

Language

by Matthias Petzoldt

Version 1.0 | Published 1 May 2026 | DOI <https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-114298>

Other language version: Sprache (Deutsch)

In the Christian faith, language is the central medium for communicating salvation. This has been the subject of much reflection throughout the history of Christian theology and devotion. However, systematic theology must also rethink the significance of language in the current context of questions about the function and capabilities of language, as well as in light of the critical challenges posed by the sciences.

Table of Contents

1. From Animal Communication to Human Language?

2. Human Language

3. Does God Speak?

4. The Message of Salvation

Recommended Literature

Citations

Citation Style

Metadata

Editorial Note

Links to other media and further information regarding this topic can be found in the German version of this article.

1. From Animal Communication to Human Language?

Humans are able to make “language” a topic of discussion because they are trained in the conventionalized sign system of language – as culturally unique as each language may in the end be. Naturalistic attempts to explain language starting from a non-human animal origin have up to now been criticized for their logical circularity: such derivations of the mental (*geistig*) phenomenon of language always presuppose the very thing that is to be explained. With his research on the gestural coordination of cooperative interaction (requesting, informing, sharing) among primates, the experimental psychologist Michael Tomasello  has, however, recently provided empirical evidence for an evolutionary explanation of human language that begins with non-human animal communication.

Aside from this recent debate, human beings' ability to speak has always been viewed as a distinctive characteristic of their rationality that distinguishes them from other animals. According to Johann G. Herder ^{GND}, humans are marked by reduced instincts which they compensate for through the deliberation made possible by linguistic thinking. Arnold Gehlen ^{GND} uses this explanatory model as the anthropological basis for his theory of institutions as a substitute for instinct and a compensation for humans' reduced instinctive abilities.

2. Human Language

Since the beginnings of reflection on language with the pre-Socratics, the connection between language and the nature of the world has been a subject of debate (names and things, truth and lies, etc.). Within Neoplatonic ontology, conceptual logic reflected the logical structure of the world: the higher the degree of generalization of linguistic expressions, the more the concepts correspond to being. This view was contested above all by nominalism (medieval dispute over universals). Even in the 20th century, logical empiricism could still assume a common logical structure between language and the world (see Ludwig Wittgenstein's ^{GND} *Tractatus*). However, the late Wittgenstein opened our eyes to the fact that the meaning of words only arises from their use, which varies greatly but which follows the grammar of a respective language (theory of language games; *Philosophical Investigations*). Thinking formed by language shapes people's access to the world and permeates their lives. Colloquial language therefore became the focus of research in the 20th century (ordinary language philosophy). Studies of speech acts reveal how socialized linguistic conventions form the communicative prerequisite for people to regulate their coexistence (speech act theory). In this way, they create and institutionalize interpersonal and social realities and jointly produce and shape objective reality (Jürgen Habermas ^{GND}).

People have always acquired practical knowledge of these linguistic skills (see, for example, the references to the use of language in the biblical traditions, where instead of the abstract concept of language, the organs of speech such as the mouth, lips, and tongue are discussed). Today's insights, however, are based on the results of linguistic, semiotic, linguistic-philosophical, and other analyses and theories. Even as developments in digitalization and artificial intelligence continue to advance, language in its analog (spoken and written) medium remains the guiding model for human use of language. As such, it is the fundamental medium of human encounter (M. Buber ^{GND}, and previously Wilhelm von Humboldt ^{GND}). This renders it all the more vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation by means of technological developments.

3. Does God Speak?

The idea that the gods speak is a widespread belief found in ancient myths. The biblical traditions also share this belief. However, in the biblical traditions, God not only speaks directly to people in their language but also communicates indirectly through prophets, signs, and miracles; God's messages are also conveyed in historical events (e.g., decisions made by King Cyrus or the works of Jesus of Nazareth), which are understood as revelations of God and which together can all be referred to by means of the symbol of the "Word of God."

Greek and Latin philosophy was used in the early Church to rationalize the mythological discourse in the bible (e.g., "divine nature" was understood in terms of "attributes," the concept of God's "personhood" was also understood in terms of substance, e.g., Boethius ^{GND}).^[1] However, an anthropomorphic image of God prevailed in popular piety where God was thought to speak like a human being (angry, punishing, forgiving, etc.).

