

*The Speaking Trinity
& His Worded World*



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Why Language Is at the Center of Everything

PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS

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THE SPEAKING TRINITY AND HIS WORDED WORLD
Why Language Is at the Center of Everything

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For Jesus

* * *

*And for Kenneth Pike and Vern Poythress,
men of God and lovers of language*

Our Father—to whom
All speech is one
And tongues of man
But image thin of Thine—
Help me now.

—KENNETH L. PIKE

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Introduction

I HAVE NEVER CONSIDERED myself to be cavalier. I am a simple Christian who looks to the inerrant and infallible words of Scripture for guidance and formation—spiritual and intellectual. I have studied under men who love God and keep his word with vigilance, drawing their theology not from existential experience or from philosophical speculation but from God’s revelation, as that revelation has been understood in the Reformed tradition. In the broader theological world, some would no doubt consider me a rather boring theologian. I do not make it a point to seek out novelty.

Nevertheless, what you find in this book may appear to be novel. It may *appear* that way, but I can assure you that it is not. It is merely an extension and application of the clear teaching of Scripture, which I feel continues to go unnoticed, or at least is seldom given its full weight in the broader fields of linguistics, philosophy, theology, and, most importantly, everyday Christian life.

I have always appreciated when authors are up front with me, so let me get right to it. This book has a single purpose: to argue that *language is central to reality because the Trinity is linguistic (communicative) and has formed, shaped, and continues to direct everything through his speech*. All of reality reflects the word of its maker, and because its maker is triune and communicative, all of reality is what we might call *tristructural* and expressive.¹ That is, it can be understood as in some sense reflecting the Trinity and communicating a message that goes back to the character of its creator.

If you understand all of that, then I suppose you do not need to read this book. But seeing as how the men from whom I have learned this (Cornelius Van Til, Kenneth Pike, Vern Poythress, and John Frame) consistently foregrounded the depth of mystery and complexity in God and in language itself, I will assume that you do not. I mean no insult by this. In fact, no one

1. I am borrowing the term “tri-structural” from Kenneth Pike’s language theory.

understands it fully—nor could they, since it is a divine truth. But what I do understand I want to share for the sake of Christ and his church.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

Before we get into the content of the book, I believe it is important for me to be candid about my basic assumptions. This is necessary, in my view, since all discussions begin not with ideas but with *persons*, and if you do not know anything about the person whom you are reading, you will likely misinterpret what he or she says. So, what follows are my basic theological assumptions. You may disagree with them if you like, but you will not properly understand what I am about to say if you are unaware of them.

1. *I believe that Scripture is the inerrant, infallible word of God.* I realize that this position sounds stale in a pluralistic age, but it is part and parcel of the Reformed faith, and my reasons for holding it can be laid out briefly, since here is not the place to develop them.²

Every person must have some basis for knowing anything (i.e., every person functions with at least an implied epistemology). That basis must be able to account for the stability, variation, and relationships we find in ourselves and in the world around us. Many people today are either practical empiricists or analytical rationalists, though they certainly would not label themselves that way. The former group says that nothing can be accounted for except by the senses. Testing and verification are prerequisites for claims that one knows anything. In other words, for something to be known it must be experienced. The latter group is similar, but proponents of this group believe that what can be known must be grasped with the hands of reason. They might say that for something to be known it must be rationally perceivable. We cannot know what we do not understand, can we?

Of course, all of us fall into these two tendencies (and others) from time to time. But these two epistemologies—one empirical and the other rational—cannot ultimately account for the stability, variation, and relationships in the world around us. Empiricists claim stability can be found in experience, and there is some truth to that. We almost always act based on our previous experience, based on what we can test and measure. But what happens when there is something that we claim to know which cannot be measured or tested? I do not think anyone would contest that humans have

2. For those looking for a fuller defense of the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible, I recommend Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*; Conn, *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic*; Lillback and Gaffin, *Thy Word Is Still Truth*; and, for a more accessible discussion, DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word*.

an imagination, but if you cut open a brain, you will not find daydreams and devious thoughts. You will find blood and brain tissue. Not all of what we know can be measured, weighed, and counted.³ Our stability of knowledge must have a deeper foundation. It must go beyond us.

The same goes for variations in our experience. Empirically, we can track variation and learn about patterns and deviations in the natural world and in human lives. But what is to say that this deviation is not just a sign that reality is chaotic? And if it is a sign of chaos, can we ever talk about stability of knowledge to begin with? How can we be sure that we know anything if all we know are unstable patterns and their deviations? This was the problem that David Hume introduced, and it was not solved by Immanuel Kant, despite his valiant efforts.

Empiricists also encounter difficulty when they try to account for relationships in reality. Interconnectivity—the relationships between countless people, places, and things—is notoriously complex, and this complexity can, for some people, make it almost impossible to say that they truly know anything. Their difficulty is not baseless. In fact, when we think about it, in order to truly understand relationships between one thing and another—between me and my wife, for example—one would ultimately have to know about the relationship of every fact to every other fact in reality.⁴ In order to really know the relationship between me and my wife, you would have to know everything about me and everything about her. But because our thoughts and actions are not contained to us (they affect many other people and things), you would have to also know about everything that we have affected in our lives, and how all of those effected elements of reality relate to one another.⁵ It is endless. No one can empirically account for all of the relationships in reality, and so, for empiricists, nothing can ever truly be known in full.

