

Does God Speak "Mentalese"?

Who hasn't been in situations where the right word just doesn't come to mind. The speaker knows precisely what he wants to say - in fact, it's on the tip of his tongue - but it simply doesn't seem to want to be found. Or perhaps it's just that exactly the right expression doesn't exist in our language, so we have to resort to paraphrases or foreign words. The speaker has a crystal impression in her thoughts that she wishes to transmit, but the corresponding words are missing. "Words can't express what I want to say" - what the speaker wants to say is staring her in the face, and yet the linguistic transformer or "speech converter" fails or is insufficient.

This simple everyday experience can no doubt demonstrate that the thought process does not occur predominantly in words, but rather in "non-linguistic" units. This is why it is often so difficult to express what we think. Besides words, our thoughts are made up of pictures, impressions and feelings. All of us understand what a guilty conscience has to say to us, even though it really is only a reproachful feeling.¹ The relative importance of these elements appears to vary in importance for different people. Our thought process does not take place in the first instance in English, Swahili or Mandarin. We apparently think in "Mentalese", a mixture of words, pictorial impressions, and emotions.

This has consequences for communication. It is particularly in contact with other cultures that it quickly becomes clear what place non-verbal and para-verbal elements have in successful communication.² It is not nearly enough to learn vocabulary and grammar and master syntax and semantics. That would be an unwarranted and even ignorant short cut.

It is widely recognised that a reciprocal interaction occurs between the processes of perception and language. We cannot attempt in the space of these few pages to evaluate the linguistic relativity principle language that Benjamin Lee Whorf³ (1897-1941) formulated. Even before him, his teacher, Edward Sapir⁴ (1884-1939) had considered language to not be a mere tool of thought, and much more something which itself influences worldview and thus the way reality is seen. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, people's thought processes and social behaviour are determined by the grammatical idiosyncrasies of the language that they speak. If this is correct, "Thus says the Lord..." would then suggest that God uses words. Yet God has always also communicated through dreams, pictures, the forces of nature... God's speech is communication and as such is more than language. Thought and perception are certainly not determined only by words.

Situations can be found everywhere in which a person "understands" without a single word being spoken. It is just such experiences that make the deepest (emotional) impression, whether a look, a gesture, or a picture. Research points to numerous non-verbal elements that can have much greater significance for understanding than words or grammar.⁵

A glance through the Bible shows that God communicates with people in a great variety of

¹ Compare: Lothar Käser, *Fremde Kulturen. Eine Einführung in die Ethnologie*, Lahr: Verlag der Liebenzeller Mission, 1998, p.136.

² David J. Hesselgrave: *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally. An Introduction to Missionary Communication*, 2nd edition, Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1991.

³ Benjamin Lee Whorf: *Sprache, Denken, Wirklichkeit*, 1963.

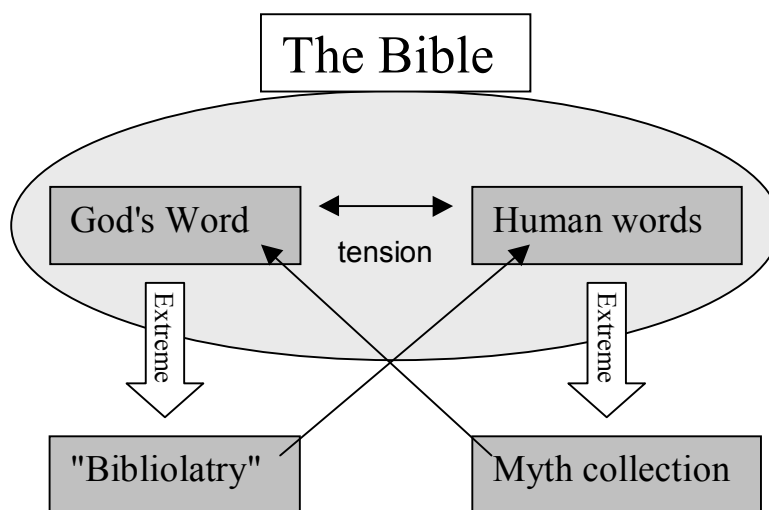
⁴ Edward Sapir, *Die Sprache*, München, 1961.

