LANGUAGE AND PHILOSOPHY

SEMINAR SYLLABUS

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DESCRIPTION

One of modernity's multiple innovations has conditioned us to imagine our existence as situated principally in a vast and all-encompassing world of *space*. This began with our new awareness of global geography in the 15th century, and continued with astronomy's new view of our Earth as hanging forlornly in the near vacuum of "outer space." In more recent times, we fancy ourselves to have boldly entered the "space age," with its current dreams of colonies on Mars and extraterrestrial tourism. It seems we have been playing out, in our own lives, the title of Alexander Koyré's famous 1959 book, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*.

Towards the middle of the 19th century, the spotlight seemed to shift to another dimension of our existence, but one of comparable impact: *time*. Chronology and history began demanding attention as never before. We were taught to think of ourselves as beings who swim knowingly, dramatically and oft precariously in the unstoppable river of change. Through the Industrial Revolution and the advent of trains, our clocks and schedules gained new precision and ever more control over our lives. From Hegel, Marx and Bergson in philosophy, to Darwin and Einstein in science, and even to Proust and Joyce in fiction, we found ourselves increasingly reminded of "what time it is," or "how late it is," often with apocalyptical overtones. History in the humanities and evolution in the sciences became the new watchwords. Increasingly, we seemed to be living our lives also according to the script of another famous book, Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927).

The danger in this is that we are easily beguiled into imagining our human reality, *in its entirety,* to be measured by quantitative metrics, and by nothing else. The space-time matrix can present itself as the unique criterion which defines and situates our humanity. But as always, just as we are about to put our finishing touches on any new "theory of everything," the complexity of reality rudely intrudes. Somewhat surprisingly, but no less urgently, a third claimant for attention has elbowed its way into this complicated modern discussion: *language*.

Here too is a very real and encompassing world in which we also live, and that furthermore seems irreducible to either space or time, although inherently related to both. Philosophers speak of a "linguistic turn" in the early 20th century, although even from the mid-18th, some German thinkers were already pointing to speech as the true code for deciphering the secret of our humanity. Johann Georg Hamann (1730-88), Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) were early pioneers in modern language study. They have been dubbed by Charles Taylor "the Three H's." Out of step with Enlightenment focus on abstract reason, they bade us turn our attention instead to that thick linguistic ambience in which we live with such intimacy and use with such alacrity. However, it had yet to be given the centrality it deserves, not only in the hard sciences, but also in both social science and philosophy.

Soon enough, the new discipline of linguistics would endeavor to scientifically account for the existence and purpose of our unruly chorus of tongues. But more importantly, all of this was accompanied by new emphasis on language precisely *in philosophy*. The new linguistic focus at times even displaced space and time in philosophical anthropology, setting our quantitative dimensions to one side in order to make room for this haunting and omnipresent power. After all, throngs of words travel daily into our ever-open ears, and with equal dispatch emerge from our mouths, amazingly and sometimes ominously. How could a philosopher fail to deeply ponder this fact and explore its implications?

Indeed, the sails of *both* ships of the Western philosophical voyage began to fill with the winds of language. So-called Analytic Philosophy even today sees its granddaddy in Gottlob Frege (1848-1925), who undertook to revolutionize the way we view language, powerfully impacting Bertrand Russell, along with the troubled, Janus-faced genius of Ludwig Wittgenstein. These were followed by dreams of logical positivists, who hoped to fashion a perfectly clear and logical scientific language, resurrecting Leibniz's project of a *characteristica universalis*. Later still came purveyors of "ordinary language" philosophy, with yet others focusing on what came to be called "speech acts." And let us not forget the brave new world of computer languages and the currently unfolding universe of AI.

Continental philosophers would take a bit longer to add a fourth "H" to Taylor's three, for Heidegger only turned seriously to language after his time-focused masterpiece had become easily his most influential work. And across the Rhine, France's most conspicuous 20th century philosophical lineage passes through structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstructionism all the way to post-modernism—currents emerging originally from the *semiology* of a Swiss linguist named Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Simultaneously, across the Atlantic, and athwart the nominalist, more subjectivist trends in France, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) launched a parallel study of language in the form of a robustly realist *semiotics*. As the 20th century progressed, it seemed everyone was talking about language.

