows his cards: “Throughout this book I have hoped to usher the reader into the very awareness animating linguists that human speech is a truly wondrous thing in itself.” It is to his credit that he convinces the reader that knowing Adam and Eve’s exact words is not nearly as exciting as pursuing the extraordinarily diverse cosmos of language itself to the ends of the earth.

Dawn Eden Goldstein, S.T.D., independent scholar and author of several books, most recently *Sunday Will Never Be the Same: A Rock and Roll Journalist Opens Her Ears to God* (Catholic Answers Press, 2019).

The Therapy of Symbols

JOSHUA P. HOCHSCHILD

Walker, Percy, *Symbol and Existence: A Study in Meaning: Explorations of Human Nature* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2019).

Elon Musk recently predicted that language would become obsolete. He envisions a “neurolink device” directly inserted in the brain allowing people to share thoughts without the mediation of speaking and listening.

Tech reporters gleefully shared this as a bold prophecy of progress, but consider Musk’s strange assumptions about language, consciousness, meaning, and human nature. On Musk’s account language is not essential to communication. Musk even described “eloquence” (in strikingly poetic language) as merely “clever compression of content”: taking concepts and feelings, encoding them in a foreign medium, and transmitting them for someone else to decode. Forming and interpreting “mouth noises,” he said, is an inefficient way to share understanding; so much can be lost in the “compression” and “decompression.” Technology will render this step unnecessary, and one day traditional speech will have gone the way of campfires, utilized only “for sentimental reasons.”

These intriguing ideas were shared on a podcast in which Musk and his interviewer, and their listeners, had no trouble arriving at understanding. But note that by Musk’s reasoning, in addition to “mouth noises,” we should also be able to dispose of ink shapes, tone of voice, and even facial expressions. From Musk’s pristine Cartesian perspective, we aren’t essentially embodied creatures, but more like angels, capable of purely spiritual apprehension, once freed from the awkward and purely accidental constraints of beastly biology.

Invoking Descartes highlights the fact that Musk envisions only a new technological path to an old dream of mind-body separation. But it is precisely this unoriginal Cartesianism that is most strange about Musk’s vision. Technologically, Musk may very well be correct (at least up to a point, sophisticated devices could facilitate some

forms of intersubjective translation). More unsettling is how he thinks neuro-engineering confirms a very peculiar theory of how language works, and what human beings are.

For diagnostic perspective, nobody could be more helpful than Walker Percy (1916–1990). If you know a little about Percy, you know he was a novelist. If you know a bit more, you probably know that he was a student of human nature, first as a scientific practitioner—a medical doctor—and all along as a philosopher. The broad scope of Percy’s theorizing has been widely appreciated. Peter Augustine Lawler, for instance, made Percy the centerpiece of his analysis of “postmodern” politics and the capstone of his exploration of Americans as spiritual “aliens.” But in both he recognized the centrality of Percy’s attention to language.

In whatever manner we experience Percy’s insight into the human condition—as novelist, as cultural critic, as therapist of the soul—it was the philosophical puzzle of language that got Percy started and remained the unifying thread of his whole career. Percy wrote essays on philosophy of language, and he considered language the key to understanding human nature, a theme treated throughout his life, up to and including in his 1989 Jefferson Lecture (delivered a year and a week before he died). Thirty years later we have, posthumously published, Percy’s planned philosophical treatise, *Symbol and Existence*, penned originally in the 1950’s.

Percy’s first publication was a review of a book about the role of symbols in understanding the human condition (in *Thought*, 1954). This led to academic articles on the same topic in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (1956) and *The New Scholasticism* (1958), which became the substance of the first half of the drafted book. The second half, elaborating further the connections between semiotics, epistemology, and metaphysics, was mostly written by 1960, with Percy piecing out and repurposing parts in *The Modern Schoolman* (1957), *Journal of Philosophy* (1958), and *The Personalist* (1960). A more literary chapter (“Metaphor as a Mistake”) appeared in *Sewanee Review* (1958).

Percy may have worked on revisions in the 1960’s (when his first two novels were published) but by the 1970’s he seems to have given up on the scholarly monograph. His ideas probably found wider exposure anyway when packaged haphazardly as a collection of essays, *The Message in the Bottle* (1975). In 1977, Percy was especially coy about his reflections on language, even as he summarized them, in a brilliant postmodern self-interview for *Esquire*, “Questions They Never Asked Me.”

