The Impact of Language on Society

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What is the impact of language on society, and what role does language play in social change? Although Jürgen Habermas calls language the medium of the life-world, the way money and power are the media of the economic and political systems respectively, can language be so powerful to play a role in changing the systems as well? Robert Bellah notes that people have often tried to bring the world closer to the life-world by making it a more human place, and they have tried to do so through language,

because on the whole they do not have a great deal of worldly power, but only the words they speak. But through the words they speak and the practices they inaugurate, they create community.[56]

In this way Bellah supports the controversial position I am taking: language can change society. But even if I do not want to short change the media of money and power, I believe the role language plays needs more focused attention, and could reward such analysis and investigation in helping to understand how it is involved in societal change. To discount what Emile Durkheim calls the linguistic culture would be a mistake.[57] He places it along-side of the scientific and historical cultures. If a historicization of totality brings reward, introducing evolution into the study of nature and biology, for example; and the scientific examination of totality also brings untold benefit,

then despite the reductionism involved, the investigation of the linguistic totality might also bring reward. Reality is more than the verbalization of it. Thus what role does language play in social change and personal growth?

Language is a very complex phenomenon, and it is easy to become overwhelmed by its complexities. One can move from grammar to logic to linguistics to the philosophy of language. In the latter case, one may delve into J.L. Austin and John Searle's speech-act theory, especially as it concerns performative language. But all these subjects cannot be dealt with in this short lecture, even if I have expanded it.[58] Within the given limitations here, it will be possible only to mention some insights and observations first in an analytical regard, and then move toward the performative and how it relates to Luther's peculiar sense of language and his Word of God Theology. Hopefully this newer insight into language will depict reasons why Luther's language introduced a world-changing momentum into early modern history.

To begin with an observation: one can look up the word "thing" in any dictionary, but seldom is its derivation known. Of course, it is as useful and recurrent a word as one that teachers have militated against,[59] because it is allegedly empty. But a "thing" was an Icelandic or Scandinavian legislative assembly, analogous to a German "diet" or a Russian *"duma*." And "things" were the matters considered and the decisions handed down.[60] In German the spelling is *"Ding.*" Thus the word is like a fossil in our language, quite certainly overused as a word to avoid thought, but unbeknownst to school teachers, it has quite an important history.

But another observation about the word is intriguing. Its meaning extends from an object of consciousness to a form of personal or social being. There are many examples,[61] but it is like the word "system:" one may speak of a philosophical and social system. A Thing is an ancient German assembly or group, and "things" are objects of thought in the emblem of the group. Perhaps the extension of meaning from the group to the thought emblem was first unconscious. But in some cases a conscious extension then went back from the thought emblem to the group, in the word "system" for example. A social system is a very late achievement in thought, while philosophical systems are early, and the latter's derivation from the former is unconscious.

Although Durkheim and Marcel Mauss in <u>Primitive Classification</u>, do not deal with words but with logic, they add light to this peculiar extension. They find that social distinction had much to do with thought distinctions and a "close link and not an accidental one [exists] between the social system and the logical system."[62] Ideas are organized on a model furnished by the society.[63] Thought is like the abstraction of the social, and society is like the concretion of thought. But to speak about thought is abstract. The concrete word and the spoken or written language need to be placed as the mediating agent between the thought emblem and the personal or social being and the process of abstraction or concretion involved. The way almost everything can be turned into money and money can be converted into almost anything again, so language can absorb the world and then reissue it, or extend it back into social reality again.[64]

Thus for Luther it was a very important move to change the basic paradigm of the medieval ecclesiastical world from Church and

sacrament, or even priest and sacrament to Word and sacrament. Luther began what Weber later called a religious form of rationalization in his Word of God Theology. In order to instigate change, the social reality of the church and the personal reality of the priest was not fundamental, but the word was. Luther held that the word was not the creature of the church, but the church was the creature of the word.[65] Luther took back the social institution and reality of the church to its basic building block, the word. Not the abstract idea having been stripped down and disembodied from the concrete word, but the word as a social organic building block, in the physicality of its sound. In addition, Luther did not mean words denuded of power, but a word of command that destroyed to create anew.[66]

John Searle brings other evidence to support this executive mode of language. He describes language itself as a social institution, broadly speaking.[67] And some language is peculiar in that it does not "match the world," but the world matches it. Such language does not first of all have a true or false proposition, but makes its proposition true. Scattered through his books, Searle has many places where he refers to this characteristic of performative language.[68]

Searle never enters into the dynamic logic of change brought by language, but he does for it an analytic service. Not only does he describe language broadly as a social institution, but it is a crucial component of all social institutions. In a recent study he opposes the sociological concept of "the *social* construction of reality" with the *linguistic* construction of social reality.[69] What seems to be a nuance is much more than a slight shift. It is a move from sociology to linguistics, marking the latter as crucial. His shift resembles Luther's from

the church and the hierarchy to the word. Luther's faith involves personal, social, and even divine forces initiating movement. But Searle seems to analyze language in a great social and institutional stasis, even if his analysis is replete with the give and take of conversation. I also imagine Searle would be averse to dialectical logic. These basic differences between the two thinkers obscure the similarity of their positions, but Luther went from the ecclesiastical construction of reality, i.e., by the Church, to the linguistic construction of the reality of the church. He reverted to words as the basic linguistic building blocks of the social reality of the church, i.e., the church is where the Gospel is purely proclaimed and the sacraments are rightly administered (Art. VII of the Augsburg Confession).