As represented by Meister Eckhardt ^{GND}, a tradition of mysticism developed alongside this popular piety. According to the former, divine speech involves a direct communication between the higher and the lower. By contrast, human language is understood only as a trace of this more primordial speech.^[2]

Insofar as medieval philosophers and theologians were critically aware that it was only possible to talk analogously about God speaking, they resisted the danger of obscuring the difference between God and humanity/the world that occurs either through univocal (single-meaning) or equivocal (multiple-meaning) discourse. For this reason, the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 formulated the principle that no similarity between the Creator and the creature can be so great that there is not an even greater dissimilarity between them.^[3]

According to the Enlightenment critique of religion, the active role of the religious subject is obvious in all human conceptions of God, including the idea of a speaking God. However, transcendental philosophical analysis secures the thought of God as a necessary idea of reflection by viewing it as present in consciousness prior to any experience (Immanuel Kant ^{GND}). On the one hand, this prohibits objectifying discourse about God, including ideas of a speaking God. Theology assimilates this transcendental philosophical foundation by means of religious-philosophical reflections on the subjective disposition of God-consciousness (e.g., “feeling,” see Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher ^{GND}, Ulrich Barth ^{GND}). On the other hand, religious discourse about God necessarily relies on metaphorical language. It seeks to speak of God or of experiences of God by means of predications taken from everyday life, thereby transcending the horizon of experience while nevertheless retaining the critical awareness that it remains limited by human language and thus differs from that of which it speaks (Paul Ricœur ^{GND}, Eberhard Jüngel ^{GND}, Hans Weder ^{GND}).

Operating within the horizon of contemporary philosophy of language, Ingolf U. Dalferth ^{GND} refers to the diverse – because syn-categorical (*synkategorematisch*) – use of the word “God” based on its unique nature as an index word (such as “I,” “you,” “here,” “there”). According to this view, “God” does not refer to “anything that could be considered or discussed in isolation but rather denotes the point of reference within whose horizon and perspective everything else is perceived, examined, and understood.”^[4] In Christianity, “God” is essentially linked to the person of Jesus of Nazareth and his Christ-like work, which gives meaning to Christian metaphorical speech about God as a “person” who speaks to people and whom people can address with their own words.

4. The Message of Salvation

Since the period in which the New Testament was written, the Greek term “gospel” (*euangelion* = good news) has been used to summarize the Christian message of salvation. Historically, it refers to the unconditional value that Jesus of Nazareth placed on his fellow human beings, something shown, for example, in his promise of forgiveness, his healing them through his words, his promise of the kingdom of God through parables, or the joy he gave them through his table fellowship, etc. Since Easter, those who trust in Christ have continued to show this same high regard for people. As Jesus’ unconditional acceptance of others penetrates the human life-worlds and the structures of human communication (thereby revealing their ambivalence), his healing consolation comes simultaneously with his call to repentance. Under the symbolic concepts of law and gospel or gospel and law, this dialectic runs through the entire history of Christian piety in a multitude of different denominations and spiritual movements.

Martin Luther’s rediscovery of the biblical message of justification during the Reformation was accompanied by his high regard for the Word of God as a liberating message that is primarily conveyed as the spoken word (“good news that is sung, spoken, and rejoiced in”)^[5] and whose written form is only of secondary importance. However, already in the Reformation, and even more so in Protestant orthodoxy, the understanding of the “Word of God” was narrowed down to the letter of “Holy Scripture.” Due to historical criticism of the biblical tradition and a growing recognition of the way in which all testimonies of faith are time-bound, a hermeneutical consciousness gained ground that sharpened our awareness of the distinction between the gospel and the continual efforts to understand it. In the 20th century, for example, Rudolf Bultmann ^{GND} thematized the connection between the biblical kerygma and existentially relevant interpretation in the context of modernity and European *Existenz*-philosophy. In dialogue with communication studies, this connection is currently discussed in terms of the difference between the encouragement that comes through the message of salvation (Jesus’ unconditional acceptance shown in the witness of Christians), occurring principally in the performative language of socialized conventions, and reflection in the constative mode of language

that, while remaining critically responsible to the other academic disciplines, seeks to explain this message within the horizon of a specific understanding of existence.

Recommended Literature

Barth, Ulrich, Symbole des Christentums. Berliner Dogmatikvorlesung, Tübingen 2021.

Buber, Martin, Ich und Du, Leipzig 1923.

Bultmann, Rudolf, Neues Testament und Mythologie, München 1941.

Dalferth, Ingolf U., Inbegriff oder Index? Zur philosophischen Hermeneutik von „Gott“, in: Beiheft zur BThZ (1999), 89–132.

