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The Language of Things and the Magic of Language

On Walter Benjamin’s Concept of Latent Potency

Kathrin Busch

Translated by Mary O’Neill

Walter Benjamin put forward the thesis that not alone does translation operate between different languages, but that human language itself is generated by a translational process. Human language originally translated nothing other than the language of things. While the function of language is generally seen to be one in which things, by being named, are transformed into objects that are communicable and therefore categorisable, Benjamin counters that this capacity is preceded by an act of reception. To hear the language of things and then translate it is a condition of any naming process. This type of perception, which cannot itself be based on the transmission of linguistic content[1], is made possible by human language’s capacity for imitation or mimesis. Rather than arguing for a concept of language as a purely arbitrary phenomenon, or asserting that it developed from onomatopoetic sounds alone, Benjamin maintains instead that the capacity of

language to perceive and produce similarities has been the driving factor in its evolution. However dubious or fruitful such speculation on the origins of language might be considered, the thesis of language formation through translation is significant in two respects. Firstly, Benjamin extends the concept of language to the language of things and, with this broader application of the idea, he introduces another conceptualization of language, referred to as „magical“ by Benjamin himself. Secondly, by postulating receptiveness as the necessary antecedent to any articulation, he asserts the existence of a passive condition in human speech. The usual relationship between humanity (active) and the object world (passive), once it is reversed in this way, is thus reinterpreted. The consequences of that re-articulation are as far-reaching as they are worthy of consideration.

1. The magic of language

In his essay entitled “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man”[2], Benjamin doesn’t just set out the main principles of his translation theory; he also starts to sketch out the unusual concept of a language of things. He formulates a theory, rooted in the early Romantic tradition, of the magic of language. This latter aspect of the magical was described by Benjamin as the “primary problem of language”[3]. The idea of a magical nature of language originates in the critique of an instrumentalist concept of language, which Benjamin rejects as bourgeois. According to him, to reduce language to the status of a mere vehicle of verbal communication, whose “object [is] factual” and whose “addressee [is] the human being”[4] is to seriously underestimate it. Benjamin rejects this naive conceptualization of language, firstly by broadening the concept of language itself: “Every expression of human mental life can be understood as a kind of language [...]. It is possible to talk

about a language of music and of sculpture, about a language of justice [...] [or] a language of technology."[5] Language, according to Benjamin, is not necessarily bound to expression in the form of words: it includes any perceptible articulation which may be understood as a formative principle of expression generally. There is nothing that does not "in some way partake of language"[6]: that something might not be communicable through expression is simply inconceivable. However, it is the mental nature that is articulated in expression. "Language, in such a contexts means the tendency inherent in the subjects concerned (...) toward the communication of mental meanings."[7]

Now it may seem problematic to link the concept of mental nature, as indeed Benjamin explicitly does, to the world of things. For this reason, he first illustrates the concept taking human language as his basis, by asserting a poetic as well as an instrumental use of language; he also draws a clear distinction between expression *through* language and expression *within* language. A specific content, i.e. what is meant by the word, is communicated *through* language – as befits its instrumental use. Items of information and semantic content are conveyed through the language as it is defined instrumentally. In contrast, something else again is communicated *in* language: a very particular type of meaning emerges in the expression or in the manner of speaking and this meaning in no way has to match the content of what is being said. Benjamin now imposes the mode of speaking, the form of language, on the concept of language in general, thereby implying that, for him, the form of articulation is more fundamental for language than the communicable nature of semantic contents or their referentiality. Benjamin's argument thus goes considerably further than simply stating that the meaning of what is being said is inseparable from the way of saying it, that the content of a speech act is intrinsically

bound up with its form. Rather, the more radical argument that the form of speech can produce a completely different, independent and above all latent meaning must be made and it is in poetry that this becomes particularly clear. “What does literary work ‘say’? What does it communicate? It ‘tells’ very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information.”[8] It is the manner of meaning that transforms the poem into a literary work. The poem cannot be wholly translated into something expressible, hence the trend towards the indeterminable in poetic speech and its resultant magical character. For in poetic language, something else beyond the named content is given expression, something akin to a mood or an atmosphere that is neither semantic nor communicable at the level of word meanings, something that cannot be wholly translated into a meaning. This other message is communicated directly – without the detour through meaning whereby language itself is the medium of this implicit transfer. Expressed in media theory terms, the medium here is the message: “All language communicates itself.”[9]