Certainly by 1980, the scholarly project was displaced by a more ambitious and playful work-in-progress on science, language, and self-knowledge with the working title “Novum Organum.” (Noting the troubling rise of television-watching, Percy also hoped the new book would be more culturally relevant.) In 1983 it was published as *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*, in which Percy practically dares his readers to tackle the central forty-page philosophical “intermezzo” on semiotic theory. The same year, he consigned two drafts of *Symbol and Existence* to the archives at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Diligent editors have finally brought Percy’s abandoned philosophical monograph to light. There aren’t exactly new ideas here; technically, a bit more than half of the volume is “previously unpublished,” but Percy, creative and persistent, found a way to get his central ideas and arguments out in other forms. The advantage of this posthumous volume lies in seeing Percy’s most philosophical reflections handled in a more systematic and organized format. What previously had to be reconstituted from piecemeal fragments, scattered articles, and oddly personal cultural criticism we have re-collected in an original expository context.

What did Percy think he could achieve by presenting his ideas in the format of a scholarly book? Here I outline his own summary of the work, with generous quotation from genuinely new material at the end.

Percy considers his book less than a full “study of language” but a “modest excursion into semantics.” He has offered a “phenomenology” and a “lay reflection on the nature of language,” in order to “make a beginning toward a radical anthropology,” capable of uniting our life as both an organism responding to stimuli and as an assertion-making being. Only a “hybrid discipline like semiotics” brings out both the “behavioristic and assertory” dimensions of human life, so it is a path into “an objective science of man as an asserting organism,” man as “animal symbolicum, as the organism who uses symbols.”

For Percy, this suggests “a radical therapy of the disease that has afflicted the vision of Western man for three hundred years: Cartesian dualism,” which cannot take account of man’s “basic symbolic orientation in the world.” To deal with “the normative and polar realities of human life, religion/myth, worship/idolatry, truth/error, true/that-which-is,” we need an alternative, non-Cartesian anthropology. This will take our experience of language seriously:

The fundamental act of symbolization is an affirming of the thing to be what it is

through the auspices of the symbol. Each symbolic form, whether it be a name-giving, a proposition, a scientific hypothesis, a work of art, an act of worship, is an affirming of what is. The existence of things, of relations, of laws, of concrete forms, of God, is known and affirmed through the mediation of the symbol.

Recognizing the role of the symbol helps overcome “the observer-data split,” manifest in private or subjective consciousness versus public or objective reality. All of these are not only personally alienating but theoretically and empirically inadequate to actual experience. “We may express the authentic term of man’s symbolic orientation as a communion that affirms what-is through the mediation of the symbol.”

Communion as intersubjective-consciousness is also why “the symbol has a fundamentally sacramental function” as “a sensuous thing that mediates a higher operation.” “The symbolic orientation achieves its actuality when it affirms being or, in other words, is a communion.” Both scientific behaviorism and subjectivist existentialism get human experience wrong:

Man is neither a pure consciousness marooned in a world of objects, nor a pure organism, an object among objects. He is instead spirit-in-organism, besouled body, a complex in which spirit achieves itself not in spite of organism, words, and the world, but because of them and through them.

Percy’s approach to language is often credited to C.S. Peirce, but more important influences seem to be Susanne Langer and Ernst Cassirer (for semiotic theory) and Henry Veatch (for semantic realism); and the ambition of renewing metaphysical anthropology through language draws on Husserl, Heidegger, and Marcel. For the unification of existentialism and semantics, the Thomist Jacques Maritain may be Percy’s most significant inspiration; it is from Maritain—including his promotion of John of St. Thomas’s (a.k.a. John Poinsett’s) “material logic”—that Percy seems to have learned to connect scholastic logic, metaphysics, and philosophical psychology in defense of a non-Cartesian, spiritually embodied conception of man’s nature and destiny.

Whatever the philosophical lineage, we find in the final two pages a still-relevant rebuke to the trendy Cartesian transhumanism of today’s tech wizards, who see “man as a sort of angelic calculator”:

The idealist is scandalized because the ‘error’ [of knowing a thing in and through

a name] decrees that man may not forsake the incarnate, the concrete, the particular, for the ideal and the universal. He can never get away from the sensuous symbol, the word, the rite, the art form.... [T]his ‘error’ is nothing else than the means by which an incarnate spirit knows the world.... Man is in the world, not merely as an adapting organism but as the creature whose vocation it is to know the truth of being and give testimony of it.