Denzinger, Heinrich (Abk. DS), Kompendium der Glaubensbekenntnisse und kirchlichen Lehrentscheidungen, hrsg. von Hünemann, Peter, Freiburg i. Br. ³⁷1991.

Gehlen, Arnold, Urmensch und Spätkultur. Philosophische Ergebnisse und Aussagen, Bonn 1956.

Habermas, Jürgen, Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns (2 Bände), Frankfurt a. M. 1981.

Herder, Johann Gottfried, Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache, Berlin 1772.

Humboldt, Wilhelm von, Über die Verschiedenheiten des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts, 1836.

Jüngel, Eberhard/Ricoeur, Paul (Hrsg.), Metapher. Zur Hermeneutik religiöser Sprache, in: EvTh Sonderheft (1972).

Kant, Immanuel, Kritik der reinen Vernunft, 1781.

Kant, Immanuel, Kritik der praktischen Vernunft, 1788.

Luther, Martin, Vorrede zum Neuen Testament, 1522.

Petzoldt, Matthias, Sprache schafft Wirklichkeit. Zur Rezeption der Sprechakttheorie in der Fundamentaltheologie, Darmstadt 2020.

Schleiermacher, Friedrich, Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der Evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt, Berlin ²1839/31.

Tomasello, Michael, Ursprünge der menschlichen Kommunikation, Frankfurt a. M. 2004.

Weder, Hans, Widerspiegelung der Kreativität. Neutestamentliche Überlegungen zur kosmologischen Dimension religiöser Sprache und Erkenntnis, in: Audretsch, Jürgen/Weder, Hans, Kosmologie und Kreativität. Theologie und Naturwissenschaft im Dialog, in: ThLZ.F 1 (1999), 47–80.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, London 1921.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, Philosophische Untersuchungen, Frankfurt a. M. 1953.

Citations

- ¹ Persona est „naturae rationabilis individua substantia“ (Boethius, Anicius M. S., Contra Eutychen et Nestorium, in: Boethius, Anicius M. S., Die theologischen Traktate. Übers., eingel. und mit Anm. versehen von Elsässer, Michael, Hamburg 1988, 74).

- ² See Meister Eckhart, Liber Parabolarum Genesis, in: Sturlese, Loris/Rubino, Elisa (Eds.), Meister Eckhart. Studienausgabe der Lateinischen Werke, Stuttgart 2016, 201–393, 324.
- ³ “...quia inter creatorem et creaturam non potest tanta similitudo notari, quin inter eos maior sit dissimilitudo notanda” (DS 806).
- ⁴ Dalferth, Ingolf U., Inbegriff oder Index? Zur philosophischen Hermeneutik von „Gott“, in: Beiheft zur BThZ (1999), 89–132, 122, translation by Dylan S. Belton.
- ⁵ Luther, Martin, Vorrede auf das Neue Testament (1522), in: Bornkamm, Heinrich (Ed.), Luthers Vorreden zur Bibel, Göttingen ³1989, 167–172, 168, translation by Dylan S. Belton.

Citation Style

Petzoldt, Matthias: „Language“, Version 1.0, in: Online Lexicon for Systematic Theology, ISSN 3052-685X, 1 May 2026.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-114298>

Metadata

DOI	https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-114298
Creative Commons Licence Type	Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs CC BY-NC-ND (4.0)
peer reviewed by	Michael Roth
Translator(s)	Dylan S. Belton
Index Theologicus (IxTheo)	Communication , Gospel , Hermeneutics , Jesus Christ , Language , Message , Reason , Trust
Subject Headings (LOC)	Communication , Gospel , Hermeneutics , Jesus Christ , Language , Message , Reason , Trust
Keyword	Communication , Gospel , Hermeneutics , Jesus Christ , Language , Message , Reason , Trust
Mentioned People	Ulrich Barth , Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius , Martin Buber , Rudolf Bultmann , Ingolf U. Dalferth , Arnold Gehlen , Jürgen Habermas , Johann Gottfried Herder , Wilhelm von Humboldt , Eberhard Jüngel , Immanuel Kant , Martin Luther , Meister Eckhart , Paul Ricœur , Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher , Michael Tomasello , Hans Weder , Ludwig Wittgenstein

KEYWORDS

Communication

Gospel

Hermeneutics

Jesus Christ

Language

Message

Reason

Trust