

## 21. UNIVERSAL SOUND

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*And the whole earth was of one  
language, and of one speech.*  
Genesis 11:1

*The student has but to practice himself in sensitivity  
for all the several sounds—there are no more than  
thirty-two or thirty-three altogether—and the  
corresponding feelings will come, if he will only  
make up his mind to become conscious of them.*  
—Rudolf Steiner  
(*Speech and Drama Course*,  
September 1924)

In our ongoing study of sacred words of power we frequently come across words and phrases that are similar in sound and meaning but from different language sources. This has naturally led to a raising of the question as to whether there is some single original source for all communicative expression. Most readers will be familiar with the Genesis story about the Tower of Babel. At a time when everyone on Earth apparently spoke a single language, an attempt was made by the “children of men” to build a tower to reach Heaven itself. God was so displeased at this display of effrontery that He came down to Earth to deal with His subjects personally. Genesis relates that He confounded their language “that they may not understand one another’s speech” and scattered the races of men all over the face of the planet.

The word *babel* is a derivative from the Hebrew word *balal*, meaning “to mix, to confuse, to confound,” which was also used in the context of “overflow” as in the mixing of oil. It has been said that God’s reason for confounding the one common language of the time and dividing it into different dialects was because He considered humanity unready to ascend into the heavens, and the confusing of tongues served to disunite a previously united race.

Whatever the origin and merits of this story may be, there has been evidence to suggest that all of our world’s languages do have a common source—if not, perhaps, in direct transfer down the ages from one race to another of actual words and phrases, quite possibly in relation to the meanings and values placed on certain key sounds that are common to the tongues of all peoples.

### *Visible Speech*

The well-known teacher of occult sciences, Dr. Rudolf Steiner, was one researcher who uncovered several conclusive universal language connections based on sound values, his major work on the subject being *Speech and Drama*.<sup>1</sup>

Born in Austria in 1861, Steiner enjoyed a brilliant academic career before entering the late 19th-century world of the occultists and theosophists. In 1912, he broke away from Theosophy and formed his own Anthroposophical Society, which still flourishes in many countries around the globe. Steiner’s prime premise was that the human mind has incalculable potential which can be developed for humanity’s lasting benefit. His teachings ranged over a wide spectrum, from meditation and mind exercise to revolutionary

education techniques and organic farming methods. In the present context, some of his most absorbing work was connected with sound and movement. To describe the interrelationship between the two, he used the term *eurythmy*, which means literally “a system of harmonious body movement to the rhythm of music and spoken words” or “speech and music made visible.”

For Steiner, as, indeed, for Hebrew kabalists and others, speech was not considered merely as a means of communication; it was and is part and parcel of creation itself. He proposed that each word we produce takes on a definable form in the air, and that if all the letters of the alphabet from A to Z were to be uttered in a certain way, a human etheric body would be created. This is, of course, completely in line with several ancient teachings, including, as one instance only, the Hebrew tradition, which considers the sounds and forms inherent in the 22 letters of the Hebrew language as the actual protoplasm of creation. We have also learned of kabalists of our own day who refer to language as a sort of computer program that works directly on our “walking bio-computers,” or physical/psychic bodies. It follows, therefore, that every word we utter can take on importance as a generator of either a positive or negative (and in some cases, neutral) impulse that will have some effect on our existence.

In a collection of some of his lectures on sound and movement, given mostly in 1924, the year before his death, and published under the title *Eurythmy as Visible Speech*, Steiner theorizes that consonants represent “an imitation of external happenings,” and vowels, “an inner experience.” He also informs that the letter *H* is midway between consonants and vowels and is related to breath itself. Here again, there are correlations with ancient teachings. In the Vedic tradition,

*apana*, or “inspirational breath,” is regarded as a catalyst for mind transformation, and the Sanskrit “Mantra of Breathing,” *Soham-Hamsa*, conclusively embodies in its vocalization the mentioned *h* sound. In the Hebraic system, the letter *hey* is actually equated with the breath of the Lord Himself, as is the Arabic expression *huwa*, which again embodies the *h* sound.<sup>2</sup>

Steiner equates the use of words with body movement and color, as well as with a human being’s actual relationship with the world of form. He suggests that there are 12 basic gestures linked with speech that signify the whole being of any person and that these are in turn related to the 12 signs of the zodiac. Of most interest to us here is what he said about some of the sounds themselves.