We are not surprised that an old-soul Aristotelian poet sees this easier than a scientific neophile engineer. The poet is most conscious of knowing things in and through words. The word—“which is after all only a mouthy little sound,” Percy admits—is what “the poet salvages... from its utility context and holds” so that in it we see “the thing in the word in another mode of existing, in alio esse.”

Percy the philosopher helps us understand the perversity of imagining human life without language. The same insights may also help explain why his scholarly philosophy book didn’t find a publisher, and why podcasts are more popular than philosophy classes. Even if you could mainline meaning and argument, they are more natural, significant, and joyfully fulfilling shared by the storyteller or poet. Percy the poet knew that communion isn’t “sentimental”; it is our distinctive mode of being. The lecture-hall and library are more likely to become obsolete than the campfire.

I’m glad to have this book, and Percy needed to write it. Did he need to publish it? It seems reflecting on the mystery, scandal, and joy of naming sufficed for him to find his vocation:

What I perceive in all its intricate and iridescent reality is the thing itself as it has formed itself within the web of sound. No wonder the poet is seduced. Once he has savored this dangerous delight, it is enough to set him fondling words for life, turning them this way and that in the hope that one will catch this holy fire.

Joshua P. Hochschild is Professor of Philosophy at Mount St. Mary’s University and co-author (with Christopher O. Blum) of *A Mind at Peace: Reclaiming an Ordered Soul in the Age of Distraction*. Follow him on Twitter @JoshHochschild.

Of Language, Culture... and Change

MEGHAN SCHOFIELD

Drysdale, Helena, *Mother Tongues: Travels Through Tribal Europe* (Macmillan, 2001).

It's been said that when you learn a language you learn a culture. Language is more than a tool for communication; it is in some sense a living icon of a people and their way of life. This is what Helena Drysdale set out to explore in her unconventional travelogue *Mother Tongues: Travels through Tribal Europe*. The reader is bundled off along with Drysdale's young family in a mobile home (affectionately called "the Mob") in search of various tribal language groups of Western Europe. For eighteen months the author vividly and bracingly documents their travels from the Arctic to the Mediterranean. The characters they meet along the way are equal parts fascinating, eccentric, lovely, and enigmatic. Drysdale is searching for ancient language communities, most especially those that have been marginalized, cross modern borderlands, or have been seriously endangered because of systemic legal action as opposed to organic development. Not all stories are the same, but each has a story to tell. As she put it, she wants to know "not just who they were [as a people], but who they thought they were." At the time the book was written (1997) nearly half the world's 6,500 languages were on the brink of extinction. What is lost when a language is lost? Certainly more than sounds and syllables; a whole culture begins to fade as its language does. While Drysdale's main concern is language, hers is not simply a philological expedition. The mutually reinforcing influences of language with history, politics, religion, social class, art, and topography are explored. The whole world of a people is unfolded, with language as the animating center.

The Drysdales travel to regions and encounter mother tongues that the modern reader may not be familiar with: Ladin, Provençal, Frisian, and Corse to name a few. And each of these is full of texture and life, containing many dialects within its

language group. What makes a language different than a dialect is a debated issue. Drysdale points out that a dialect is typically considered a language when it is “sufficiently different” from another dialect so as to be mutually unintelligible, having differing grammar, vocabulary, and syntax. The difficulty is that “sufficiently different” can be a subjective term and one open to artificial pronouncements for the sake of national unity. For example, while in France, an acquaintance of Drysdale’s insists that in addition to French, France boasts Celtic Breton, Romance Occitan, German Alsatian, and Basque Basque as other language groups with their own histories and cultures. Though not officially recognized as such, they are not derivatives or dialects of French.

The diversity of language, dialect, and culture is ultimately rooted in one’s place. Drysdale makes much of this, pointing out how language groups formed organically for topographical reasons more than political allegiance. For example, the Basque valley people (in modern-day Spain) are united north-to-south because of how the mountain ranges are set. In her introduction she writes, “I was investigating speakers of language rooted to a place, and the relationships between them and that place.” Nothing represents that more than the Sami people, who inhabit the northern reaches of Scandinavia. They were traditionally a nomadic people, living in movable *koti*, making a living herding wild reindeer. Their life and their trade were determined by the weather and the vicissitudes of the natural world. It’s no small wonder, then, that they have no less than 160 words for “snow.”