As we now move into the mid-21st century, language has joined a larger circle of those fundamental matters that resist ready explanation, either as to their nature or as to their origin, but without which we can hardly make sense of our existence and our world. Those matters are: consciousness, personhood, religion, culture, and language.

As we focus in this seminar on the last of these, the other four topics will inevitably accompany us as we explore the game-changing endowment that moved Aristotle to christen the human creature a "language animal" (arguably the best translation of *zoon logikon*, *animal rationale*). In the course of this seminar we will see that it is by no means clear that language belongs either purely to the world of culture or purely to the world of nature; nor is it fully explicable as an autonomous relation that arises only after both nature and culture have established their separate domains. It may be that language, quite simply, *is* the link, *is* the relation between the two. Is it not language that makes our human nature natural, but which simultaneously makes our culture cultural? Language may be the missing link that makes sense of our amphibious human existence, straddling the material and immaterial worlds.

There is more to be said about this than could be covered in eighteen or even eighty weeks, but in the eight weeks available to us, we shall tentatively explore the following topics:

1. **Language as a World.** Before we ask more specific questions, we must take stock of the extent and the power of language in our lives. As in all philosophical matters, true insight is granted only to those who have taken the time to attend not only to the things we can *say* (famously outlined by the categories), but more importantly, the foundational question as to what it is exactly we are talking *about*, and *before* we start saying anything at all—grammatically put, subjects before predicates. Our first week will be exploratory and panoramic, familiarizing ourselves with the omnipresence and complexity of language *as a world into which we are born*. There is a sense in which it constitutes a genuine *and pre-existent* world just as much as do space and time (I will argue even more); within that world we live and die, and without it our humanity would vanish into an empty and barren silence. A handful of provocative texts from our references will help to underscore what it is that we are talking *about* when we talk about language.

   Bibliography

   - **Primary**: Taylor, *The Language Animal*, "The Range of Human Linguistic Capacity."
   - **Secondary**: Picard, *Man and Language*, "The Origin of Language," "The Meaning of Language."
   - (for comic relief, though a tad vulgar, watch a 10-minute sketch by Fry & Laurie:) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MWpHQQ-wQg (At 50 seconds, Fry asks: "If Hitler had been British…" a bit hard to make out amidst the laughter.)

2. **Can language be defined?** Now that we have appreciated the embracing horizons of the matter under discussion, what can we indeed *say* about it? Moreover, as Wittgenstein cautioned us, if we cannot truly get outside of it in order to look at it, point to it, describe and analyze it, can it be defined at all? What *is* this thing? To begin with, we find ourselves constrained to address (and hopefully clarify) a few seminal relations, without which we would have very little to say about language (or anything else, for that matter). What is the relation, for instance, 1) between thought and language, 2) between knowledge and language, 3) between silence (the tacit and implicit) and speech (the verbalized and explicit), and, closely related, 4) between listening and speaking? And for each of these pairs, we must also ask—if the question makes any sense at all—which comes first? These relations will contextualize our attempt to identify the *status quaestionis*, to review the history of its articulations, and finally invite us to propose a few Scholastic "notes" for a definition. This will give us some initial bearing in the following weeks as we proceed to deal with the intractable multiplicity of its kinds.

   Bibliography

- **Primary**: Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Origin of Speech*, "The Authentic Moment of Speech"; Deely, Introducing Semiotic, "Language," "Knowledge.".
- **Secondary**: Rosenstock-Huessy, *Speech & Reality*, "How Language Establishes Relations"; Picard, The World of Silence (diverse meditations).

3. **One tongue of flesh / countless tongues of speech.** Why, when all humans are equipped with exactly the same vocal apparatus—the same muscle in the same mouth with the same lips, teeth and lungs—why do we speak so many extraordinarily different languages, and not just a couple of dozen, but today numbering around 7,000? We must first take a long look at this flesh-and-bone contrivance of organs and tissues that makes up the apparatus, most especially its signal situation in our upright anatomy. This is, after all, the feature that provides us with freed hands that cooperate with the mouth in one of language's most obvious functions: communication. We will identify the singularity and especially the "eccentricity" of this apparatus's versatility, both in accommodating with equal dispatch the most disparate of phonetical configurations (in English 24 consonant sounds, and almost as many vowels—Sanskrit, and a few other languages have many more!), but then also allowing us—nay encouraging us—to employ its resources in order to enunciate not only what nature demands, but more adventurously (and dangerously) whatever its users may choose to say. Biblically speaking: how did we get from "the whole Earth had one language and few words" to the curse of the Tower of Babel (Gn. 11), and then from there to the blessings of Pentecost (Acts 2)? And furthermore, how are languages classified, either according to origin (into natural and artificial); or according to the various linguistic families of today (Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Semitic, etc.), not excluding also the countless extinct tongues of the past; or within a given language, into formal and informal, or into dialects, patois, pidgins and creoles? Why and how do some languages seem to be better at some things than others? And outside of the Bible, is there any evidence at all of an "original" language?