Steiner states that the first sound in the alphabet, represented by the letter *A* (as pronounced in German, or “ah” as in “far”), “proceeds from our inmost being when we are in a state of *wonder* and *amazement*.” It is connected with birth and creation and stimulates the growth of philosophy, which begins with wonder. Significantly, the first of all mantras—*Aum*—has *A* as the initial syllable of its tripartite sounding. Moreover, a full translation of the Sanskrit term *vach*, which holds the *A* as its central sound, places it not only as a word meaning “speech,” but as the mystical personification of speech. In a deeper sense, *Vach* is the subjective Creative Force which emanates from the Creative Deity to become concrete expression in our vision of reality. The Greek equivalent is the well-known expression *Logos*. And, for the record, the Hebrew letter *aleph* or *A* is at once taken as the symbol of God as the Creator and considered to be the prime element used in any combinations of letters employed to form the very elements of creation.<sup>3</sup>

We have already been told that, according to Steiner, every vowel sound is, in effect, bound up with an experience of the soul—which may even bring us back to the posited seven-vowel version of the Name of God discussed in Chapter 4—or to the fact that the five vowels *AEIOU* vocalized in succession sounds remarkably like the word *Yahweh*, the Name of God derived from the Hebrew Tetragrammaton. Consonants, on the other hand, are different in that they are not sounds that arise from inner promptings but are “images of that which is outside our own being.”<sup>4</sup>

It is, however, of more than passing interest to note that the letter *B*, and all other consonants for that matter, cannot be uttered without the addition of a soul-produced vowel sound. This points to the proposition that nothing in our physical world can take on existence without stimulation from the power of the spirit. For the record, Steiner equates the sound of *B* (the first letter in the English “build”) as creating a form that is something in the nature of a shelter or a house—which, of course, is precisely what the Hebrew letter *bet* means, in its most direct sense. *Bet* is also, incidentally, a symbol for the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

### *In the Beginning*

Placing important emphasis on the value of Hebrew as a language of creation, Steiner described the ancient tongue of the descendants of Abraham as “a language which works upon the soul quite differently from any modern language.” Moreover, he affirmed that the sounding of Hebrew calls up in the soul of a person a picture, even a whole world, such as when utterance is made of the words that mark the start of Genesis: *B’reshiyth bara elohim et ha’shmayim v’et*

*h'aretz*—"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."<sup>5</sup>

Much in line with what we have already written about Hebrew, Sanskrit and other ancient tongues, Steiner posited that the creative power inherent in Hebrew sound sequences could be utilized to allow for elevation of consciousness from the sensible to the supersensible, an action which might be compared in some ways with the clairvoyant experience of a modern-day seer or channeler. He also put forward the suggestion that use of ancient sound forms could create a bridge to penetrate the primeval records of our existence in a way that is entirely different from the methods used by modern research. To Steiner, true reality is spiritual reality, and our physical life form is only a secondary existence brought into being by the actions of discarnate and ultra-terrestrial forces. In one of his lectures, "The Mystery of the Archetypal World," presented in Munich in 1910, he described the first three letters of the Bible as indicative of this process, and of what lived inside any Jewish sage when the sounds penetrated his soul:

*Bet*, the first letter, called forth the weaving of the habitation of substance; *Reysh*, the second sound, summoned up the countenances of the spiritual Beings, who wove within this dwelling, and *Shin*, the third sound, the prickly, stinging force which worked its way out from within to manifestation.<sup>6</sup>

The underlying principle back of all this is, of course, the supposition that ancient sound correctly intoned stimulates a creativeness unknown to modern-day abstract speech.

## A Universal Foundation

Steiner's work regarding sound and movement has been carried several steps further in recent times by the Israeli-born speech and drama teacher and counselor Yehuda Tagar, now resident in Adelaide, Australia, who has given workshops in Australia, Switzerland and England, and as part of a joint Jewish-Arab educational program, in Israel and Palestine. Tagar came under the influence of Steiner's Anthroposophical teachings early on in his career when studying in his home country and later in England. His research and experimentation has been directed mainly at Steiner's approach to drama, but he has also adapted certain elements of Steiner's propositions for use not only as a teaching aid for classes on acting but in psychological counseling and self-therapy by direct confrontation with the forces that lie hidden in the sounds of language. His method, known as *Philophonetica*, has been recently included in several tertiary and other educational courses in Australia.