The journey begins in Provence, France, then the Alsace region on the border of Germany and continues to the autonomous region of the Åland Islands and Scandanavia. The route winds back south through Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, and Belgium to Spain’s Catalanian and Basque regions, to the islands of Corsica and Sardinia. The circuit completes in FYROM (now Republic of North Macedonia), Tyrol and the Ladin, and finally back to Brittany, in France. Several maps are included in the volume for the reader to trace out the path as each chapter unfolds.

Along her way, Drysdale begins to discover the difficulties connected to the disappearance of some of these mother tongues. She sees the threat as both internal and external. The internal threats are twofold. First is the difficulty of various dialects and subdivisions of a given language group that is sometimes highly regionalized. For example, Corse is considered a single language (spoken on the island of Corsica) with three main dialects, and yet there is a plethora of local nuances so that the word “dog” to one Corsican is “carne” and to another it is “largaro.” A second internal difficulty is the fear of being thought unmodern or of a lower class if one speaks his mother

tongue, as Drysdale found especially in Sardinia. With the legal suppression of the mother tongues in favor of a single national language, such languages were excluded from places of education, business, and politics. The external pressure even took the form of punishment. In Provence (as in many other places) if you were caught speaking Provençal in school you were punished and publicly humiliated. In fact until the 1980s it was illegal to teach school in the Sami language. Diversity was excluded in the name of unity. Add to that the complication of shifting national borders due to war, treaties, or other forms of re-allocation. Because of Hitler's connection to Mussolini, the region of South Tyrol that was previously part of Austria was given to Italy. Now you have German, Italian, and Ladin speakers all in one nation. Drysdale met a couple in the Ladin-speaking region of South Tyrol; the man's second language was German, as he was schooled when the region was part of Austria, while his wife's second language is Italian, as she was schooled when the region was Italian. When asked which nationality they felt more like, the reply was complex: in language the Ladin speakers feel more Italian, yet their culture and lifestyle is totally German.

What, then, of the connection between a language's origin and its inevitable evolution? Does the preservation of language matter? How does one keep a tribal culture alive while growing into (and with) the modern nation state? This is a theme Drysdale grapples with masterfully, giving full weight to history, tradition, and the demands of the current situation. She also considers the differing responses of each people in how they relate to their own mother tongue. She distinguishes between two prevailing attitudes that she calls "state nationalism" and "popular nationalism." State nationalism tends toward a violent demand for independence, as seen in organizations such as the ETA revolutionaries in Spain and the wars of the Balkan states. But there is also a popular nationalism characterized by a passionate love for the uniqueness and beauty of one's own tribe. Drysdale finds this positive tribalism hopeful and sees greater acceptance of bilingualism as the way forward. Writing in 1997, she looks expectantly to the European Union to promote such a path forward, allowing more unity and diversity, or as she describes it, allowing both centrifugal and centripetal movements to exist together. We don't have to choose between homogenization and xenophobia.

Drysdale's *Mother Tongues* is enthralling, vibrant, and provocative. One truly feels transported to the heart of a people through her writing. The work is well-researched and despite its length proves a quick read. While she provides some concluding insights, there are several tensions she leaves unresolved, both linguistically and in herself, some of which she acknowledges. She exults in their mobile unit as the

epitome of freedom, and yet looks disapprovingly on a younger generation that wishes to leave their parents' way of life in favor of new adventures. While reading I was sometimes distracted by her thoroughly twentieth-century, middle-class outlook, and her impatience when encountering a narrative she disagrees with; yet for all this perhaps she was simply being consistent with her cultural background. In addition, these tensions somehow add to the draw of the book, for it challenges your own way of looking at culture, time, and the meaning of change. Drysdale makes philology alluring, and I found myself daydreaming over the evolution of a word and researching the current status of these mother tongues. As Helena and her husband set up "the Mob" for one last night of camping, with their girls Tallulah and Xanthe tucked into bed, the reader joins them in a sense of sadness that the journey is over. And yet if the author has done her job, this will continue to inspire you long after the last ferry crosses home to England.

Meghan Schofield is a PhD Candidate at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute in Washington D.C. She is also the author of the middle school portion of **ROOTED: Theology of the Body** supplemental curriculum series.