

SIGNS IN GENERAL AND LINGUISTIC SYMBOLS:  
HERMENEUTICS AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

**Introduction**

In order to convey meaning, humans rely on the use of signs. In order to convey knowledge, humans rely on the use of signs, particularly linguistic signs. Signs are indispensable in relating meaning and knowledge with other humans. Noting the importance of signs Jacques Maritain states, “No problems are more complex or more fundamental to the concerns of man and civilization than those pertaining to the sign. The sign is relevant to the whole extent of knowledge and of human life; it is a universal instrument in the world of human beings.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, what constitutes a “sign?” What is the function of a “sign?” How are “signs” used? When are “signs” employed? Is there a difference between “signs,” “symbols,” and things signified, called “signatum?” These questions are fundamental to the interpretive process. For, if the majority of meaning and knowledge gained by humans is through signs, then it is beneficial, even necessary, to understand how signs function.

Additionally, the linguistic sign is the primary mode of communication between humans. But it is obvious that there is not a *universal* conventional human language. The Chinese language and English language are radically different. This raises a series of questions. What is the linguistic sign - is it just written words? What is a “word?” When and how did the linguistic

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Maritain, “Language and the Theory of Sign,” in *Language: An Enquiry into its Meaning and Function*, ed. Ruth Nanda Anshen (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 86.

sign develop? Why is the linguistic sign so important? Who uses linguistic signs - is it just humans, or are animals linguistically inclined as well? And is there a universal “language” between humans - if not how is translation possible? These questions are foundational to the understanding of meaning and communication. Thus, this project will attempt to explore the nature of signs and the linguistic phenomena. The purpose of this project will be to show the undeniability of signs as a tool for knowledge and the linguistic sign in particular as the primary bridge of knowledge among humans. This project will highlight developments in the study of linguistic origins. Further, this project will highlight the linguistic gap between humans and other animals. That is, only humans use language to convey meaning and knowledge. The last section will tie together the data to show that in the hermeneutical process communicated meaning is undeniable, objective, and that language is appropriate and sufficient for the task.

### **Natural and Conventional Signs**

Francis Parker and Henry Veatch define “sign” broadly as, “*that which is representative of something other than itself.*”<sup>2</sup> There are different types of signs, but, generally speaking, this is what is meant and understood when a “sign” is labeled as such. The underlying connection between a particular sign and its corresponding signatum, and not something else, is the justifying relation which Parker and Veatch refer to as the “foundation-relation.”<sup>3</sup> There are different types of signs. There are natural and artificial signs, as well as, material [instrumental]

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<sup>2</sup> Francis H. Parker and Henry B. Veatch, *Logic as a Human Instrument* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 14 (Unless otherwise noted all italics are in original).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

and formal signs. **Figure 1**

illustrates the various types of signs.<sup>4</sup> Parker and Veatch are, likewise, helpful in defining these various types of signs.

Natural signs are one “whose

*foundation-relation is natural.*”<sup>5</sup> Smoke is a natural sign of fire because it is an effect of fire.

Fire is the cause of smoke, and we naturally associate fire with smoke. Thus, smoke is a natural sign of fire, because “the justifying foundation-relation is a natural cause effect relation. The sign [smoke] signifies its signatum [fire] because the two are in nature causally connected.”<sup>6</sup>

Artificial, or conventional, signs are one “whose foundation-relation is artificial.”<sup>7</sup> The example given by Parker and Veatch is of a barber shop pole. There seems to be no current causal relation between the red and white stripe pole and a barber shop. Though there may have been at one time (e.g., the letting of red blood on white skin). Due to its similarity with a candy cane, a barber shop pole, today, may more commonly represent a candy shop than a barber shop. Nevertheless, conventionally we associate the red and white striped pole with a barber shop. Thus, the relation, since it is not causal, is artificial or conventional. “When the foundation-relation is not a natural connection but rather a connection imposed by human

**Figure 1: Types of Signs**

		<u>Signs</u>	
		natural	artificial
material	smoke, thunder, etc.	barber pole, language, etc.	
formal	ideas		

<sup>4</sup> Figure taken from Parker and Veatch, *Logic*, 22.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

artifice, convention, custom, or habit either by an individual or by a group, the sign is called an *artificial* or arbitrary or conventional sign. When such artificial signs are specially contrived, we call them ‘symbols.’”<sup>8</sup> According to Parker and Veatch, then, a barber shop pole would more properly be labeled a “symbol” rather than “sign,” because it is a contrived conventional sign.