The term *Philophonetica* can be translated as "love of sounds" or "soul relationships with sounds." It is a method of exploring and experiencing the phenomenon of the single sounds of language and of their effects and impressions on the body and on the soul.

In the present context, Tagar's most interesting conclusions relate to his views and findings on a universal foundation for all languages. In his studies he has uncovered those elements which emphasize the differences between various languages, but has also discovered other elements which can be used to create a bridge between two or more tongues.

This attempt by Tagar at bridging the gap between cultures calls to mind the experiences while in

North America of our good friend Credo Vusamazulu Mutwa, current High Sanusi and Keeper of the Tales of the Zulu nation, whom one of the authors first met over 20 years ago in the famous black city of Soweto, near Johannesburg, South Africa. When it comes to the tongues of the black tribes of Africa, Mutwa is an accomplished multilinguist. In 1975, he was invited to the United States to lecture and to assist with research on a film project. On his return he told us that while in the USA he had spent some time with the elders and medicine men of the Zuni Indian tribe, and that to the amazement of both his hosts and himself, he was able to converse with them in a language that approximated their own. This was accomplished by use of a combination of words and phrases taken from several Southern African dialects and root-languages, which were almost identical in pronunciation and meaning to the Zuni Indians' own spoken form.

The question still remains as to whether these similarities have come about as a result of an initial universal language that spread all around the globe, which then became confused into numerous subsidiary forms—or, as Steiner and Tagar would have it, because certain seed sounds universally represent the same or similar objects and/or experiences. Steiner, incidentally, did posit a universal language in Atlantis, the famed continent of antiquity that sunk into the sea. Perhaps both propositions are true and there was a universal language once *because* certain sounds represent and express the same experience.

### *Sounds are Experiences*

There are numerous examples in the *Philophonetica* system, based on the original Steiner find-

ings and developed by Tagar, through which direct personal discovery can be made of powerful and immediate connections between particular sounds and correlated inner experiences. Some of these unusual concepts contained in Tagar's working proposition are noted for the reader's comprehension:

The letter *B*, when spoken with the active participation of the whole body, results in an experience of embracing, holding; *K*—of breaking through a barrier; *G*—of guarding and fending off; *S*—of penetrating (like a sword); *V*—of invading, and of strong movement; *M*—mothering; *D*—consolidating; *F*—firing, dispersing, and mastering confidence; *R*—of scattering and spreading; *P*—of exploding; *Sh*—of calming down; *L*—of the water element, of flowing and molding; *T*—of pointing, and of incarnating; *H*—of expanding in all directions; *O*—of sympathy; *I* [ee]—of self-knowing and asserting the self; *U* [oo]—of fear and deepening; *E* [eh]—of offending and countering; *A* [ah]—as already mentioned, of wonder and openness. (It should be recorded that the above examples represent but a sample of typical inner and outer expressions and responses that occur during exposition of *Philophonetica* exercises.)

All these sounds also have their cosmic as well as natural elemental dimensions, for every consonant is an utterance of a particular constellation:

|            |             |                 |
|------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Aries = V  | Leo = T     | Sagittarius = G |
| Taurus = R | Virgo = B   | Capricorn = L   |
| Gemini = H | Libra = Ts  | Aquarius = M    |
| Cancer = F | Scorpio = Z | Pisces = N      |

Every vowel is the speech of a planet:

|         |   |        |
|---------|---|--------|
| Sun     | = | Au     |
| Venus   | = | A [ah] |
| Mercury | = | I [ee] |
| Moon    | = | Ei     |
| Mars    | = | E [eh] |
| Saturn  | = | U [oo] |
| Jupiter | = | O [oh] |

The sounds evoked by the letters of the alphabet are also manifestations of the four elements of nature. They are the forces behind these elements: *B, P, T, K, G, D, M, N* are **Earth** sounds; *S, F, H, V, Sh, Z, Ch* are **Fire** sounds; *L* and *W* are **Water** sounds; three versions of *R* are **Air** sounds.