This immediate communication is what Benjamin calls “magical” since language acts here as a medium – very much in the sense accepted by occult practice - for a potent transfer. Benjamin doesn’t just have the early Romantic linguistic theory of a Novalis or a Schlegel in mind here[10], but also ethnological studies of magic in circulation at the beginning of the 20th century. According to the ethnological research by Marcel Mauss, for example, the effects produced by magic are essentially based on an underlying causality, although cause and effect here belong to different orders. In magic, the effect is not produced mechanically and is not the tangible result of ritual acts: it goes beyond them. The effect transcends the register of its causative operations.[11]

Now this switch of orders [of cause and effect] is of the utmost importance as it relates to Benjamin's theory of the magic of language. It is this switch alone that allows the implicit potency of language to become apparent. They are, as it were, woven into the form of the language so that the potent force and its context are inseparable.[12] What cannot be said, or put into words, can be expressed in language; indeed it can be transferred linguistically. These implicit effects of the form of language mean that the inexpressible can occur or become apparent, but it doesn't follow that they are necessarily present or representable. With this thesis of the magic of language, rather, a layer of language is revealed in which latent meanings are conveyed. In the theory of magical practices, this transmission of what is latent and purely implicit is conceptualized as contagion and one may conclude that, as far as his outline of a language of things is concerned, such models of sympathetic contagion served as an example for Benjamin.[13] It is in this concept of a transfer that is both immediate and latent but contagious and affective that the crucial difference from theories of performativity lies: in these, what is expressed and what is caused are one and the same. The performative speech act produces exactly what it names. With the idea of the magic of speech, on the other hand, Benjamin seeks to conceptualize a linguistic potency in which something else is transferred in language besides what is represented verbally.[14]

However, Benjamin doesn't just mean that, within a language - in poetic usage for example - the "how" of the act of saying is relevant, but that every language is itself such a form of saying. Language is precisely the formative principle of expression in general. Here, Benjamin picks up on Humboldt's concept of the inner form of language. According to this, a specific form of saying is expressed in a particular language and, at the same time, a

particular cultural significance is generated through this linguistic form. The difference between cultures corresponds to the various forms of language. Here too, the form of language is immediate since it constitutes not the object of speech, but rather its style. In the linguistic form, the "mental nature" is communicated in so far as, through it, the linguistically structured relation to the world and, correspondingly, the different ways in which the real becomes apparent are attested. The linguistic form can thus be regarded as the particular signature of an experience of the world.

It then becomes clear that language, as the principle aimed at the communication of mental nature, can be asserted in the sphere of things too. Mental nature communicates itself *in* language, not *through* it. The language of things communicates not the things themselves, but rather their physiognomy, i.e. their expressive value. The "mental nature" of things is therefore the form in which they are communicated, i.e. the mode in which they are offered, the "how" of their manifestation. Since an entire structure for the living world finds expression in the world of things, Benjamin speaks of a language of things. He therefore reads meanings in cultural artefacts that go beyond their ordinary, everyday functions. [15] This language of things can be referred to as "magical" because a spontaneous accessibility to objects is formed. To put it another way, it is magical because ways of negotiating the world - our dealings, operations and practices - but also relations to the world are bound to things, relations which may well remain implicit but are no less potent. The language of things is also magical in the sense discussed earlier, since it is based on contagion by what is latent or implicit.