In the end, empiricists find themselves in a quandary when it comes to stability, variation, and relationships.

The same can be said for rationalists. At first glance, it may seem that rationalists can account for stability, since the principles of reason and logic appear to be steadfast and immovable. But a closer look reveals problems. Take stability, for example. Certainly, there seem to be many logical laws (or natural laws) at work in the world. These laws appear to account for the stability we find around us and within our own thought patterns. “There is ice

3. For an atheist’s perspective on this, see Nagel, *Mind & Cosmos*.

4. Cornelius Van Til emphasized this point consistently throughout his writings.

5. You would also have to account for the thoughts and actions that my wife and I have committed across time, and since thoughts cannot be traced this closely, it makes the task once again insurmountable.

on the road, so I cannot drive safely to work.” There is a simple cause and effect relationship in a sentence like this. The ice on the road is the cause of my not being able to drive safely, the effect. Logic might appear to account for this stable relationship between cause and effect, but it cannot account for the personal variations that are woven into real life situations. For instance, there are many personal factors that must be taken into consideration in the context of that sentence. (1) How do I tend to drive? Do I obey the speed limits? Do I roll through stop signs? Do I forget to signal my turns? If the latter is the case, then it may not matter whether there is ice on the road or not. Either way, I may not get to work safely. Or, even if I follow the law to the letter, I cannot control the decisions and driving habits of my neighbor who lives down the street. So, there enters another question: (2) How do my neighbors tend to drive? And of course, I cannot account for this with any precision. Even if I could, there is nothing to say that one of my neighbors might violate the norms of his or her behavior and drive more recklessly one morning. Reason cannot account for or control the choices of others. Reason and logic capture generalities that have been formed on the basis of countless particulars. But if we think that logic or reason is some neutral entity or power at work in the world, we will be sorely disappointed. Logic and reason begin with concrete *persons*, not with abstract *principles*. We can use logic and reason in many ways, but logic and reason themselves do not account for the stability we find in the world. They simply give us tools to measure what is, in the end, beyond them.

Variation, as well, is difficult for rationalists to explain. Certainly, any reasonable person could predict that there are variations for any given event, utterance, or entity. The Red Maple tree outside of my window looks slightly different today than it did yesterday. It has fewer leaves and perhaps its roots have grown a bit during the night. The tree, in other words, varies from day to day. Reason, in following common stages of plant development (recorded by the empiricist), could certainly *predict* that, but it could not ultimately *explain* it (i.e., account for it by uncovering its ultimate purpose). In the end, a rationalist would say that such development happens simply because this is the way the world works. That is not an explanation.⁶ Rationalists can

6. Now, I know that many atheists would say that “God” is not an explanation either. We seem to be at an impasse here. But this should be resolved based on which position makes the most sense of how reality functions. Atheists might claim that there is no ultimate reason why the world has stable laws of logic, or variation, or relationships. Thus, atheistic rationalists are ultimately *irrational*. Christians, on the other hand, claim that a tri-personal God is responsible for the way the world functions—in its stability, variation, and relationality. It seems to me that Christians are more consistently rational than rationalists. See Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 361–63.

notice variation and even predict it, but that is not the same as *accounting for it*—giving an ultimate reason for why this is the way the world works.

Relationships, too, pose problems for rationalists, sometimes because of the sheer mass of relationships that encompass us. There are relationships between persons, between places, between moments, between elements, between cells, between molecules, and so on. It is not possible to notice all of these relationships, let alone rationally explain their existence. But if we cannot rationally explain all relationships, then can we truly say with confidence that we can know any of them exhaustively?

As you might predict, I believe that only God and his spoken word can account for the stability, variation, and relationships around us. One of the primary reasons for this is that there must be a personal explanation for stability, variation, and relationality. Without a personal explanation, we are left only with patterns and observations that might be subject to change. That was the bomb that Hume exploded on the playground of philosophy. This personal explanation, however, is actually *tri-personal*. As I will show in the pages ahead (echoing the teaching of Scripture and the thoughts of Kenneth Pike and Vern Poythress), stability, variation, and relationships are rooted in the self-communicating Trinity.

Stability, in the end, is not the result of natural laws or principles of logic. As we said, the latter are simply tools for measuring what lies beyond them. *Stability is rooted in decision, which in turn is rooted in character.* This seems clear for two reasons. First, for stability to be what it is—reliable, immovable, trustworthy, predictable—it must be set in motion and controlled by something or someone that transcends reality. It must be decided by a personal (choosing) being. Otherwise, stability is a groundless principle; it is only an abstract label for patterns. Second, lest stability be founded on the capricious whim of some divine being, stability must be simultaneously rooted in the character of this personal, divine being. In short, stability must be both decided by and derived from the character of the one who set it in motion.

The same can be said for variation and relationships. *Stability, variation, and relationships are rooted in decision, which in turn are rooted in character.* In what follows, we will see the Father as the source of stability, the Son as the source of variation, and the Spirit as the source of relationality. Yet these three persons are one God, and so stability, variation, and relationships are coinherent, i.e., bound up with one another. What's more, only this tri-personal God accounts for the two things noted in the previous paragraph. The triune God is a God who chooses—a God who has a will and who exercises it (cf. Ps 51:18; Matt 7:21; 12:50; 18:14; Luke 12:32; John 6:40; 7:17; Rom 1:10; 15:32; Phil 2:13; 1 Pet 3:17; 4:19). The triune God is

likewise the only one whose character reflects the decisions he has made. This leads to my next assumption.