### **Material and Formal Signs**

Material, or instrumental, signs are defined as “‘*signs-plus*.’”<sup>9</sup> Signs are sometimes double natured. Parker and Veatch explain, “If you are asked, ‘What is smoke?’ you may say, ‘It is a sign of fire,’ or you may say, ‘It is the gaseous product of combustion.’ Your double answer indicates clearly that all the signs we have mentioned are double-natured; each is a sign *plus* a thing of a certain kind in its own right. . . . Such a ‘sign-plus,’ which has a nature of its own in addition to its signifying nature, we shall call a *material* [instrumental] sign.”<sup>10</sup> Further, “Since a material sign is significant in virtue of its own peculiar nature, that nature must itself be known *first, before* its significance or signatum can be known. And this real nature which must first be known includes also its relations to other things, and especially its foundation-relation - its similarity or causal or artificial connection - to the thing which it signifies.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, for smoke to be a sign of fire we must first know it as smoke and not as something else. “Material signs must

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

first be known in their own right before their significance can be known.”<sup>12</sup>

Formal signs are defined as “‘*signs-period.*’”<sup>13</sup> All signs are not material. Ideas may be signs representative of something else, but ideas are not material. “Just to *have* an idea is to know what it is an idea *of*. Of course you have to *have* the idea, but you do not have to *know* the idea before you know what it’s about. Hence ideas - images, concepts, propositions, etc. - are not material signs. They do not have traits which must be known before their significance is known. . . . [Formal signs] have no nature other than their signifying nature . . . their very nature or form is significance.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the very nature of a formal sign is to represent something other than itself.<sup>15</sup> It is important to remember that while a formal sign does not have a nature itself it can still be the object of study. When this occurs “it ceases to be a sign and becomes instead a *signatum* of *another* formal sign - *another* idea. Thus formal signs are significant only when in *use*, though their formal significance can itself be studied.”<sup>16</sup> Parker and Veatch explain, “Thus formal signs are the most efficient of instruments for the simple reason that they are *nothing but* instruments.”<sup>17</sup> **Figure 2** should help illustrate the above differences. The solid lines indicate natural connections and the dotted lines illustrate conventional, or artificial, connections.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 18.

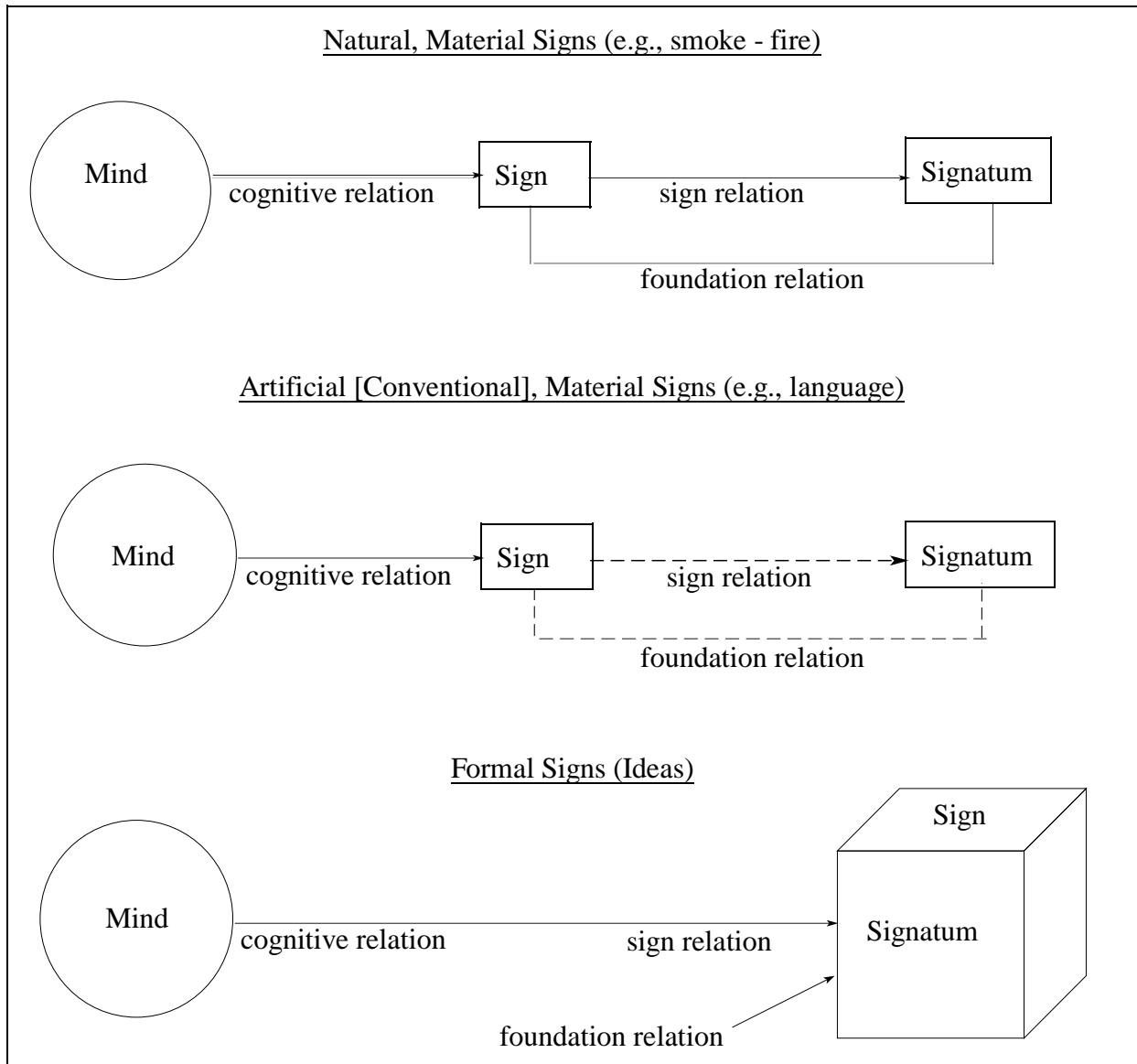
<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>18</sup> Figure taken from Parker and Veatch, *Logic*, 23.

