

**THE ORIGIN OF SPEECH**

*Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy*

INTRODUCTION BY  
HAROLD M. STAHMER

ARGO BOOKS  
NORWICH, VERMONT

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FIRST EDITION

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Rosenstock-Huessy, Eugen, 1888-1973.

The origin of speech.

Based in part on: Die Sprache des Menschengeschlechts.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Language and languages – Origin – Addresses, essays, lectures. 2. Languages – Philosophy – Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Title.

P116.R67 1981

401'.9

81-20527

ISBN 0-912148-13-6 (pbk.)

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## THE ORIGIN OF SPEECH

The origin of language is one of the most debated and most ridiculed and most hopeless questions of human history. It has been rejected as a wrong question which never can be answered and therefore never should be asked. It has been explained by "imitation," by nervous reflexes (Langer), as gesticulations of the whole body curtailed into a movement of the throat (Jousse), as the shouting of a warfaring group; and all these explanations border on the scurrilous. Most people acquainted with the treatment of the question are rightly discouraged.

The "origin" of language, to my mind, is as legitimate a question as any question of "origin." This means that it shares the one central limitation of all these questions: we must know what we mean by "origin," what we mean by "origin" of speech. Speech may mean:

A. A method of showing a man the direction to the next farm on the road or a way of stopping a child from crying. Then it comes in with gestures, smiles, and tears, and then the apes and the nightingales are our masters. There is no doubt in my mind that, in our daily chatter and prattle, our speech serves the same purposes as animal sounds. And things which serve the same function should be related. There are areas in our life where we share the conditions under which animals emit sounds of courtship, warning, etc. When we use sounds in these same areas they bear some resemblance to the languages sounded by animals.

B. But speech may also signify the power to sing a chorale, to stage tragedy, to enact laws, to compose verse, to say grace, to take an oath, to

confess one's sins, to file a complaint, to write a biography, to make a report, to solve an algebraic problem, to baptize a child, to sign a marriage contract, to bury one's father.

Most people confuse A and B. They seem to think that by explaining lullabies and neighborly advice or chatting we also have explained the power of an oath. We are going to disentangle A speech and B speech from this confusion. Our confidence in dealing with the problem of speech is based precisely on the discovery that a nursery rhyme, a pointing towards the next house and the humming curiosity of gossiping neighbors have no right to pose as pretypifying human speech at all.

### 1. *The Authentic Moment of Speech*

It is easy to distinguish between animal sounds, formal speech, and informal speech. The question "How do I get to Tipperary?" and a lullaby and the nicknames of Jim and Jack are neither animal nor formal speech. They are "informal." In the United States everybody likes to be informal; informality is considered a great virtue. It is the goal of the good life to slap the President on the back and to call Eleanor Roosevelt "Eleanor." When "informal" is an ideal, it also seems to be normal. But we do more honor to our ideals by admitting that they take an effort. Informality is a rebellion against formality. Never can "informal" be called pre-formal. That would take the edge off. After forms have been created and perhaps grown stale, we may become informal. To be informal means to neglect forms which exist. That which does not exist cannot be neglected. He who likes to live and speak without formalities has not explained the birth of these same formalities. The situation brings to mind the case of an agnostic who sent his son to an orthodox minister for religious instruction. The minister asked the father if this was not perhaps an oversight. No, said the father. "After all, a man must have something to liberalize upon." The low brow must have something high brow to speak lowly about. Formalities explain our craving for the informal, not vice-versa. Nobody, then, could speak and say, "Gosh, what a fine day" unless somebody had sung before, "the heavens declare the glories of God." Nobody could say *Mommy* or *Daddy* unless somebody had spoken reverently *Father* and *Mother* before.

The distinction divides all forms of speech into two halves which are in

constant competition: the formal and the informal. Logically and historically, the formal precedes the informal, and it succeeds animal speech. In anticipation of our result, we may say 1. pre-formal animal speech, 2. formal human speech, 3. informal, low brow speech. Informal speech capitalizes on both the pre-formal and the formal; it is a compound of both.

Our distinction opens the road to a new investigation of speech: some kind of speech exists with the animals. The human historian need not explain it; it is natural. Another kind of speech exists with man only. This must be understood or human history remains a mystery. The acts listed above as some acts of formal speech, from chorale to peace treaty, actually constitute humanity in distinction from animals. But humanity caters to lowliness and relaxation. Any formal speech is melted down until it is liquified into informal speech between "cat and dog, *frère et cochon*," as in the nursery or the soldier's barracks. What we do to formal speech in breaking it down to tidbits of information, informalities and innuendos cannot serve to explain formal speech. In fact, it shows the tendency of absorbing, obliterating, and levelling it. It is humorous, casual, unobtrusive, and deprecating. Therefore we must forget all our informal habits when we wish to understand the sublimity, elation, exultation, gravity, and precariousness which it takes to speak formally.