2. *I believe in the Trinity.* This is a more nuanced way of saying, “I believe in God,” which is behind my first assumption. However, I prefer the latter wording. The Trinity *is* God. There is no such thing as a generic or basic deity to which we can attach descriptors and characteristics. We would not say, in other words, that God exists and that he happens to be triune. Rather, we would simply say, “The Trinity exists.” There is nothing deeper than that. I state this at the outset because I see everything in existence as reflective of the Trinity, to varying degrees.⁷

3. *I believe that language is a properly divine behavior.* I have written elsewhere what I mean by “language” when it comes to the Trinity. I will summarize that by saying that each of the persons in the Godhead expresses himself to the other persons exhaustively and is thus known exhaustively by them. Cornelius Van Til writes that the divine persons are “exhaustively representational” of one another.⁸ What he meant is that whenever we look at one person of the Trinity, the other two persons are exhaustively and felicitously represented as well. You never have one without the other two. You cannot tear one person of the Trinity away from the others, for God is essentially one. Moreover, each person eternally lifts up the others with accolades of love and glory. That mutual expression of love and glory is what I have in mind when I think of language as a properly divine behavior. I use “behavior” because I believe that language, on the divine and creaturely level, includes more than words, phrases, and sentences. Language is part of a spectrum of personal action that is structurally integrated with everything else that personal beings do. Because of this, everything can be looked at through the lens of language and can be understood as expressive or communicative. This does not discount the truth that language is always embedded in a web of many other distinguishable behaviors. I simply want to acknowledge that language is not structurally separate from all that personal beings do. This is the case for God; it is also the case for us, which leads to the next assumption.

4. *I believe that language is an imaging behavior.*⁹ Though some might view it as an exaggeration, I believe that language is the heart of the *imago Dei*, the image of God in us. By that, I mean that our ability to communicate

7. Of course, we cannot perceive this until our minds are illumined by special revelation. Special revelation is the lens through which we properly view general revelation.

8. Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 78.

9. I will define language as *communion behavior*. This definition fits well with Geerhardus Vos’s understanding of the *imago Dei*. For Vos, the essence of our image is our disposition for *communion* with God. See Vos, *Anthropology*, 13.

personally and powerfully—expressing meaning, exercising control, and evoking our presence—is what marks us quintessentially as image-bearers.¹⁰ When we use language for God’s glory, we are a breath-taking light to the world; when we use it for self-serving purposes, we descend into the darkness of depravity. When we use language for God’s glory, we illuminate his image in us; when we use language for merely human ends, we darken that image. In both scenarios, however, it is language that lies at the heart of who we are as God’s creatures.

5. *I believe that language is covenantal.* Actually, I believe that all of reality is covenantal, but because I believe that all of reality is linguistic (spoken into being and sustained by the Trinity), it is more fitting in this book to say the former. Here is what I mean: All of our sundry uses of language—in every moment of every day—occur in the context of a covenant between God and man. This is a covenant that God has graciously and in his good will condescended to implement (WCF 7.1), suffered to uphold, and labored to fulfill with his own blood. By implication, because we are all either covenant keepers or covenant breakers, we are accountable for every linguistic action we take. In this sense, all of our communication happens in consonance with or in violation of our covenantal obligations.

6. *I believe that language is representational.* I do not mean by this that language is a system for representing thoughts (though there is obviously truth to this). Instead, I mean that *we* are represented in our language. For this reason, Jesus could say, “on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt 12:36–37). We are fooling ourselves if we assume that language is merely the trappings of thought, that what really counts are our ideas or motives. Ideas and motives are certainly important, but they are formed and expressed by language, and that expression is vital to our spiritual health, even to our eternal destiny. There is a very real sense in which what we say reflects how we think (epistemology) and who we are (metaphysics). Our communicative acts represent us faithfully to other people and to God, who searches the heart (1 Sam 16:7; Jer 17:10), but also hears every whisper that echoes in its chambers.

Those are my assumptions. You can disagree with them, analyze them, critique them however you like. The only thing you cannot do is claim to have understood what I say in the following pages if you are unaware of them.

10. I am here drawing on Vern Poythress’s work where he describes man as imaging the meaning, control, and presence of God’s words analogically (on a creaturely level). Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 24–31.

ORGANIZATION

The discussion in this book is organized as follows, in two main sections.

- I. Why Language is at the center of everything
 - a. Defining language
 - b. The communicative Trinity
 - c. Creation through speech and reality as linguistic
 - d. Image-bearing creatures, image bearing speakers

- II. What that means for you and me
 - a. Relying on the Trinity for our understanding of language
 - b. Creation and the purpose of language
 - c. The fall in language: sin as linguistic
 - d. The redemption of language: the eternal Word entering the temporal world
 - e. The consummation of language
 - f. Principles for living in a worded world

In the first section, I define language in general, both for God and for us. Then, I focus more narrowly on how the Trinity is communicative. From there I move on to consider creation as a product of God's words, exploring how all of reality is thus linguistic and marked structurally by trinitarian speech. I end the first section by applying what we have learned about the trinitarian Creator to his image-bearing creatures.