**Figure 2:** Natural, Conventional, and Formal Connections



From the previous discussion some conclusions follow. Material signs, both natural and conventional, are always different from their signatum, however, they may be similar. Formal signs are identical to their signatum. As Parker and Veatch state, “This is simply another way of saying that a formal sign has no other nature than its signifying nature.”<sup>19</sup> Mortimer Adler

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

concurr, “a formal sign is never an object we apprehend. Its whole existence or being consists in the function it performs as a sign, referring to something we do apprehend, something it serves to bring before our minds. It is, as it were, self-effacing in its performance of this function.”<sup>20</sup> At this point the objection is raised that since the nature of a formal sign is identical to its signatum does the formal sign not cease to be a sign at all? There needs to be a qualification on what is understood by its nature. “Formal sign and signatum are identical in *nature* or *character*, but not in their *status* or *condition*. In the formal sign the nature or character exists in the status or condition of a *pointer*; in the signatum it exists in the condition of an independent being which happens to be *pointed at*. And this difference of state or condition is sufficient to preserve the difference or otherness which must obtain between any sign and its signatum.”<sup>21</sup> Since formal signs are identical to their signatum does this not necessarily stipulate, then, that formal signs are necessary for knowledge? Yes it does. No knowledge is possible without formal signs. If there were only material signs, how would one know the material sign? Certainly not *formally*. Nothing material can enter the immaterial mind. Since material signs must have their natures examined before we can *know* what they signify, how can we *know* the natures of the material signs if they cannot be known formally or directly? The answer is that they cannot. The “form” of the thing in reality is what the mind knows. Thus, the formal sign is necessary for knowledge. Further, it is in the “form” of the thing in reality that meaning is acquired. Linguist Kenneth Pike states, “Meaning is tied to form, so that it exists only where there is form of some kind.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Mortimer Adler, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1985), 65.

<sup>21</sup> Parker and Veatch, *Logic*, 23.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth L. Pike, *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 116.

Without form there is no meaning, but within form meaning is found. Adler comments, “our ideas, as the [formal] signs of the objects they enable us to apprehend, *are* meanings. . . . Each of our ideas *is* a meaning and that is all it is.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Linguistic Signs and Knowledge**

Linguistic signs are conventional material signs. There does not seem to be any real causal relation between the signs used and their signatum. The possible exception to this would be the use of onomatopoeia, which will be discussed below. Language is the primary bridge of communication between humans. Indeed, language is sufficient for the delivery of meaning and knowledge. For it is self-defeating to assert otherwise. To communicate that communication is impossible is self-defeating. Or stating, in language, that language is insufficient for the delivery of meaning or knowledge is, likewise, self-defeating. If anyone denies language is sufficient, then he uses the very tools he wishes to deny. With the introduction to linguistic signs one encounters the term “word.” What is a “word?” It seems intuitively obvious what a “word” is, but this has been a subject of much debate. Adler notes, “words have multiple meanings. One and the same word can have a variety of meanings. In addition, in the course of time a word can lose one meaning and gain another - a new meaning.”<sup>24</sup> According to Parker and Veatch a “word” is, “an artificial sensory image, specially contrived to convey or signify the abstract idea of a single trait or characteristic.”<sup>25</sup> When the word “man” is employed it does not take into

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<sup>23</sup> Adler, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*, 66.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>25</sup> Parker and Veatch, *Logic*, 21.

consideration any particular individual (although it can if nothing else is known of the subject of the sentence except the characteristic of “man-ness.” For example “a man walked in the store.”). The word “man” takes into consideration all things that are common to the class of “man.” Whether, this be physical characteristics (e.g., one head, one nose, two arms, two legs, etc.) or more abstract characteristics (e.g., moral, rational, intelligent, etc.). So when someone utters “a man walked in the store,” what kind of “man” comes to mind? Tall? Short? Skinny? Whatever is recalled to the imagination, one thing is for sure - we do not recall anything that could properly be classified as a “duck!”