⁵ "We cannot not communicate." (P. Watzlawick und J.H. Beaven: *Menschliche Kommunikation*, Stuttgart 1969, quoted in: Friedemann Schulz von Thun: *Miteinander Reden*, Bd1: Störungen und Klärungen. Reinbek: Rowohlt 1998, p. 34.)

ways. He speaks through words, pictures, thunder, wind, circumstances... Considering the variety of possibilities in communication it would also be surprising if he limited himself to words. People understood what he said, even when he did not use any words. And they did not understand him, even when prophets announced clear words in his name.

How does God speak to us today? The Reformers and the protestant churches that followed in their wake laid great worth on the "word", both written and proclaimed. Christianity is, or has become, a "book religion". Even if Jesus himself did not leave anything written, many of his words and deeds have nevertheless been preserved in writing. The Bible thus rightly stands as the centrepiece of protestant theology. Yet, depending on their character, protestant theologians today assign completely different value to the Bible. For some it is the subject of quasi-divine veneration⁶, for others it is a mere work of human history.

We can represent the characteristics of these two extremes in the following diagram:



The Bible is simultaneously God's word and man's word. Straying to one or other side of this tension leads us into unhealthy extremes: either to the idolisation of the Scriptures or to their undervaluing as a collection of myths. It is worthwhile suffering the tension of a paradox.

The meaning that is attributed to the Bible is largely a product of our understanding of the way God speaks. The question of inspiration is answered in a non-uniform manner in western theology. One extreme considers God's speech as word-for-word dictation. According to this view exact words were "dictated" by God to the prophets. Yet this understanding can only really be applied seriously to a few isolated verses from the Bible.⁷ At the other end of the spectrum, in the wake of the Enlightenment and rationalism we find the complete denial of divine inspiration of any kind.

Between these two positions are further models of looking at the Bible. Verbal inspiration

⁶ English has a term for which there is no equivalent in German (*in which this paper was originally written - translator's note*), "bibliolatry", which may be translated by "idolatry of the Bible".

⁷ The Koran rests on this narrow understanding of inspiration, understanding itself to be an unchanged dictated transcript of the original heavenly book.

proceeds from the assumption that each and every word in the Scriptures, even if not dictated by him, is nevertheless exactly what God wanted. Other theologians hold to personal inspiration. They are convinced that God certainly did inspire the writers, but that this could not be transferred as such to the Bible. When we come to real inspiration the content is what is important, not the individual words. All of these approaches have their advantages and disadvantages, but cannot fully cover the process.

A study of the synoptic gospels shows that the evangelists transmitted the words of Jesus in a uniform sense, but not always in complete agreement as to the exact words. Rather, the gospel writers display linguistic particularities in their choice of words, grammar and syntax. This may be a first indication that literal meaning is not the most important element in how God speaks to us.

For Paul, the Scriptures were "*God-breathed*" (2Tim.3:16). This statement refers in the first instance to the Old Testament Scriptures, about which he recognised that he believed "*everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets*" (Acts 24:14).