In the second section, I move on to consider what all of this means for us. Picking up where the first section ends, I explore how and why image bearers must rely on the Trinity for our understanding of language. Then I survey the fall of language, considering what we learn about sin by viewing it as linguistic in nature. This will naturally lead to a discussion of the redemption of language, specifically considering how the eternal Word entered and began redeeming the temporal world. Next, I present what the ultimate goal of language is, the consummation of language. I end with a chapter more pragmatically focused on the implications all of this has for our use of language, outlining principles for living in a "worded world." I explain what I mean by that expression in the chapters ahead.

A WORD ABOUT THE STYLE AND CONTENT

I wish to make it abundantly clear that my purpose is to put my thoughts into accessible prose. My thinking is heavily influenced by the four men I mentioned earlier: Cornelius Van Til, Kenneth Pike, Vern Poythress, and John Frame.¹¹ So, nearly all of what I say can be traced back to their work in one way or another. However, in my effort to present this to a less specialized readership, I have refrained from filling up pages with footnotes. Where I feel that background information might be necessary, or when I quote or paraphrase an author explicitly, you will see a footnote. But my goal in this book is not to present a piece of work for academia; it is to offer the truth of Scripture to the church as a whole—to the layman, pastor, theologian, *and* academic. Those who wish to explore some of the ideas in this book in more detail may consult the Recommended Reading List at the end of the book, or reference some of my own scholarly articles.¹² To use a phrase from Thomas and Turner, I want my message in this book to be “clear and simple as the truth.”¹³ To that end, I have done my best to keep the pages clear of clutter. But behind every one of them is the thought and theology of the men under whom I have studied—whether on paper or in person.

One technical point about pronoun use: I sometimes use “I” to express my thoughts, conclusions, or intentions; other times I use “we.” This use of “we” is meant to be inclusive of you, the reader, since I consider reading an interpersonal activity. So, when I use “we,” I am not implying that there are additional authors for this book.

Lastly, if you find anything in the following pages that inspires you or draws you to marvel at the truth of Scripture, that is the result of the Spirit’s work in continuing to sanctify my own mind. If you find anything pompous, shallow, egotistical, short-sided, unbiblical, inaccurate, ambiguous, or poorly worded, I take full responsibility for these things.

11. I am also indebted to K. Scott Oliphint for his work on covenantal apologetics and Christian epistemology.

12. Hibbs, “Imaging Communion”; “Where Person Meets Word Part 1”; “Where Person Meets Word Part 2”; “Closing the Gaps: Perichoresis and the Nature of Language”; “Words for Communion.”

13. Thomas and Turner, *Clear and Simple as the Truth*.



Why Language Is at the Center of Everything



1

Defining Language

LET ME BEGIN BY defining language.

Language is difficult to define because our entire lives are immersed in it. We have to use language to define language, which is a strange thing when you think about it. We do not use paint to define paint or gravel to define a road—we use language to define these things. But when we are dealing with language itself, we are dealing with something so basic to our existence that it must be used *as* it is being understood. When we begin discussing language, we are already caught up in its current. In later chapters, I will suggest why this is the case theologically.

Language is also inherently difficult to define because of the array of purposes it serves. At a local business, language might be commonly perceived as a means of information transfer. In an undergraduate course on Romantic literature, language might be praised as a poetic medium. For parents trying to shepherd a toddler through a season of temper tantrums, language often serves an instructional purpose, expressing boundaries for acceptable behavior and solutions for frustration or emotional overload. Considering its sundry purposes, when we define language, we run the risk of either being too narrow or too broad. On the one side, too narrow a definition would not account for the range of purposes that language serves, and it might also segregate language from other parts of life in an unnatural way. For instance, the greeting “hello” is virtually unintelligible if we do not account for the contextually appropriate actions and environments in which it is embedded. “Hello” could be a casual greeting, if two strangers are passing on a street. Or it could signal the beginning of a conversation if the two persons are friends. It would not, however, be spoken by a man to his family

as he was getting into a taxi and leaving them behind. In this last example, “goodbye” (or some similar expression) would suite that social and physical environment. Thus, we cannot ignore other parts of life—even physical environments—when we define language. A narrow definition would run the risk of just that. On the other side, too broad a definition would end up being useless, since language would then not be distinguishable from everything else that we do. If we define language as “an action performed by humans and directed towards other humans,” then language would be no different from throwing a football. How do we settle this? How do we define language neither too narrowly nor too broadly?

We should stop here before going any further, since we are getting ahead of ourselves in trying to address such questions before opening the good book. What does Scripture reveal about how we might define language? The very word of God should be our starting place for every definition. Of course, Scripture is not a dictionary, but it does have much to say about human communication—in fact, an overwhelming amount! Let us start with just one passage.

One passage that has been historically referenced by theologians as having unique significance for our understanding of language is John’s Prologue, especially John 1:1–3 and 1:14.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God.
3 All things were made through him, and without him was not
any thing made that was made.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have
seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of
grace and truth.

As I will explain more fully in the following chapter, in calling the second person of the Trinity “the Word,” John is showing us that language has divine origins. In the beginning was not just “God” but *the Word*, and this Word was “toward God” or “facing God.” The Word—both as a divine person and as some high form of divine interpersonal discourse—was in the beginning. As one theologian remarked, we might translate John’s verses more poetically: “In the beginning was Discourse, and Discourse was with God, and Discourse was divine.” The Word as eternal Son and as divine discourse, eternally communicated by the Father in the hearing and power of the Spirit, indicates that language is not a human invention; it is a divine disposition, a disposition to express, in the highest sense, mutual love and glory among the persons of the Godhead.