Further, it is to be remembered that the word “man” is conventional, though the formal sign for man is not. Why? Because the formal sign is what gives man-ness. The term “man” may vary from culture to culture and language to language, but what makes a man *man* does not change simply because he is in a new region. It is because of this distinction that translation is possible. When one goes to a new language group and learns the word for man, then the individual has a new conventional sign in which to refer to man. This, however, does not mean that man, as an ontological being, has changed.

So what constitutes the word “man?” Why use the letters “m-a-n” and not something else? Why use letters at all and not characters like the Chinese? Letters (in English at least) are simply conventional tools that correspond to the sounds that people make. The letter “m” simply represents the sound that is used in many words. This could be said of all twenty-six letters in the English alphabet. The letters are representations of the different sounds that are employed in the English language. The combination and manipulation of these various letters together comprise words in which the arrangement of the letters correspond to the pronunciation of the

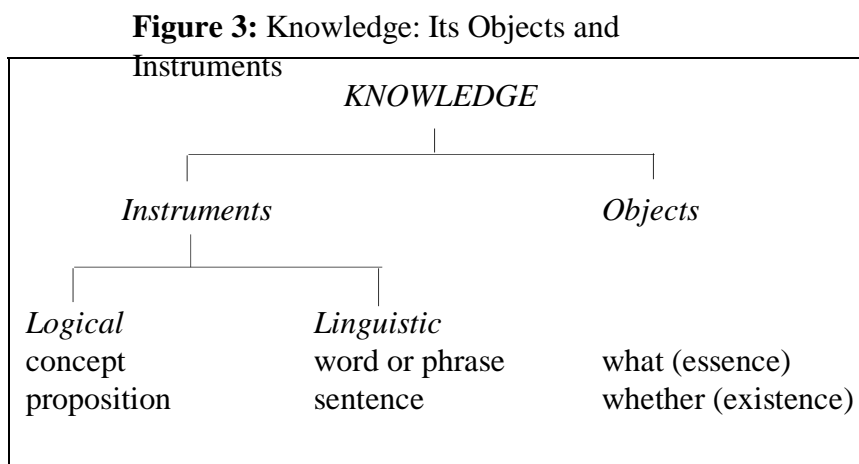
word when spoken. This in turn is the conventional sign for the signatum. Words, therefore, represent things whether in reality or in thought as conventional signs.

It seems obvious to note that the spoken language came before the written language. Children learn how to speak before they learn how to read. This phenomena can help us understand how humans obtain knowledge, regardless of language group. When children are younger they want to know *what* something is. “What is that?” is a common question amongst two year olds. The parent is likely to answer, “That is a ‘dog.’” The next time the child sees a four legged creature they may point and say “dog,” but the parent may need to correct them “no, that is a ‘cow.’” The child now has a new term “cow” in which to classify certain four legged creatures. Eventually, after much trial and error, the child learns to abstract that which is common to all dogs (and, likewise, all cows). Thus, the child comes to understand the concept of “dog” is its essence. That is, individual animals can be labeled “dog” if they fit the particular class of animal that has the proper characteristics of creatures called “dog.”

About the age of four or five the most common question children ask is *why* something is the way it is. “Why is the sky blue?” “Why do you go to work?” “Why do I have to eat broccoli?” This seems to be the most obvious step in the acquisition of knowledge, yet before the child ever gets to the *why* question, implicitly, they have asked the *whether* question. That is, children may now know *what* a “dog” is, but then they implicitly ask *whether* the “dog” is. A real dog and a portrait of a dog may both properly be called a “dog,” but one is a *real* dog the other is only a *sign* of a dog. The child implicitly begins to distinguish between the real dog and the representational dog. This is the process of determining *whether* something exists or not.

The *why* question has driven most parents to the brink of insanity. There seems to be no end to the curiosity with which a child possesses. This, however, is an integral step in human knowledge. For once the child knows the *what*, the essence, of something, and they know the *whether*, the existence, of something, then they begin to inquire the *why*, the cause, of something. A child may know *what* a “dog” is, and *whether* Cerebus is a “dog,” but Cerebus does not exist since Cerebus is a mythological three-headed dog. Therefore, the question arises *why* did people invent the story of Cerebus? Whatever the answer, the child has employed these three concepts to obtain knowledge. **Figure 3** shows the relationships between the objects of knowledge (such as an

actual dog) and the corresponding instruments of knowledge (such as the word “dog”).<sup>26</sup> This chart can help us understand what aspects signs play in



our understanding. While language incorporates words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs; the sign aspect on its most basic level is the word. According to the chart a word is the concept or essence of something. The essence is the form of the thing. Above we discussed that the formal sign (the essence) of a thing is what the mind knows directly. Thus, when we hear or see the word “dog” or “man” we recall conceptual (or even actual) entities that can be classified as dog or man and not a cow or duck.