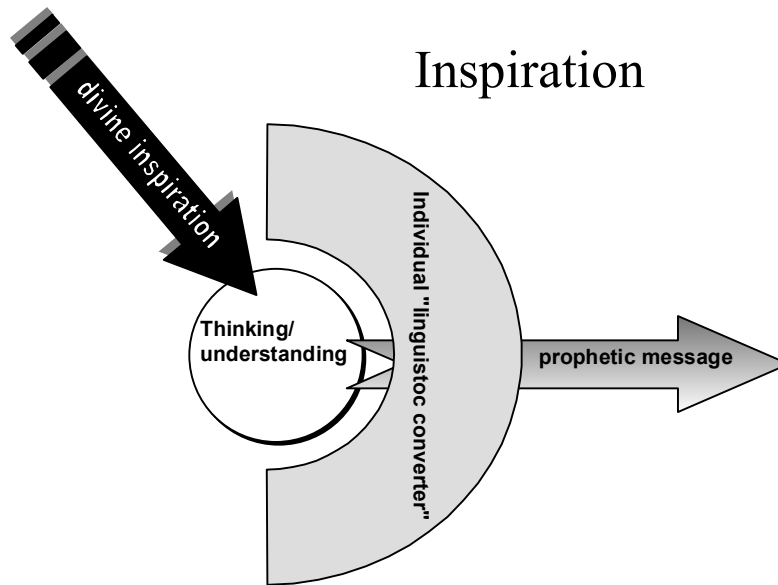
For Peter "*prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit*" (2Pe.1:21). And the early Christians appealed in their prayers to God's declaration in the Old Testament: "*You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of ... David*" (Acts 4:25).

All of the terms used here are derived from divine inspiration. As some of those mentioned as the authors of books in the Bible personally experienced the process of inspiration which they describe, the terms "*God-breathed*" and "*carried along by the Holy Spirit*" are undoubtedly the most apt transcriptions of the process itself.

Can linguistics and ethnology, with the cross-cultural research they embody, help us to understand this process better? Both ethnology and linguistics are used in missiology as supporting disciplines. Their influence on the theology of missions can be fully compared to the significance of (Greek) philosophy for western theology. Through the insight they bring from across cultures they are able to not only correct unjustified and culturally conditioned restrictions in theological systems, but also - at the very least if we go further into the realm of worldview - upset theological systems. How do perception, thought and communication take place. How should we envisage the process of God's communication (inspiration) as it relates to culture?

In view of these considerations we can assert that words have a subordinate role in thought and communication. God places his message in people's thoughts, at a deep level of their understanding. This may happen through words, pictures, impressions, or feelings. A person understands - with or without words - precisely what God "says". As a prophet passes on the "*God breathed*" message to others it is fully transformed by his individual "linguistic converter". The linguistic transformer is characterised by personal vocabulary, grammar and style, which in fact corresponds to what we find in biblical texts. There is considerable difference both semantically and stylistically between Paul and John, and yet they both transmit the same divine message. Their aim must be to awaken in their hearers the same far-reaching understanding.

This process can be represented graphically as follows:



This has important consequences for exegesis and hermeneutics. It is enough to comprehend what the Holy Spirit has said (or "carried along"). Ideally, then, that deep understanding takes place, which the prophet himself experienced and which goes beyond words and literal meaning.

With this background, the question of whether communication from God happens today in exactly the same way as in the times of early Christianity becomes more important. Does God today provoke in the same manner that deep understanding which Paul wrote about to the Romans: "*The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children*" (Rm.8:16)? If God "speaks" today in the same way, then this witness does not need to be derived from the words of Scripture in the form of a rational chain of proof. God's Spirit rather communicates in that deep personal level of perception and produces assurance. Faith comes through "hearing" (akoe) the word of Christ (Rm.10:17), and this certainly cannot be restricted to preaching. The one who believes has this witness within themselves - without words or any audible signals. A strong assurance, which can also be expressed in impressions and feelings, is born in the spirit of the person.

Today's messages that claim to be prophetic can thus also be weighed anew. They have neither the position nor the recognition of the biblical writers. But we also do not do them justice if we judge their worth or their correctness on the basis of the individual linguistic converter or the maturity of the messenger. We should rather seek to understand what God would actually like to communicate.

In doing this it must be admitted that the danger exists that subjective elements may blur the truth content. This is why the church is urged to test messages and impressions (1 Co.14:29). Again, it is worthwhile tolerating a healthy tension between objective and subjective elements, even if this may represent a further paradox. This enables us to enjoy an exciting and certainly also appropriate approach to the Bible and spiritual impressions. God does not only "speak". He communicates with us, in "Mentalese".