2. The language of things

The language of things refers to the manner in which we are addressed by an object. This appeal or claim on our attention itself defines the act of speaking. Instead of the identificatory order imposed on objects by means of linguistic categorization, Benjamin focuses on the process of being approached or "sparked" by objects as a precondition for this naming process. In particular, his work *Berlin Childhood around 1900*[16] tells of the affective force of things, which precedes a linguistic order. The human being lives life, affected by the world of things, like the "mollusc in its shell"[17], totally "enclosed in the world of matter"[18]. This affectability by a surrounding environment is, according to Benjamin, a relic of the necessity to adapt[19], and that tendency towards similarity emerges most clearly in childhood: "Standing behind the doorway curtain, the child becomes himself becomes something floating and white, a ghost. [...] And behind a door he is himself door [...]."[20] The fact of being admitted into an experience of things shows how their potency is articulated in the resultant mimetic process. This magical transfer of features shifts over time into language, which acts as a medium for the correspondences.[21]

This theory of mimesis in the world of things is interesting not only from the perspective of the philosophy of language, but above all in view of the force exerted by the world of things in the shaping of practice. The fact that things have a contagious effect and their language cannot be kept at a distance represents a restriction of the human being's self-determined ability to act. The language of things, and the relations to the world which it mediates, affect the human being: he/she is "distorted by similarity" to the surrounding environment and the effects of this process extend to his/her actions, since "the features that have a determining influence on his existence are shaped" in things.

The familiar idea we have of things as objects that we can categorize by means of language and then use for our own ends is for Benjamin only the visible, topmost layer - a symptom as it were - within which further, unconscious layers are stored. As human language feeds off the language of things, so an involuntary contagion from things prepares the ground for their purpose-driven function. In this unconscious layer, the relationship of subject and objects is reversed: here objects begin to show their potency, their language is transferred to the human being who, through moods, habits and practices, gains admittance to their textures. Thus, if one can state that not only is the language of things translated into human language, but that there is also a process of being translated by things in the ordinary, everyday world, then this process takes place at the level of attitudes and practices. Through things, perspectives and habits become established, which transform "the" human being in accordance with the historical transformations in the world of things.

Given the mediumistic upheavals resulting from the processes of image reproduction, Benjamin argued in particular that the new techniques give rise to a reshaping of perception.[22] Sensual perception itself and not just the objects of its attention underlies a change brought about by the influence of photography and cinema. Apart from these new visual worlds, the upheavals in modernist architecture, to cite a further example, affect the structure of experience itself. Human beings become accustomed to other ways of being in these new forms of living space. So if these new inventions "make of the former human being [...] a completely new, lovable creation"[23], then it is primarily because his/her dispositions and possibilities grow out of the world of things. So there is also a process of translation operated by things: they determine modes of behaviour, they establish human faculties as

habitual and transform them. It is evidence of the persistence of a metaphysical concept of the subject, when one is prepared to reflect on the translation of the language of things into human language, but not to consider the process of human language being translated into the language of things.

More recently, Bruno Latour has adopted a comparable position which, as part of the overall concept of translation, may be understood as the transfer between human being and thing. Taking as his starting point the conviction that the modern split between subject and object is as artificial as it is untenable, Latour argues that a subject unaffected by objects has never existed; rather, subject and object both form symmetrical associations at the level of action.[24] In such networks, he argues, things are as much determined by human actions as the latter are influenced by material preconditions.[25] A reciprocal transfer between subject and object takes place and a hybrid sphere emerges from their inseparable nature as a result. By taking on capacities for action and so mutating into what are known as “actants”, objects intervene in human activities.[26] In their role as carriers of the functions of action, objects can transform human activities when original aims are shifted into the material world as a result of the translation. As is the case in Benjamin’s theory, the status of passive objects is no longer appropriate for things: they translate actions and so have a formative role in shaping them.