<sup>26</sup> Figure taken from Parker and Veatch, *Logic*, 12.

A sentence is a relation of words to convey a specific meaning. The correct organization of the sentence is conventional and varies from language to language.<sup>27</sup> However, the subject of thought must remain stable since this would be the formal sign (and the formal sign is identical to signatum or object). Thus, whether the adjective goes before or after the subject is conventional to the language. So whether the word “tall” goes before or after “man” is irrelevant to the concept of “tall” or the concept of “man.” The relation of the ideas to convey meaning simply does not effect the actual tall-ness or man-ness of the subject.

Above, it was mentioned there did not seem to be any causal connection between the linguistic sign and its signatum, with the possible exception of onomatopoeia. Words like “bang” and “pop” seem to be causally related to what they signify. Namely the sound *bang* or *pop*. Even in this case, however, the word “bang” is simply a conventional sign for an actual bang sound. The letters “b-a-n-g” simply correspond to the sound that the English word “bang” makes. The spoken word “bang” corresponds to the actual bang sound. Yet, in another language the word “bang” may take on a conventional spelling to correspond in that language to the bang sound. Thus, in onomatopoeia the word is conventional even though it may closely resemble its signatum.

### **The Origin of Language<sup>28</sup>**

The origins of language are mysterious at best. William Alston notes that much of the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>28</sup> A complete survey on linguistic origins is too broad and complex for this project. I have attempted to highlight certain aspects that are important in the history of linguistic philosophy and its import on hermeneutic studies. No doubt a much thorough investigation is warranted for the various theories that flood academia on this topic.

literature on this topic assumes, wrongly, that a committee of early humans decided which terms would stand for something.<sup>29</sup> Commenting on this theory of linguistic origins Alston notes, “on reflection, we can see that language, as such, could not have originated by having decisions adopted by ‘common convention.’ As [Bertrand] Russell has said, ‘We can hardly suppose a parliament of hitherto speechless elders meeting together and agreeing to call a cow a cow and a wolf a wolf.’ By the nature of the case, making agreements and conventions presupposes that people already have a language originated, but at least we can be certain that it was in no such way as this.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, the theory that language originated by having ancient humans decide what to call something simply cannot be the case of how language originated. But if this is not how language originated what else could explain the origins of linguistic phenomena?

In the nineteenth century and into the twenty-first century the theory on linguistic origins shifted from a divinely given attribute to a naturally evolving characteristic.<sup>31</sup> Roy Harris notes, “The more fundamental question was whether it was possible to explain ‘by natural causes’ what the Bible explained as a divinely prompted intellectual feat of nomenclature. And here the force of invoking such factors as vocal imitation and expression of emotion was precisely that these, unlike the invention of names, were not unique to *homo sapiens*.”<sup>32</sup> The key to this passage is the notion that philosophers of language began to search for *natural causes* of language. The Genesis account of linguistic origins did not satisfy their questions. N. H. Tur-Sinai concurs,

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<sup>29</sup> William Alston, *Philosophy of Language* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 57.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Roy Harris, ed., *The Origin of Languages* (Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, 1996), x.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

“language is not a fixed thing, determined by unchanging laws and logical judgments. It was not given or created, but has developed by a long, complicated process.”<sup>33</sup> Tur-Sinai hypothesizes that language began not with the naming of specific entities, but with a basic categorizing based on similar qualities (e.g., this is white, that is white, both are types of white).<sup>34</sup> It is this basic categorization that root words are formed. But, Tur-Sinai does not think the root word came first. He argues that the root word was noted, as such, only after other words had gained acceptance.<sup>35</sup> While it may be true that language evolved naturally, the important point is that a divine intervention for the origin of language was, and is, no longer considered a valid theory in modern academia. A divine giving of language is philosophically rejected before the evidence is examined. Hence, with the release of *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) by an anonymous author (later found to be Robert Chambers) a foundational premise for modern linguistic study was established: “language [is] a human invention and that the difference between animal communication and human communication was one of degree rather than of kind.”<sup>36</sup> Charles Darwin reenforced this idea in *The Descent of Man* (1871) by asserting that mans possession of “the faculty of language was not in itself counterevidence to ‘the belief that man has developed from some lower form.’”<sup>37</sup> The import of these statements cannot be overemphasized. If humans are only separated from animals in that humans employ a complex

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<sup>33</sup> N. H. Tur-Sinai, “The Origin of Language,” in *Language: An Enquiry into its Meaning and Function*, ed. Ruth Nanda Anshen (New York: Harper & Brothers, Pub., 1957), 41.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-51.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>36</sup> Harris, *Origin of Languages.*, xii.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

series of grunts and groans called language, then man is nothing but an animal. This is because language, then, would not be unique to man. To say that man is only different in *degree* and not *kind* to animals is to make a radical statement about the nature of man. If man is only a different degree of animal, then there is nothing really unique about man, and language is just a complex series of grunts and moans. This theory has prompted much study in the belief that animals can be taught human languages.