   Bibliography

   - **Primary:** Anderson, *Languages: A Very Short Introduction*, "Introduction," "How Many Languages Are There in the World?".
   - **Secondary:** Tattersall, *Human Evolution*, "Emergence and Spread of *homo sapiens*."

4. **English and the *linguas francas* of history.** Now that we have gained an overview of the thousands of languages the human creature speaks, what can we know about the one spoken by those taking this seminar, most of whom speak it as their mother tongue? How did English become the *lingua franca* of the world, following so many others that held sway before (in modern times, French; in medieval times, Latin; in ancient times, *koiné* Greek; before that, in the Near East, first Akkadian and then Aramaic, for instance)? And what is so special about this hodgepodge language that the British Empire, for better or for worse, has bequeathed to the world?

   Bibliography

   - Primary: McWhorter, *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue*, "Introduction."
   - Secondary: Barfield, *History in English Words*, "Philosophy and Religion."

5. **Lost or found in translation?** It might seem obvious that, in a multilingual world, the inevitable practice of translation would presuppose multiple languages already present and active. Could it be, however, that the

converse makes at least as much sense, and perhaps more? That is to say, could language, when all is said and done, involve translation in its very genesis? The emphasis in the social sciences today is to view different languages as conditioning us from the outside, generating different worldviews and "identities." Relativism and an irreducible "multiculturalism" are usually the fruits of this approach. In contrast, Noam Chomsky suggested the thesis of a "universal grammar" innate in human nature. Developing this idea with the help of George Steiner and Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy may show us ways of avoiding the nemesis of post-modernism and the rescue of a realism consonant with the very nature of language. As language animals, are we not—and from the very moment we open our mouths—always already engaged in translating experience into words and sentences? Could it be that the very possibility of translating in the more familiar sense—say, from Greek into Latin—actually rests on the prior foundation of our ability to translate our meaningful but inarticulate experiences into any language at all? To address this, we will inquire as to the relation between what we call meaning and what we call speech. To put it as briefly as possible, are language animals also by nature "translation animals"?

Bibliography

- Primary: Jerome, "Letter to Pamachius"; Goethe, "Translations"; Benjamin, "The Translator's Task."
- Secondary: Steiner, passages from After Babel; Paine, "Translation: the only Sacred Language of the Church."

6. **Orality and Literacy.** How do spoken and written language differ, and furthermore, after millennia of primordial and apparently universal orality (embracing perhaps tens of thousands of years), why did the latter arise at all? Earliest evidence of script dates from only around 5,000 years ago. Plato once even suggested that the gift of writing may have been a curse, designed by the jealous gods to destroy our memories. Is it indeed a blessing or is it a blight, or can it be seen as both? Some estimates suggest there are around 170,000,000 books in the world today. What does the existence of these endless archives of human scribblings say about the ultimate purpose and destiny of language? What would happen to the knowledge and culture contained in those pages if they all went up in smoke? The existence of writing raises all sorts of questions. Back in the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan first coined the term: "the medium is the message." Since then, media studies have grown apace and insights into the relation between speaking and writing, listening and reading, have thrown new light on our understanding of the language animal and the implications of its irrepressibly voluble history.