Practices too are transferred in the language of things so that the capacity of things to determine human practices must be taken into account. Not only does the human being carry out processes of translation, he/she is also under their control. If being influenced by the material world corresponds to a certain passivity on the part of humans, then it should not be set in opposition to the freedom to act. It should be seen rather as the passive underground of

activity. The political or ethical dimension of translation as a mimetic process derives precisely from the way in which the relation to the world is articulated and from the fact that this articulation cannot be attributed solely to the power of human beings.

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[1] The argument would be circular if the prerequisite of human language were itself determined by the structure of representational expression, a claim which would of course have to be substantiated first.

[2] Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" in: *One-way street, and other writings,* transl. by Edmund Jephcott, Kingsley Shorter, London: NLB, 1979, p. 107-123. Originally intended to clarify the broad lines of his own thinking, this brief 20-page treatise was written in 1916. It was never intended for publication and only a few friends knew of its existence. The fact that elements of this early treatise may be detected in all his later essays on the philosophy of language attests to its enormous significance for Benjamin himself. Examples are found, among others, in a range of texts from "Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty" to "The Task of the Translator".

[3] Ibid., p. 109.

[4] Ibid., p. 111.

[5] Ibid, p. 107.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” in: *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, London: Fontana, 1992, p. 70.

[9] Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man”, op. cit., p. 109.

[10] These references are given in Winfried Menninghaus’s *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1995.

[11] Cf. Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert, “Outline of a General Theory of Magic” (1904), originally published in: Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie*, edited by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950.

[12] The thesis of the inseparability of force and context is also found in Mauss. He posits the concept of the magical medium and concludes: “In magic as in religion and linguistics, it is the unconscious ideas that are potent. ”(op. cit.)

[13] On contagion in the theory of magic, cf. Mauss, op. cit.

[14] This is not to say that, in magic, oral rites that could be described as performative in the common sense of the term do not exist. But Benjamin seeks to locate the magic of language in its very form, i.e. beyond the realm of what is being said.

[15] This is evidence of Benjamin’s closeness to surrealism, which he mastered to perfection in the summoning-up of a latent layer of meaning in things. Benjamin attributes to surrealism the politically effective power “to bring the immense forces of ‘atmosphere’

concealed in these things to the point of explosion" ("Surrealism" in: *One-way street, and other writings,* pp. 225-239, p. 229).

[16] Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, transl. by Howard Eiland, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 2006.

[17] Walter Benjamin, *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert*. Mit einem Nachwort von Theodor W. Adorno und einem editorischen Postskriptum von Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1987, p. 59.

[18] Walter Benjamin, "Child hiding" in: *One-way street, and other writings,* op. cit., p. 74.

[19] "The gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else". ("On the Mimetic Faculty" in: *One-way street, and other writings,* op. cit., p. 160). Cf. too in this context "Doctrine of the Similar" ("Lehre vom Ähnlichen" in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. By Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1977ff., Vol. II, p. 204-213).

[20] Walter Benjamin, "Child hiding" in: *One-way street, and other writings,* op. cit., p. 74.

[21] Although Benjamin introduces in "On the Mimetic Faculty" the concept of a "non-sensuous similarity" (p. 161), it should be stressed here that this does not refer to superficial similarities, but rather to a correspondence that is almost intangible. "It flits past" (p. 162). It is also something implied, something in what is being said that generates a flash, but it cannot be objectified. In this context, the "Doctrine of the Similar" describes it thus:

“Compared to the infinitely vast number of similarities that are perceived unconsciously or go completely undetected, the similarities that we consciously perceive, e.g. in faces, are like the tip of the iceberg jutting above the waterline in comparison to its massive submerged base.” (*Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II, op. cit., p. 205).

[22] Cf. Walter Benjamin, Walter Benjamin, „The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction“ in: *Illuminations*, London: Fontana Press, 1992: “The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well.”

[23] Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II, op. cit., p. 216.

[24] Cf. Bruno Latour, *We have never been modern*, transl. by Catherine Porter, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

[25] Latour is one of the founders of the “Actor-Network-Theory”, cf. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford: Clarendon, 2005.

[26] Cf. Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope. Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Cambridge, MA; London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1999.