From the few examples shown above, it would not be too difficult to accept comprehension of sound as a possible all-embracing "language of life" that extends over the whole gamut of human physical, psychic and spiritual experiences. Practice of *Philophonetica* exercises can result in these connections becoming conscious for direct use of appropriate sound as tools for inner healing and change through the medium of the body's ability to express all these experiences in gesture and movement.

### *Babel or Babble?*

In propounding his thoughts on the matter, Yehuda Tagar places initial emphasis on those elements which lie in the foundation of all languages—and points out immediately that, in all the different races and cultures around the globe, babies all babble in exactly the same way:

While on the way to learning how to speak the specific language of the tribe or culture they have been born into, babies naturally go through a stage of what may be called universal language... babbling consists of what is universal to all languages, namely, consonants and vowels. As adults, we are normally only aware of consonants and vowels in their capacity to form words in endless possibilities. But for babies these curious groups of single sounds seem to hold a value of their own. They taste them, they experiment with them, and express much of their inner experience through these sounds alone.<sup>7</sup>

And, still according to Tagar, the babbling of babies takes us right back to what is left of the primal language that existed before the Biblical Tower of Babel episode:

If it be true that the growing embryo, baby and child repeats in his development all of the previous stages mankind has gone through in its evolution, then babbling may be understood as a retracing of a previous stage of human language. Only later in their development do babies relate names to objects, in their particular mother tongue.

When a child begins at last to articulate clearly in the tongue of his or her people, only then does some division from the original universal language begin.

The next stages in the development of personal expression led to both the loss of a universal understanding between cultures and a partial loss of communication between individuals in the same culture. Tagar uses a comparison of the poetry of ancient cultures with the poetry of the 20th century to illustrate part of this evolution away from divinely inspired imagery and vocalization:

In reading the *Iliad* of Homer, pictures come flowing into one's imagination, nearly ready-made.

There is no need to understand Homer's situation personally in order to understand his poetry, for he does not speak about himself at all. According to his own invocation in the opening words of the *Iliad*, it is the Muse, a heavenly being, who speaks through him, when he is inspired. In comparison, there is nothing "ready-made" in T. S. Eliot's poetic work "The Waste-Land." The Muse speaks not through him, but he himself. . .

What this all leads to is that we have through the course of time somehow gained individual language at the expense of universal—and have, along the way, even lost much of our social ability to communicate. Asked if this process might be reversible, Tagar has expressed the opinion that it is not, for it is inevitable that human evolution must move forward so that "the fruits of one epoch turn in time into the seeds of another." The development of individual language can be considered as a great human achievement, which need not be reversed. What needs to be done is to take another step or two forward and try to uncover the way in which our "inner content finds its expression, through words." This can lead to a new understanding of one's own language and also of the universal character of the single sounds of any language.

From this new comprehension of expression and communication through speech, the lost universal language may become re-awakened in a more contemporary and individualized sense. A natural process that started with a universal inspirationally based language and worked its way through culturally based languages to develop into the present-day more individual form of communication can, in theory, become part of a conscious process. But any such conscious effort to improve language forms would have to be based on a fresh approach to, and resultant deeper under-

standing of, the entire foundation of all language.

The words used to describe specific objects or incidents usually echo in their sounding some aspect of those forms and/or occurrences, no matter the language used. What must eventually become understood and accepted is that two or more words designating the same object are not necessarily mere substitutes for each other, but rather, "different aspects of the same, shedding their light on each other, enriching the experience of that object."

Moreover, once people of variant cultures begin to realize that their basic communication methods rest firmly on the same foundations, they may also, perhaps, begin to acknowledge common links regarding their cultural and other differences.

Ultimately, one day, we may well have reached full cycle in the evolution from "babble," via cultural language and individualized language, to whatever lies beyond. This will, we hope, consist of a universal form of communication even more complete than the original common tongue in use at the time of the Tower of Babel—a form of communication that can be understood and used by all, regardless of race or culture.

According to Steiner, commencing the last third of the 19th century, the spiritual guidance of humankind was placed in the hands of the Archangel Michael whose characteristics include universal aspects. Developments in recent times that cut across boundaries of race, color, creed and language demonstrate this. It is only natural that this characteristic of our time may ultimately reflect itself in a moving away from the separation of languages towards a unification or synthesis of communicative sound.