However, what is less attended to in this passage is how John 1:14 intersects with John 1:1–3, and what this suggests about the nature of human language.

The Word, the eternal foundation for interpersonal discourse, became a fully human *person*. There are many implications of this that are worth drawing out here, some of which lead to a weighty conclusion about human language.

First, we must remember the connection between the eternal Son of the Father and humans as created sons and daughters. The Gospel of Luke refers to Adam, the first human, as the “son of God” (Luke 3:38), and Israel is referred to corporately as God’s son (e.g., Hos 11:1–2). As Scripture unfolds, we find that people who profess faith in Jesus Christ are named “sons and daughters of God” (2 Cor 6:18), a title they can only acquire *in Christ*, the eternal Son (Gal 4:5–7) through whom they have been adopted. In light of the connection between the eternal Son and God’s created sons and daughters, what is said of the eternal Son might be analogically applicable to creaturely sons and daughters. So, we must pay close attention to this eternal Word, the Son, taking on a human nature.

Second, Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans that we are “predestined to be conformed to the image of [God’s] Son” (Rom 8:29). This truth builds upon earlier biblical revelation, namely Genesis 1:27, where we are told that humans are made in the image and likeness of God. God’s Son, however, is the ultimate “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15) and “the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb 1:3). As far as is possible for creatures, we are to conform to him—his disposition, his speech, his social behavior.

Third, in the context of John’s Prologue it is important to keep in mind the allusion to Genesis 1, which tells us that we are products of God’s speech in a manner analogous to the way in which the eternal Son is the Word, or speech, of God the Father, spoken in the power and hearing of the Spirit. We are not divine, as the eternal Word is divine. Rather, we are *the products* of God’s speech. This reinforces the distinction between God as Creator and humanity as his creatures. Yet, at the same time it also shows us that there is a connection between the Son as the Word of the Father and creatures as products of the Father’s Word.

Let us bring these three implications together to recognize something truly magnificent about human language. We are sons and daughters of God, called to conform to God’s Son, who is the divine Word that took on flesh. As the divine Word in the flesh, Jesus Christ has divine language embedded in his very personhood. Put differently, as the Word incarnate, Jesus has language—interpersonal discourse—as the beating heart of his identity. He does not just use language in his earthly ministry; he *is* language: divine discourse from the Father, uttered in the power of the Holy Ghost. Because

Christ never ceases to be the divine Word of the Father, language is at the foundation of *everything* that he does on earth.

This truth is worth re-expressing, for I have not seen it emphasized in much of the Reformed theology I have read. Recall the orthodox teaching that Christ has two natures (one divine and one human) that are both fully present in his person. That means the divine Word of the Father is simultaneously present with the fully human person born of the virgin Mary by the power of the Spirit (Matt 1:18; Luke 1:35). Divine discourse (the eternal Word) tabernacled among us in human flesh! Thus, all that Christ thought, said, and did was undergirded and directed by his divine identity as the Word. Let me say it again: Christ did not just *use* language; he *is* language, the root of all interpersonal communication—divine and human. And so language is bound up with everything in his life.

Now, because we are creatures made in the image of the Son and are products of God's Word, language is, in a derivative way, embedded in our personhood, too. All that Christ thought, said, and did was undergirded and directed by his divine identity as the Word. All that we think, say, and do is undergirded and directed by our identity as products of that Word. Language is not just something we use; it is an essential part of who we *are* as creatures crafted by the speech of the tri-personal God.

Because of this, language is intertwined with all of the other behaviors we carry out as creatures. This is my weighty conclusion about human language—one that is often rejected or forgotten in contemporary discussions. *We cannot segregate language from other human behaviors because it is the base of those behaviors and the base of our identity.* This truth is divinely established in Scripture and rooted in God himself. We cannot sunder what God has joined together. So, if we try to separate language from other human behaviors, we will either be frustrated or we will simply misinterpret and misuse it. We can distinguish elements of language, such as verbal discourse in speech or writing, from other human behaviors, but we cannot structurally separate them. Thus, these two small sections of John's Prologue reveal why language as a behavior is related to everything else that we do. The Word incarnate is holistically engaged with every facet of life. All of what Christ thought, said, and did was colored by his divinely linguistic identity—as the communicated and communicating Word of the Father. By implication, because we are the products of God's speech, which specifies our identity, human language is likewise engaged with every facet of life. Language is a window on all that we do.

Now, it may seem that we have complicated things by arriving at this conclusion. We were trying to find a definition for language that was neither

too broad nor too narrow, but now we also must factor into the equation the centrality of language to all that we do! While it might seem that we have made things more difficult for ourselves, this was a necessary step in moving toward our definition, for we must begin with Scripture. Given what we have seen in John's Prologue, we can at least say that, because language is at the heart of our identity as products of God's speech, language must be considered in conjunction with everything that we do. If we are going to define language, we must think about where language fits in relation to the rest of life. Only then will we arrive at a definition that is faithful to the biblical witness and to our divinely governed identity.