Formal speech cannot have originated with groups whose whole bent is to live informally. The mother-child relation, for instance, has to be excluded from the area in which formal speech might have originated. A herd or a gang of youngsters or soldiers or hunters also is no environment in which human formal language can ever have been born. It is in these environments that science has looked for evidence. But the truth about them is plain. These environments tear down all articulate or formal speech. They destroy grammatical endings, they live by exclamation marks and the shrugging of shoulders. They ruin the best language. What a strange expectation that the wealth of forms in grammar and syntax could go back to a milieu that per se is hostile to forms. Can a chemical agent which dissolves be used to explain crystallisation? Can the informal slang of a gang explain the crystals of grammatical, formal speech? But this has been done, time and again, by linguistics and by philosophers of language. Two trains of thought have prevailed. Either one is struck by the fact that animals speak — under this impression, the abyss between animal language and human language

becomes a mere ditch of negligible depth. Or we admit that speech should be explained in terms of human history. If this were the starting point, it might seem permissible to concentrate on children. However, the most unhistorical forms of human existence are children and their mother or boys in their gang. When we fix attention on these most natural groups among us, we assign to them the task of having created the most unnatural thing in the world, articulate and grammatical speech. We may, fortunately, look in the opposite direction, away from ape and from babies and boys and girls. When we search to understand the origin of formal speech it must be from a man's work or an old man's deed.

By changing the direction of our investigation radically and by looking in the opposite direction, we run the risk of going too fast. Child psychology and animal sociology are going forward among us with ever-increasing investment of capital and equipment and personnel. These vested interests will not admit, for a long time, that they are given to secondary studies in the realm of articulated speech, that their training has not prepared them for research in the fields of religion, language, politics, law, poetry, and ritual. They of course resent this suggestion that the child does not explain the man but, perhaps, the man the child.

Results alone can decide whose method is more adapted to the material which asks for interpretation. To find the origin of formal speech this book invites the reader to look at the attitudes of mature, grown up and responsible people among ourselves, to consider the acts of the wisest and greatest souls of all times. The results will be as simple as they will contradict the current prejudices. Speech is not a manufactured tool or a toy of our mind.

We may now sum up. We shall distinguish a sequence of three manners of social sounds between animated beings.

1. Pre-formal
2. Formal
3. Informal language

The sounds of animals are eloquent but pre-grammatical. Man's speech is articulate and grammatical. Children speak informally, dialectically, slang. From here we may go further. Man's language aims at something not aimed at by apes or nightingales: it intends to form the listener into a being which did not exist before he was spoken to. Human speech is formative and it is for this reason that it has become explicit and grammatical. Grammatical

forms and names may be called the symptoms which prove that animal speech is superseded by articulate human language. This language can name a place Tipperary in Ireland, and a child Dorothy, the gift of God. This animals cannot do.

The greatest forms of man's speech are names. They clearly are not in animal language. Whatever man has in common with the apes when he speaks, the apes cannot call on God. The very name of God means: "he who speaketh; he who enthuses man so that man speaketh." So much did formal language long for names to which man should listen and in whose power he should speak.

If formal speech is particularly strong in names, formal speech may be labelled nominal or naming speech. This has some merits. By calling man's speech nominal, we gain access to one of the strangest phenomena of speech, the use of pronouns. *You (thou), I, my, we, that, it* are the most frequent words of a language. But they are used instead of names — *pronomine*. Instead of the term "table," we point to it as *it* or *that*. We must explain the distinction of name and pronoun; therefore we shall now replace the list preformal, formal, informal, by the terms pre-nominal, nominal, and pronominal. We shall call the languages of apes, birds, etc., prenominal languages, languages without names. The languages of humans we shall call nominal languages. Now comes our difficulty.

The areas of animal language between male and female, mare and colt, in a pack of wolves or chamois also extend into our own human relations. A mother and her children, a lover and his coy mistress, an officer and his men live in situations not completely different from the animal kingdom. It would be false pride to overlook the similarities of intimate comradeship which exist.