   Bibliography

   - **Primary:** Ong, chapters 1 and 2 of *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 1-30; "Literacy and Orality in Our Times."
   - **Secondary:** McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, "The Medium is the Message," "Challenge and Collapse"; Entry on "Writing" in *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

7. **Reading God's Two Books.** An ancient Christian tradition expands our understanding of the centrality of literacy (and numeracy) when it teaches us that God wrote "two books" when creating and redeeming the world: the Book of the Bible and the Book of the Cosmos. The two groups of the Seven Liberal Arts provide the tools for our alphabetization in reading these books. What is the relationship of language to each of the Trivial arts of grammar, dialectic and rhetoric, and also to the concrete and discrete quantities studied by

the Quadrivial arts? And even more fundamentally, what is language's relation to this basic binary of quality and quantity, so well-articulated by that septenary group of arts? And, in a related issue, why are letters sometimes used as numbers? Are word and number siblings or distant cousins, rivals or accomplices; and since it has often been tried, we must even ask if one can be reduced to or derived from the other? Furthermore, since metrical language, used in poetry, obviously displays a penetration of quality through measures of quantity, how does the distinction between prose and verse, on the one hand, and the prosaic and the poetic, on the other, relate to the deeper questions we have asked about language? And why does language seem unable to get away from the suggestive but perplexing offerings of metaphor? Looking finally at a more abstract topic in the recent history of philosophy, why is it that language, logic and mathematics often seem locked in such an epistemological contest, each one in turn trying to prove superiority over the other two? And why is poetry rarely invited to this squabble?

Bibliography

- Primary: Van Doren, *Liberal Education*, "The Liberal Arts"; Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, "Metaphor."
- Secondary: Paine, "From the Liberal Arts to Philosophy in the Medieval University"; Rosenstock-Huessy, *Magna Carta Latina*, Preface.

8. **Language, Religion and the Word Made Flesh.** Scholars sometimes call Eastern religions "mystical," and Abrahamic religions, "prophetic," as the latter are inseparable from a Torah, a Gospel or a "recitation" (Koran), with explicit prophetic messages at the heart of their teachings and practice. One factor that seems to support this distinction is that the Semitic religions do give a paramountcy to language over silence, image over symbol and person over principle—priorities less in evidence in Asia, where the ineffable and oblique tend to hold sway. Nonetheless, all our major religions, including the Asian, do have their Scriptures. What role do these canonical texts play in a general way in the world of language and literature? And among the prophetic religions, does Christianity have a unique relationship with language through its belief that creation *ex nihilo* occurs *through the Logos*? And in the Bible, what does it mean when in its first explicit reference to the Incarnation of the Son (Jn. 1,14), St. John chooses to describe this core mystery of Christianity as the enfleshment *not* of a thing or a force or even of a truth, but rather of a *Word*? In short, in philosophical and theological terms, what is the relation of the Incarnation *of the Word* with the creation of all things *through the Word*?

Bibliography

- Primary: Ashley/Deely "Why is God the Son the Word?"
- Secondary: Paine, "The Language that Rose from the Dead."

References:

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Ashley, B./Deely, J. *How Science Enriches Theology*, St. Augustine's Press, 2012.
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Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy*, Routledge, 1982.
Paine, S.R. "From the Liberal Arts to Philosophy in the Medieval University" (English translation and adaptation of original Portuguese article, "Das artes liberais à Filosofia nas universidades medievais," *Veritas*, 1996.)
_____. "The Language that Rose from the Dead," in *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, v. 90, n.10, p. 60-65, 1990.
_____. "Translation: The Only Sacred Language of the Church," 3wisdoms.com.

Picard, Max. *Man and Language*, Gateway, 1963 [German, 1955]; *The World of Silence*, Gateway, 1948.
Rosenstock-Huessy, Eugen. *Speech and Reality*, Argo, 1970; *The Origin of Speech*. Argo, 1981; *The Fruit of Our Lips*, Wipf & Stock, 2017.
Steiner, George. *After Babel*, 3rd ed., Oxford, 1997.
Tattersall, Ian. *Understanding Human Evolution*, Cambridge, 2022.
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Van Doren, Mark. *Liberal Education*, Beacon Press, 1959.
Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translation Studies Reader*, 3rd ed., Routledge, 2012.
Weaver, Richard M. *Language is Sermonic*, Louisiana University, 1970.