Still, to situate language in relation to the rest of our behavior we must begin with a bare definition—for practical reasons. Let us for the moment say that language is "communicative behavior." We can take this bare definition and relate it to many other common human actions before further refining it. Only if it is seen in relation to such actions can language simultaneously be distinguished from and integrated with all of life. Going about it this way, and checking ourselves against the teaching of Scripture, will provide us with a definition that is sufficiently broad and yet still nuanced enough to be helpful.

Let us start by asking ourselves a simple question: What do we do *besides* use language? Figure 1 suggests some of the many sorts of human action that are distinguishable from language as communicative behavior and yet, in one way or another, related to it.

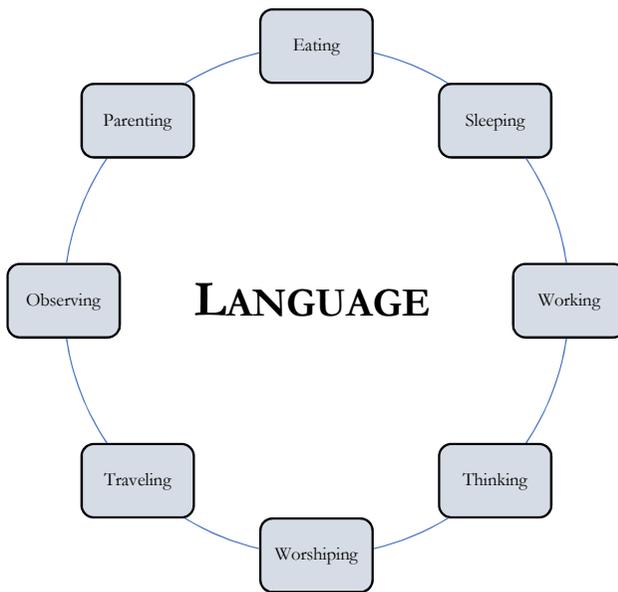


Figure 1: Language in Relation to Other Human Behaviors

Language, as “communicative behavior,” is not *equal to* any one of the actions in figure 1. When we see someone driving a car (traveling), we do not say, “He’s using language.” The same goes for our observations of a person eating or sleeping or watching a basketball game. Yet, language can be clearly related to all of these behaviors. Scripture itself attests to this.

Take parenting, for example. In Ephesians, Paul exhorts his readers to follow an ancient command from Deuteronomy: “Honor your father and your mother.” In addressing fathers more specifically, he says “do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4). Provoking, discipline, and instruction all presuppose the use of language. We often use words to provoke another person; discipline and instruction require verbal commands and exhortations; they require communicative behavior on the part of parents. Thus, the action of parenting is both distinct from and yet intimately related to language.

Or consider sleeping. Dreaming is a common part of sleeping, and throughout Scripture God uses dreams to communicate with his people (Gen 20:3; 28:10; 31:11, 24; 37:5; Num 12:6; 1 Kgs 3:5; Matt 1:20; 2:12, 13, 19, 22; 27:19). In several cases, he speaks to people in their dreams, relaying messages or warnings. In the New Testament, Joseph was told in a dream to take Mary as his wife (Matt 1:20). The wise men who traveled from distant lands were warned in a dream not to report to Herod, but to return to their land by another route (Matt 2:12). Even outside the bounds of Scripture, in our own lives we have all had numerous dreams that communicate something to us—fears, desires, lusts, and so on. Dreams are communicative, and so sleep is bound up with language. Even if we do not dream in our sleep, we are resting from a day full of communicative interactions, processing what we have heard and said. Dreamless sleep is still surrounded on all sides by language.

A less obvious example might be observing or thinking. How are these behaviors related to language? Thought, of course, lies beneath all communicative behavior. We cannot express anything before first thinking of what words we want to say or write, even when we are not conscious of the thought processes that are occurring in our minds. Not only this, but language actually structures our thought: it gives us a framework for thinking. We think in words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and so forth. When we reason, we logically arrange propositions or hypotheticals that are channeled through language. So, language and thought have a deep and reciprocal relationship. Scripture also testifies to this in statements such as Ps 139:4, “Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.” Thoughts flow into words, and God sees and knows every

thought we have even before it finds its way into phonemes and rolls off of our tongue. We can just as well say that God knows how every word we speak and hear affects the thoughts we have. So, thinking and language are bound up with one another.

Observation is similar to thought. When we observe the world around us, we process it mentally; we *interpret* it. We do not, strictly speaking, give the world new meaning in our interpretation. Rather, as Cornelius Van Til taught, we *re-interpret* the world that God has already interpreted for us in Scripture. In other words, we are called to recognize the meaning that God has already instilled in every fiber of reality, as much as we are able to as finite creatures. When we observe the world, then, we are interpreting it, which is patently linguistic. To interpret is to derive meaning, and meaning is always understood and expressible to some degree in communicative behavior, in language. In everyday life, consider how many times you hear the question, “What does that mean?” The person asking this question is always hoping that the other person will formulate in words the significance of an utterance, action, or event. Meaning is bound up with language, and so interpretation is bound up with language. Because interpretation is a core part of observation, we can say that language and observation are bound up together.