When formal language originated, the animated groups which correspond to animal groups found themselves between two influences: one the prenominal, preformal situation of the direct, physically visible and audible group of mates, of packs, of hen and chickens; the other the formal, grammatical, articulate language of names and places. The family, the platoon, the couple struck and strike a compromise between formal and preformal language: they speak informally. *Mommy, Daddy, Jim and John* are informalities. They are products of a grinding process between the two millstones of our animal and of our formative nature. Any word spoken in

the nursery is a compromise between pre-formal and formal speech: it is informal. Logically, then, the informal is later than the preformal and the formal. It is their synthesis or mixture. It follows that *Mommy* and *Daddy* cannot be used to explain the origin of speech. Neither can my gesture, "There is your way to Tipperary" explain man's power to call the place "Tipperary" or to ask the question: "Which is the road to it?" *Where, your, which, it* are informal words which can be spoken because people meet as intimately as animals. In such intimacy, we need less formal speech than ordinarily. *Where, your, which* and *it* correspond to *Daddy, Mommy, and Johnny*. All these words are of the same character: small currency used in transactions of the moment. They are the copper one cent pieces compared to the formalities of a check or a war bond. Money experts will not understand money by meditating over the one cent coin only. One cent is too clearly a mere fraction of the dollar. The copper is a compromise between a short-term and intimate situation of two neighbors and the long-term and formal situation of the Federal Bank.

For this reason, *where, your, which, it*, are called pronouns. These words replace formal nouns. Similarly coins may take the place of "real" money. If we now extend the term pro-noun to words like *Daddy, Mommy* and *Johnny*, the whole relation of ape, man and child stands revealed. The ape in us speaks preminally, the man in us speaks by names, and the child in us speaks in pronouns.

Prenominal, nominal and pro-nominal language are clearly distinguishable. Wherever people room and board and work and play together, in one place at the same time, they live in a pre-formal, more precisely, a pre-nominal situation. They can, therefore, get quite far by signs and sounds as the animals do.

On the other hand, lullabies, nursery rhymes, gossip, prattle, whisper, propaganda, jokes, puns, sales talks, advertisements and soap operas are not quite pre-formal. They are only informal. They are torn between the requirements of formality and common sense. They constitute the realm of the pronoun. They empty names by pointing, hinting and suggesting. A friend of my student days in Heidelberg invariably used the term "anyhow" (*irgendwie*) for all the mysteries of life. We decided that he used the term instead of the name of God. And so it was, indeed. Where former generations had spoken of the will or the help of God, he was satisfied with this uncer-

tain and unspecified gesture of "anyhow."

Nicknames, short forms, pronouns and gestures, all abbreviate, empty and cheapen. But they render a positive service too. They protect names from wearing thin. The very vain Kuno Fischer, a German professor of philosophy, bore the formidable title of Your Excellency with great pride. However, one evening a young student at his house outdid himself in the use of the title. It rained "Your Excellency." Whereupon Fischer finally said: "Don't say it so often, young man. Once in a while is enough." In the intervals he was satisfied with the simple pronoun "you," instead of the full title!

Pronouns protect names in places and at times where their use is not authentic! We who look for the authentic place of speech by now have found the authentic place of pronominal speech: where formal speech is out of place, pronouns enter.

Pronouns are not animal speech. They keep a clear connection with the great names and titles of man's speech. *It*, *he* and *me* are full of form; *Daddy* is articulate and remotely refers to *Father*. Pronouns are less full than names; they protect the fullness by omitting most of the content. For the last 200 years people doing research on the origin of speech have not distinguished full and emptied speech. By lumping together lullaby and decree, gossip and oath, in one and the same category, we erect an insurmountable barrier against our understanding of the origin of speech. It is truly astounding how many problems become simple once lullabies are put in their proper place, in the nursery, and gossip in its proper place, in the parlor. Neither nurseries nor parlors are the fountainheads of formal language. The greatest victims of this fallacy were the names of the Gods themselves. People began to call God an idea. But ideas cannot be Gods. Names can. The nursery and the parlor presuppose the meeting house and the court and the formal languages spoken there.

Now, with the permanent obstruction by child language out of the way, we may well inquire when and where formal language is called forth, and what constitutes the contribution of language in a hitherto speechless community. The authentic place and the legitimate moment for the birth of language can now be explored.

Until we have faced the situations of a human society when and where speech is lacking we cannot even understand the second question of why the instruments of language were cast in grammatical forms. The question of

the origin of language makes sense as a sequence of two questions. First, when, in our own experience, is new speech indispensable? Second, when, then, did speech become indispensable? Without any present day experience of speech as originating anew under our noses, from necessity, we shall have no yardstick for the past. Sceptics will say: this annihilates the question. There is no new speech today. Artificial languages offer no interest for our problem. Esperanto certainly does not explain Greek. Basic English does not explain Anglo-Saxon.