Searle argues that all institutions, including language, operate by constitutive rules, and the simple linguistic rule that supplies the formula which constructs social realities is "X counts as Y in context C." e.g., a package of cigarettes (X) counts as money (Y) in the collapse of public confidence in the Russian currency (C).[70] We will not detain ourselves further with Searle's analytical theory here. But he gives some support to the basic argument of these lectures. If language escapes a static and abstract logic and enters a dynamic, concrete, dialectical logic, then it becomes the demolition, reconstruction, and emergent source of all social institutions.

Turning to the characterization of Luther's Theology: according to Prof. Robert Goeser of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Luther's theology or language is occasional and performative. Because the former is a technical term and the latter is controversial, some explanation is necessary.

By "occasional" Goeser meant that Luther's theology was non-systematic.[71] Luther reacted to issues in each occasion of crisis with a theology derived from Biblical study. Systematic thinking seizes a measure of control and necessitates some detachment. But Luther is centripetal. He himself becomes totally involved in the crisis. He becomes seized, grasped, and moved by his language-like theology. Drawn in he becomes moved and acted upon, rather than acting.[72]

Secondly, that Luther's theology is performative should not be controversial. To say that performativity is merely a technical designation for a trivial class of speech acts is misguided. Searle can give this impression. But his last article about "How Performatives Work" corrects and criticizes his own previous analysis and description of the inner working of performatives.[73] In this definitive work on performatives, he notes that the performative utterance is both self-referential and executive.[74] An event is achieved by way of making an utterance. A particular class of actions are carried out by the mere manifestation of the intention in the utterance. Although an assertion takes some commitment to the truth-value it is saying, a performative also bears the obligation for the intention to do an action named by the verb. And in the central thesis of his essay, Searle argues convincingly that assertions are derived from performatives and not conversely.[75] These descriptions of the performative do not seem to relegate it to the trivial.

But in a peculiar way, performatives are often considered earth-shaking in importance, and then almost in the same breath, felt to be of disappointing significance.

In How to do Things with Words J. L. Austin first feels he has made a powerful discovery by isolating performatives, and then apologizes for the very technical and trivial examples he offers.[76] After his definitive article on performatives of 1989, Searle continues his independent work in The Construction of Social Reality in 1995 presenting them as not at all trivial.[77]

While reading J.L Austin's How to do Things with Words, a funny thought came to my mind: "There seems to be something wrong from the beginning to the very end of this!" A looseness of thinking can unfortunately accompany the elusiveness of ordinary language.

Such a looseness of thinking can hardly be ascribed to John Searle, however. Although even Searle first made do with a very inadequate, not to say misleading, analysis of the linguistic act called the performative.[78] When he finally comes to terms with it in "How the Performative Works" he discovers it to be self-referential and executive. These features do not seem trivial. And if a taxonomy of performative verbs is worked out, then they would include many very crucial to theology: promise, command, baptize, name, marry, confirm, etc.

Permit one more observation in this digression which has been trying to refute the argument of the triviality of performatives and that they are merely a technical class of verbs in language. Perhaps it is only loosely related to this subject: but when focusing on what language is referring to, language almost vanishes from consciousness. When focusing on language itself, what it is referring to vanishes. One can dissect the performative oblivious to the personal, social, cultural, and religious role it plays in language events. When Searle finally comes to the surprising result that performative verbs have no

common semantic property that marks them and sets them off from others, that any verb which names the intentional action can be uttered performatively,[79] then he finds that performativity reflects how the world works, and not how a small class of verbs work. Theologically this insight is significant, because how God works in the world through language can thus be perceived by the faithful. God is not only executive, but also self-referential. ("I am who I am." is self-referential.) God works through language, and does not need to choose only those verbs which name an intention and are simultaneously capable of being an act. God creates out of nothing, but via the Word.

Now let us return from this excursion and attempt to characterize Luther's theology. Whether promises are highly regarded in Protestant culture, as John Searle observed among Oxford professors,[80] or a promise is merely considered a verb from one technical class of speech acts; it is a promise, and it is one of the earliest performatives discovered, and it still brings home the telling point: "to speak about a promise is not the same as making one." Now those versed in Luther's theology know how Luther identified the Gospel itself with God's promise. Luther discovered that the Gospel was also present in the Old Testament in the form of the promises of God, and that actually, even in the New Testament the word, "Gospel" is interchangeable with "promise." Even the word, "evangelical" derives from the word for Gospel in Greek, and thus the preponderance of the performative can be seen in Luther's as well as other Protestant theology. Now the Law and the Gospel is the dialectic with Luther's "key-signature." But Luther uses the terms "command and promise" as well as "law and Gospel."[81] That Luther's writing is not so much literary as it is recorded speech makes his theology even more intensely performative. In addition, in his writing he

addresses the reader with direct speech dialogue, encountering the reader with a dialectic of performative speech acts. Thus there can be no question that Luther is operating with a performative mode of language and speech.

The question now revolves around whether it is deceptive to hold that this language induces social systemic change; whether that kind of power really inheres in language. The question about God acting in the world via language is an additional consideration for those who believe in God. Luther, of course, certainly champions this controversial conviction.