Scripture, once again, confirms this. The author of Proverbs expresses a deep desire for his son to look, interpret, and receive his teaching. “My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways” (Prov 23:26). The son is called to observe the patterned behavior of his father (his “ways”) and to interpret this as instruction. This instruction presupposes language—the communicative behavior of one person passing on a moral lesson to another. Moreover, this phenomenon—observing, interpreting, learning—would be an expression of total commitment on the part of the son, who in this process is giving his “heart” to his father. Note here that receiving instruction through the communicative behavior of the father (i.e., through language) is *all-encompassing* for the son; it involves the giving of his *heart*. This parallels on a creaturely level the all-encompassing submission of Christ to the plan of his heavenly Father. The whole person of Christ—his “heart”—was offered up to his Father as he carried out his will, even to death on a cross at the hands of crooked men. Throughout his entire life, Jesus is the perfect model of observing, interpreting, and acting as he witnesses the work of his Father (his Father’s “ways”), both in his own interpretation of Scripture and in the engagements he has with those around him. He tells his disciples, “My Father is working until now, and I am working” (John 5:17). The implication is that Christ, as the perfect Son, is observing what his Father has done and is doing. He is then receiving divine instruction as he carries out his Father’s

will in his earthly ministry. Language for the Son of God incarnate is thus inextricably intertwined with interpretation and observation. The same is the case for us as creatures. When we observe, we interpret, and are thus receiving communication that is controlled by God, who is present everywhere and is the Lord of all meaning.

We could go on. Eating, working, worshiping, traveling, and parenting all have clear ties to language, some of which have been implied already. Eating, all throughout Scripture and into the present day, is the occasion for conversation between friends and family members. Meal times were and continue to be an opportunity to commune with loved ones, and language as communicative behavior plays a central role in this. We all use language in one way or another in our work—that's true for the businessman and school teacher as much as it is for the stay-at-home parent. And what is worship without words? The songs we sing—the psalms and hymns that the church has sung for centuries—are filled with language that communicates our gratitude for and worship of the Trinity: for the Father's mercy and grace in sending his Son and Holy Spirit for the sake of sinners. Traveling, too, is bound up with language, since we almost always travel in order to commune with others via language. Or, even if we travel without plans to see anyone, we rely on language in our thinking (as already mentioned) and will find it hard to avoid personal contact with others—whatever our destination might be.

It is clear from these examples that language is tied in some way to every other human behavior. Yet, Scripture also treats language as a behavior that is distinct. There are many verses and passages in Scripture dealing with our words (what we might call *verbal behavior*), with the use of the tongue, particularly in Psalms and Proverbs (Ps 19:14; 34:13; 36:3; 64:3; 119:103; Prov 10:19; 12:6, 25; 15:1, 23, 26; 16:24; 17:27; 18:4; 21:28; 25:11). Our words can be both brilliantly redemptive, if we use them to build one another up in grace (Eph 4:29), and dishearteningly destructive (James 3:5–6), if we use them to burn bridges and break apart what love has joined together. In both cases, our communicative behavior is distinct from various other human activities.

So, as Scripture itself confirms, language is related to all other human behaviors and is still distinguishable from them. The follow-up question is this: "Is there something about language—some purpose for it or effect of it—that helps us to see how it is related to and distinguished from all other human behaviors?" By this question, I hope to help us see the core of language: its primary and eternal purpose, both for God himself and for us as his image-bearing creatures.

Here is my answer to that question: *Language, as communicative behavior, always represents or fosters interpersonal connections.* Language is, at base, always personal. This is the case for all the examples we have just considered. Recall the initial examples of how language might be perceived in business, in a course on Romantic literature, and in parenting. In business settings, there is no such thing as purely propositional (informational) language. Language can never be reduced purely to information transfer, because information transfer ultimately transpires between persons, and those persons will, as a result of the information being conveyed, be either cognitively or spiritually closer to or further from one another. Language always goes back to interpersonal connections.

What about the course on Romantic literature? Despite the prevalent assumption that reading is an individual activity, every time we read something we are engaging with the words of another person. Written words are not dead; they are alive and well, offering us the presence of the person who wrote them. When we read, we are actually growing closer to the author, coming to a deeper understanding of his or her meaning, values, and desires. Reading is a communal activity, even when we find ourselves sitting alone in a sofa chair with a good book. There is interpersonal engagement between author and reader, though this is not as fluid and full as that which occurs in verbal conversation.

Parenting, too, relies on the interpersonal connections that language fosters. Shepherding children through a spell of temper tantrums (as my wife and I have experienced) requires strong interpersonal connections, both between parents and children and between siblings. I must use language to connect with my son, Isaac, and show him that I have his spiritual and social growth at heart when I reprimand him. When I tell him that he cannot hit his sister with a plastic hammer, I am not just trying to prevent her from being harmed. I am trying to show him the interpersonal connection he has with her, and with me. As her older brother, he has the privilege of guarding and protecting his younger sister, just as I have the privilege of guarding and protecting my children. Both of these interpersonal connections are established by our heavenly Father, who through Christ and the Holy Spirit guards and protects us from evil. What's more, God often does this by calling us to follow his word, Scripture. So, provided that our words align with the truth of Scripture, we can rightly guard and protect others with the words we speak.