However, there is an alternative theory (which the modern theory is more of a reaction), and that is that language is a divinely gifted ability. In the early chapters of Genesis, Adam is formed from the dust of the ground and shortly thereafter names the animals (Gen. 2:19-20). God did not need to put Adam through grade school or any institution to learn language it seems to be naturally endowed by the virtue of God's image in him. It is fascinating that the creation process gives an image of God *speaking*. What language does God speak? What was spoken that brought forth the heavenly and earthly realms? It is this image, of a speaking God, that embodies man. What was Adam's language - this proto-language used before society developed? These are questions that we may never know the answer. However, it is fascinating to note that if the Genesis account is accurate then we have a foundational understanding of where language originated. It would still remain to be seen in what form this language existed or how it developed, but nonetheless we could assert that language is qualitatively different than that of the animals. In fact, inasmuch man has the capacity to speak, man most resembles God. Language seems to be man's ability, endowed by God, to share with God in a miniature creative process. God created the heavens and the earth, but man can create in a small way imaginary universes. God enables man to speak, because He first spoke, and man speaks out of his own

will, much like God, to communicate meaning and knowledge.

In this theory, the differences found among languages relies on the story of the tower of Babel (Gen. 11). If the languages were confused at this time then this would account for the similarities of various languages as well as the differences. If there was a singular proto-language used by all and then confused, then this explains how languages are grouped into “families,” but have conventionally different spellings and sounds. As noted above, the conventional signs would change, but the formal signatum would *not* change. This allows for cross linguistic communication. Another conclusion follows from this line of thought. Human language not only differs in degree from that of animals, but also differs in kind. Human language and communication is completely different than anything found in the animal kingdom. This follows though, only if the premise is true that language is divinely gifted. If, however, humans are just an evolved animal species, then the capacity for language is only of a different degree than that of animals.

### **Animals, Signs, and Language<sup>38</sup>**

Animals make noises and show certain expressions. Pet owners swear that their animals can laugh, cry, and talk. But can they? Can animals actually communicate in language like humans? Flocks of birds express certain calls when danger nears or mating season approaches? Is this not language? Parrots blab “Polly wants a cracker.” Research with chimps and gorillas have led some researchers to concur with Robert Chambers that the capacity for animals to

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<sup>38</sup> A thorough investigation into the linguistic, or lack of linguistic, abilities in animals is beyond the scope of this work. I intend to highlight important features in this debate and relate its relevance in the fields of hermeneutics and linguistics.

communicate is one only of degree and not kind or quality.<sup>39</sup> Of interest is a number of primate studies, in particular with the gorilla Koko. Koko has shown tremendous ability to express feelings, wants, and simple recognition. The importance of this study should not be missed. If it is shown that Koko does use language like a human then, this would be hard evidence that (certain) animals think in language like humans. Thus, the claim that animals only differ in degree and not kind would be established.

However, it must be remembered that much of the study with primates seems to be more of reward-reaction type actions and not real communication. Most of the apes learn that to make certain hand gestures, facial gestures, or pressing certain button sequences results in a prize. Is this really considered language or an instinct to achieve pleasurable results? Koko is different, according to her researchers, because she learned to initiate communication instead of waiting for the action of one of her keepers. It is argued that Koko has learned to use rudimentary language to communicate what she wants. While Koko's researchers are optimistic that Koko has learned human communication, linguists are not so forthcoming in lauding recommendations for Koko to join toastmasters! Noted linguist Noam Chomsky states the reason for the difference in man's and animal's ability to communicate is intellectual organization. Animals, even otherwise intelligent apes, do not have the capacity for linguistic ability.<sup>40</sup> Wilson and McKeon note Chomsky's results, "the attempts to induce apes to learn a symbolic system could confuse an observer to think that they are using a system like human language, in much

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<sup>39</sup> Clifford Wilson and Donald McKeon, *The Language Gap*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 39-40.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

the same way as a person who jumps is really thought to be flying, although to a lesser extent.”<sup>41</sup>

What this means is that even though an ape may be able to gesture that they want a cookie this should not be confused with actual human language, which is spontaneous and varied. Adler agrees, “Almost all of the cries, sounds, gestures, that animals in the wild, and domesticated animals as well, use to express their emotions and desires, serve as signals, not as designators. It is only in the laboratory and under experimental conditions, often with very ingeniously contrived special apparatus, that such higher mammals as chimpanzees and bottle-nosed dolphins *appear* to be communicating by using words *as if* they were names, and even to be making sentences by putting them together with some vestige of syntax.”<sup>42</sup>