A few online resources:
Ethnologue.com - the go-to source for language research

Youtube:
A wealth of videos on languages by a young enthusiast: *langfocus*:
https://www.youtube.com/@Langfocus
Useful, eloquent argument against the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis by a prominent contemporary linguist:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXBQrz_b-Ng
The Tongues of Men, an excellent 2-hour documentary on the world's languages (1977), with brilliant commentary by George Steiner (activate captions to help with soundtrack issues). Watch it!
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDnOtAq2QLg part 1
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RX2b8ezyo6g part 2

METHOD

The seminar is 8 weeks long, with one recorded lecture and one discussion session each week. Most sessions are structured around ideas drawn from readings and lecture alike. Participants are expected to have read the assigned reading and listened to the lecture prior to the session, so that they may engage in a semi-structured discussion directed and moderated by the instructor. As this is an advanced seminar, one *cannot* participate well without a *deep engagement* with the assigned reading. Moreover, *continual discussion* will foster that participation and engagement throughout the week. Participants will be expected to partake in these discussions on a regular basis, and will be challenged to do so directly. It is expected that full participation in this seminar will require a minimum of **10-15+ hours per week** of reading, listening, discussing, and reviewing material.

LECTURE

Each week there will also be an audio lecture (anywhere in length from roughly 30 to 90 minutes, depending on the required details of the content), posted to Teams at the beginning of the week. This lecture will be based upon the assigned reading, but will also stray into related topics, or may use the reading as a launching point for addressing related issues.

DISCUSSION

The heart of the seminar is the discussion session (**Saturdays 10:00am-11:00am ET**, officially: some sessions may run longer): where all the thoughts emergent and encountered throughout the week—via the reading, lecture, and on-going textual conversations in the Teams channel—are brought into explicit conversation. This allows us to attempt a concerted effort at bringing resolution to our difficulties, and—failing such a resolution—to direct our inquiry further.

Each discussion session will begin with a brief synopsis of the week's material and a focusing on whichever aspects of that material seem most pressing. Beyond the direction provided by the instructor, participants are encouraged to bring their own concerns explicitly into view and to engage with the instructor and one another in civil debate and collective inquiry.

SCHEDULE

Week I 01/04–01/10	Language as World Readings: • **Primary**: Taylor, *The Language Animal*, "The Range of Human Linguistic Capacity." • **Secondary**: Picard, *Man and Language*, "The Origin of Language," "The Meaning of Language." • (for comic relief, though a tad vulgar, watch a 10-minute sketch by Fry & Laurie:) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MWpHQQ-wQg (At 50 seconds, Fry asks: "If Hitler had been British…" a bit hard to make out amidst the laughter.)
Week II	Can Language Be Defined? Readings:

01/11–01/17	• **Primary**: Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Origin of Speech,* "The Authentic Moment of Speech"; Deely, Introducing Semiotic, "Language," "Knowledge.". • **Secondary**: Rosenstock-Huessy, *Speech & Reality*, "How Language Establishes Relations"; Picard, The World of Silence (diverse meditations).
Week III 01/18–01/24	One Tongue of Flesh / Countless Tongues of Speech Readings: • **Primary:** Anderson, *Languages: A Very Short Introduction*, "Introduction," "How Many Languages Are There in the World?". • **Secondary:** Tattersall, *Human Evolution*, "Emergence and Spread of *homo sapiens*."
Week IV 01/25–01/31	English and the *Linguas Francas* of History Readings: • **Primary**: McWhorter, *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue*, "Introduction." • **Secondary**: Barfield, *History in English Words*, "Philosophy and Religion."
Week V 02/08–02/14	Lost or Found in Translation? Readings: • **Primary**: Jerome, "Letter to Pamachius"; Goethe, "Translations"; Benjamin, "The Translator's Task." • **Secondary**: Steiner, passages from After Babel; Paine, "Translation: the only Sacred Language of the Church."
Week VI 02/15–02/21	Orality and Literacy Readings: • **Primary:** Ong, chapters 1 and 2 of *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 1-30; "Literacy and Orality in Our Times." • **Secondary:** McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, "The Medium is the Message," "Challenge and Collapse"; Entry on "Writing" in *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
Week VII 02/22–02/28	Reading God's Two Books Readings: • **Primary**: Van Doren, *Liberal Education*, "The Liberal Arts"; Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, "Metaphor." • **Secondary**: Paine, "From the Liberal Arts to Philosophy in the Medieval University"; Rosenstock-Huessy, *Magna Carta Latina*, Preface.
Week VIII 03/01– 03/07	Language, Religion, and the Word Made Flesh Readings: • **Primary**: Ashley/Deely "Why is God the Son the Word?" • **Secondary**: Paine, "The Language that Rose from the Dead."