Psalm 91 is a beautiful picture of this. Here we read words that have power to engulf our souls with heaven-sent confidence. This is a psalm about God's unparalleled protection of the one who trusts in him. In verse 14, we read, "Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will

protect him, because he knows my name.” Knowing God’s name is the result of reading God’s word. As we read and meditate on God’s word, our knowledge of him (of his name) grows deeper and more secure. Thus, God reveals himself so that we might know him by name and trust in his protection and deliverance. He uses language to shepherd and protect us as his sons and daughters, fostering interpersonal connections between himself and his creatures. Parents stand upon this foundation of God’s personal communication when they use language to foster interpersonal connections with their children. Our parenting, in other words, is a finite image of God’s parenting of his children—and both levels of parenting are mediated through language.

So, in all of these situations language represents or fosters interpersonal connections. But we can go further.

The phrase “interpersonal connections” can sound a bit stiff to some people. I have written elsewhere that language as communicative behavior not only fosters *connections*; it fosters *communion*. We might think of interpersonal connections as strands of rope that bind us to one another. God’s revealing his name to us, for instance, is an example of an interpersonal connection: a bridge between persons. But these connections are meant to draw us into closer fellowship with God and with one another. The connections point toward communion. This is illustrated in figure 2.

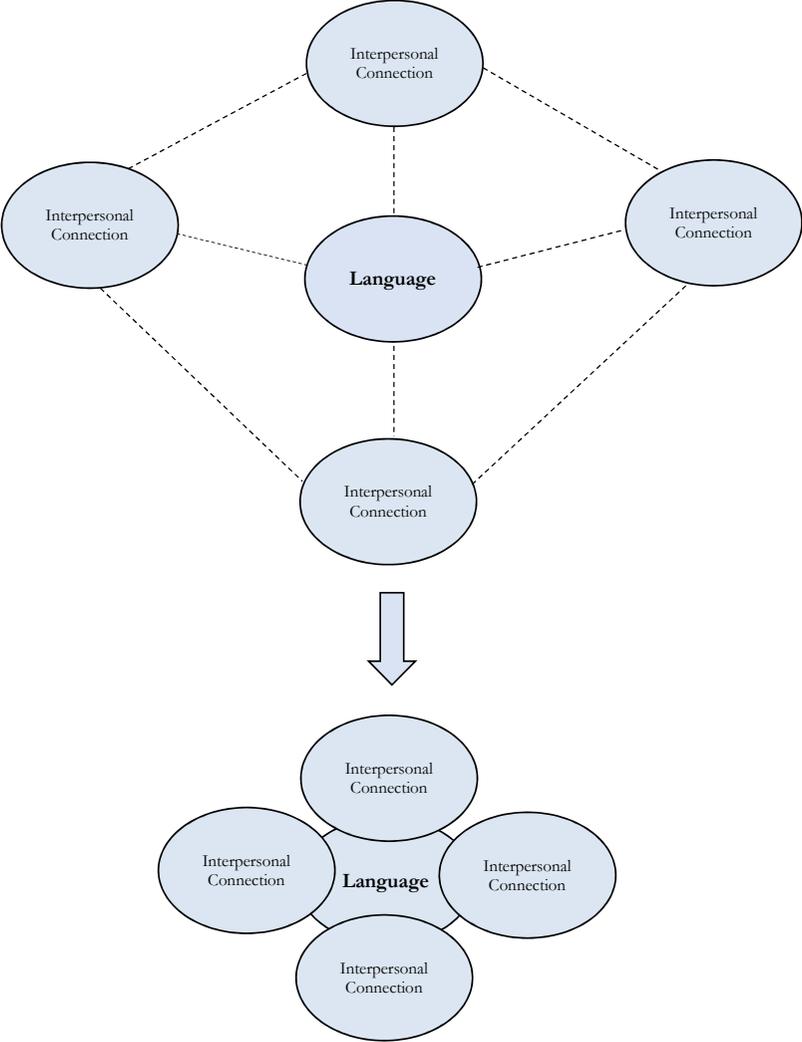


Figure 2: Interpersonal Connections Moving toward Communion

This communion is something that has its roots in the Trinity, which we will explore in the next chapter. In light of this, let us revise our earlier definition of language so that we can account for its ultimate purpose: *Language is communion behavior*. If this definition does not seem to distinguish language adequately from other human behaviors (recall our earlier discussion), we can go on to say that this communion behavior is either *verbal* or *nonverbal*. I have tried to explain what I mean with this distinction below, noting the different senses in which I understand communion behavior (divine and human). We will explore these concepts in more detail as the chapters unfold.

COMMUNION BEHAVIOR DEFINED

Communion behavior: (1) an interpersonal, trinitarian divine behavior amongst the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whereby they express mutual and intimate love and glory to one another; (2) an image-bearing human behavior that has the goal of (a) drawing persons into fellowship with God and (b) drawing persons into fellowship with each other

Verbal: The use of written or spoken language to foster communion or fellowship between God and humanity or between human persons

Nonverbal: Any other communicative behaviors (aside from written and spoken language) that are substitutable for verbal behavior and serve the purpose of drawing people into more intimate fellowship with God or with each other.

In this book, I will use the terms *language*, *communion behavior*, and *speech* sometimes interchangeably.

We set out in this chapter to define language, and now we have a working definition: Language, i.e., verbal and nonverbal communion behavior, is a phase of human behavior that fosters connections between persons who are ultimately meant to grow closer to one another and to the God who communes with himself.¹ This leads us to the next chapter.

1. I am taking the phrase, “a phase of human behavior” from Pike.