So how does one explain Koko’s ability for simple recognition? Wilson and McKeon comment on statements by Chomsky, “apes may share with humans certain aspects of what he [Chomsky] calls ‘conceptual structure,’ they [apes] lack ‘computational structure’ (i.e., the human language faculty). Some sharing in the conceptual structures permits the apes to make use of signs and other indicators, to label objects in a limited fashion, while the encoding thereof in terms of a structured system is lacking. In short, humans are the sole possessors of a ‘Language Acquisition System’ (LAS).”<sup>43</sup>

There appears to be no limit to the linguistic tools that humans can employ, while apes on the other hand are limited to certain specific gestures and buttons that they have learned. Even then, there does not appear to be any spontaneous attempt to communicate by the ape. This

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Adler, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*, 75.

<sup>43</sup> Wilson and McKeon, *The Language Gap*, 156.

is very much unlike humans who are universally known to have the capacity not only for simple language, but very complex linguistic structures within only their first few years of life. The conclusion that one draws from this is that not only are humans capable of language, but that *only* humans are capable of language. Wilson and McKeon identify twelve aspects of human language that are absent in animal communication: 1) *Discreteness of sound / form*, that is, primates do not have the ability to speak and certain finger movements taken as “signs” may very well be, simply put, monkey business; 2) Apes were unable to manipulate the *symbolic nature of the units*, unlike humans, to create new meaning; 3) Apes do not adhere to a *rule governed system*, many “complex” signs are simply repetitious; 4) Apes simply do not have *compositional* ability, unlike humans, who can determine abstract structures in language; 5) Apes are unable to communicate *complex* meaning, such as, counterfactuals (e.g., “I would have gone outside if you had given me a banana.”) or ambiguous sentences (e.g., “I dislike pushy researchers.”); 6) Apes are unable to acknowledge *displacing* information, that is, “discuss” future or past events; 7) Apes are repetitious or imitative, unlike humans who use language that is *unbounded in Scope (open-ended)* moving from one conversation to another; 8) Apes are generally prompted for a response, unlike humans who are *independent of stimulus control*; 9) Human language is *suitable for contextualized communication*, unlike apes who are “taught” certain “suitable” signs; 10) Human language is *independent of need satisfaction*, however, ape communication is usually to satisfy some need or desire; 11) Human children *spontaneously acquire* language, unlike apes, who show no evidence of ever independently learning symbols much less complex language; 12) And human language is *culturally transmitted*, there is no

evidence that a “learned” ape could teach other apes language.<sup>44</sup> Thus, it is concluded that spontaneous, varied, and complex linguistic communication is found only in humans. This suggests that the difference in humans and apes is not of *degree* but in *kind*. Commenting on these studies Adler notes, “If the students of animal behavior had engaged in their observations and experiments with a recognition of the difference between perceptual and conceptual thought, and with an acknowledgment that humans have intellect as well as senses, whereas animals lack intellects, they would not be so prone to ignore or deny the difference in kind between human and animal use of signs as names or designators.”<sup>45</sup> Humans, as an ontological species, have capabilities that simply do not exist in any other species in the animal kingdom.

### **Conclusion: Language and Understanding**

In this postmodern culture, the majority of those who study hermeneutics hold that understanding and meaning are relative to the individual. Since we are each locked in our own interpretive bubble we can never get outside our bubble to know reality. Thus, we have no objective knowledge about meaning in reality or in texts. This school of thought teaches that our ability to create meaning is dependent on our historical placement. Only in the historical framework in which we exist can we understand our surroundings, this is known as historicism. Jean Grondin describes historicism as, “that every particular phenomenon must be conceptualized within the context of its age. The point is to avoid judging other times by the standards of our own, and instead to interpret historical events immanently as expressive of *their*

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 147-54.

<sup>45</sup> Adler, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*, 77.

time.”<sup>46</sup> In discussing the problem of language, from this historicism viewpoint, in the hermeneutic process Grondin states, “Language always tries to express something literally, but this ‘something’ often enough remains in the dark, because the words do not occasion the same meaning or effect in the receiver as intended by the speaker.”<sup>47</sup> This misunderstanding is not limited to language but extends to all of reality. Grondin states, “The ceaseless striving for words and understanding indeed presupposes the experience of the inadequacy of linguistic understanding.”<sup>48</sup> For the postmodern hermeneutician all reality is a matter of perspective. Therefore, since we have the difficulty of striving for words to explain reality, and this inability to explain reality is evidence that our experience is subjective, but linguistics purport to speak on reality, thus, it must be the case that linguistics are insufficient. There is no objective viewpoint, thus, there is no objective meaning.