They are right. That which creates speech is not at work in these willful plans of speechifiers. But the sceptics are not right in every sense. History is not simply a matter of ten thousand years back. Pre-history is among us. Although artificial languages are not instructive for the origin of language, pre-linguistic situations in our midst do exist. These pre-linguistic or prehistoric situations reflect, to a measure, the field of force in which the first language originated. The vacuum is composed of the same polarities here and there. In each instance a pre-linguistic or preformal situation craves or calls for becoming articulate. Human beings as well as social conditions are waiting to become articulate. There is among us a muteness which waits to become speech. In asking ourselves where we don't or can't speak although we should speak, we may discover that function which is actually fulfilled by speech. We shall be outside of mere theory and we shall not abstract what language is from our little knowledge of English or German or Latin.

We shall try to learn from the sickness of a group which lacks speech why the health of a group depends on the origin of speech in its midst. We shall study the field within which the spark of speech is emitted before we study language. This negative approach to speech will put our debate of its origin on the firm basis of our own present-day experience. If a certain quality of life is impossible without speech, then speech should originate as restoring or creating this very quality. A comparison with other fields of knowledge will encourage us in our method. Economics became a science only when it began to study the crises in which the order of economics was destroyed. The eternal "origin" of economics, its perpetual bursting forth as an efficient division of labor, becomes understandable when we focus our attention on the disorder which arises from the absence of an efficient division of labor. Medicine is a science in so far as it penetrates into the mystery of disease.

Sociology becomes a science in so far as it can explain wars and revolutions. The absence of the proper order, the improper, serves to explain the "origin" of the proper order. When we have learned why one state of affairs is negative, and no good, we begin to understand the origin of the good.

Biology will be the science of life on that very day when death is fully understood. In the same sense we shall have a science of speech or of language as soon as we have penetrated the hell of non-speech.

In plunging into the darkness in which man cannot yet speak or no longer does speak to his brother man today, we shall prepare ourselves best for the answer to the questions: what is speech?, how does it originate?, why do we speak?, which, of course, are one and the same question in its divers aspects.

We are, then, going to inquire under what conditions modern man is not on speaking terms with his brother. This obviously is not a purely linguistic or philological question. If members of a family are not on speaking terms, something is wrong with the family. A moral question is implied. When nations are not on speaking terms, they are at war. It may not be a shooting war. But with Spain, Argentina and other countries we have made the startling discovery that a state may not shoot and yet be at war with another by not being on speaking terms with it.

Our way of putting the question for the origin of language shifts the field of the question into the realm of politics and history. The question "when must man come to speak?" is disclosed as a question which must have been answered by other authorities than the teachers of English or Arabic or Sanscrit. They deal with languages as facts. Our question deals with languages as question marks of political history. We wish to warn any purely literary or grammatical reader to leave us right here. For he will be disappointed when he finds that new speech is not created by thinkers or poets but by great and massive political calamities and religious upheavals.

Our question, then, is prephilological and prelinguistic. For this reason, our new way of asking eliminates a series of answers in which the last generation has taken delight or interest. These answers were based on the study of child psychology. Children were observed in their attempts to speak. And the origin of speech was explained in terms of these observations. Also, lunatics were objects of such observation. These psychological approaches are eliminated by our manner of stating the question. No child finds communities properly speaking. It learns languages which exist and

operate. This is precisely the opposite from our problem of understanding what happens when a language is not functioning. I shall not exclude, at this point of our discussion, that children's genius may regenerate a community in which there is too little speech. The enfant terrible is as real as any genius. And children sometimes act as beneficially as adults. But my point is this: whenever children do regenerate a group which is failing in speech, they act like any founder or creator of speech in general. No difference can be made between young and old in this respect. It is then the saving grace of a child's word, not child psychology, which explains the origin of this word. It is a general quality common to all humans which is here evidenced in a child. Children per se do not invent speech, but they may act like full members who put the whole group right. This is the meaning of the truth: "out of the mouth of babes and sucklings, we shall find speech reborn."

Where, then, do we feel threatened and saddened by the absence of speech in our own life? There is not simply one fundamental situation in which man and man are not on speaking terms. The negative aspect of lack of speech is not sufficiently grasped in simple statements like: "The younger generation of whites and blacks in the South no longer speak to each other"; "You can't do business with Hitler"; "My parents are so old-fashioned that they don't understand me at all"; "The soldiers at the front don't understand the striking workers at home."

When we analyze these statements, the negative "no speech" splits into many "Nos" with different meanings. All these meanings are instructive. All should contribute an element of truth to our effort to find by induction what speech is and how it originates.