It seems obvious enough that the study of hermeneutics employs language. As such, Grondin’s statements are curious. How does she know that language does not “occasion the same meaning or effect in the receiver” as in the speaker? Does her writing the statement not assume that the person reading will be able to understand what *she* intends to communicate? While there may be agreement that one cannot know what an author *intends*, it does seem obvious that we can know what an author *means*. In fact, this is the only way we can communicate. Grondin’s statement is self destructive because she uses the very tools that she claims are inadequate. If she really believes that a receiver cannot gain the meaning intended by

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<sup>46</sup> Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 76.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

the speaker then why did she produce a book to tell us as much? Implicitly, she *does* believe that we can know what an author means, and she shows such belief by communicating *in language*. If language were inadequate, then there would be no point in writing a book since there would be no one who could understand it.

Grondin's statement is even more curious since there *does* seem to be a universal language for all humans. As noted above, Wilson and McKeon utilize Noam Chomsky in their research. One of the twelve characteristics that they use from Chomsky is that language is *rule-governed*. That is, language follows rules in order to be sensible. In response to this, Michael Devitt and Kim Sterelny comment, "Chomsky's picture [that linguistic behavior is innate] is not one we can accept. If a speaker understands English in virtue of knowing rules for its employment, these rules cannot be in English. . . . If you do not already understand English, a system of rules in English telling you how to construct sentences, and what they mean, is no help. It follows that the speaker must represent those rules in a language of thought that is not English; and, of course, it cannot be any other public language either."<sup>49</sup> The critique by Devitt and Sterelny is only half-valid, and their distaste for anything innate is due to their naturalism which demands that there be no innate behavior.<sup>50</sup> True, if you are giving instructions on rules for the English language to a non-native English speaker, then, yes, that would be pointless. However, they miss Chomsky's argument. Chomsky does not limit linguistic behavior to an individual language, but applies it to all languages. All languages follow their own conventional

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<sup>49</sup> Michael Devitt and Kim Sterelny, *Language and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language* (Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 118-9.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

rules for comprehension, but all languages are bound by certain metaphysical rules - a metaphysical language, if you will, that is common to all languages. This metaphysical language is rooted in reality and, thus, is common to all humans. That language is the laws of logic. That something *is* what it *is* is obvious, and this is known as the law of identity. That this something is not something else is known as the law of non-contradiction. This states that *something* cannot be *non-something*. To make sure something does not fall into the “cracks” this something must either be something or non-something it cannot be both. This is known as the law of excluded middle. These three laws are foundational to all of thought because they are rooted in the very fabric of reality. We cannot deny them without using them. They are literally undeniable. Out of the laws of logic are born mathematical truths, another universal language. Since logical truths are universal there can be universal objective communication. That a man is a man and not a duck is true, not only logically, but formally as well. That man is the signatum, is common to all languages. The sign, “man,” may be conventional, but what it points to (e.g., the real man) is not. Thus, something can be communicated objectively. Above, we discussed that the formal sign is what the mind knows, and the formal sign is identical to the thing in reality. If this is the case, it is self-defeating to assert otherwise, then the mind knows reality and knows reality objectively. These are metaphysical statements, statements about the very nature of reality. Jerrold Katz argues that the linguistic studies that began the twentieth century in an attempt to do away with metaphysics have come full circle in their inability to account for reality without metaphysics. He states,

There is a rather ironic turn of events in store for philosophy in this and the next few decades . . . We may see the philosophies of language of Logical Empiricism and Ordinary Language Philosophy replaced by a philosophy of language based on a scientific theory of universal linguistic structure, concerned with uncovering properties of knowledge and mind on the basis of philosophically relevant aspects of the underlying reality of natural languages. If this happens, the linguistic turn taken by philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century will have turned back on itself, reintroducing the very metaphysical issues whose banishment from philosophy was initially proclaimed as the rationale for the turn to linguistic philosophy.<sup>51</sup>

Above it was discussed that language is a conventional sign. As such, it only acts as a pointer to a thing in reality. So when the conventional word “man” is used, it is used to point to an actual man. Since this man actually exists and the word “man” corresponds to the man in reality, we can use language to discuss real things. Further, as long as the terms are understood, then objective communication can take place. Language is sufficient and adequate for the delivery of meaning provided the parties in discussion use the same conventional signs (e.g., words) to describe the signatum. This process is undeniable, for to deny it is to participate in a task that is supposedly impossible.

In conclusion it should be noted that not only is it possible to understand communicated meaning objectively, it is actually impossible *not* to communicate or understand objective meaning. Language, though limited, is sufficient and adequate for the task at hand. Provided that the participants speak the same conventional language, objective meaning can be communicated with ease. Even if the participants are of different language groups communication can still take place by resorting to the universal language of logic. Since formal signs are known by all who perceive them, they act as a starting point for translation. Finally, only humans communicate linguistically, and this linguistic act allows us to share, in a small part, with the divine nature.

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<sup>51</sup> Jerrold J. Katz, *The Underlying Reality of Language and Its Philosophical Import* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971), 189.