

Philophonetics and universal sound

On the universal foundation of all human languages

Yehuda Tagar

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The universal foundation of all human languages and the way in which the method called Philophonetics can contribute towards the experience of it. My intention in this article is to show how in different languages elements can be found which emphasise the differences between them, alongside elements which emphasise that which could bridge these differences. I will further attempt to show how, from the background called Philophonetics, a workshop can be formed in which the skill of bridging the basic human experience which lies behind any given two languages can be developed.

So much of what appears to separate nations, cultures and ethnic groups from each other and emphasises their differences, seems to have its roots in and expresses itself through the differences between their languages. Differences of tradition, mentality, world view and attitudes, express themselves well through the differences between the structures of various languages, their grammar, accent, choice of point of view on an object, choices of sound, rhythms, intonations, accentuation, of different vowels and consonants, the relationship to time and space, the possessive case, logic, pictures, emotions and so on. In the expression of human experiences occurring so differently in different languages, unbridgeable walls seem to have been erected between the different branches of the Family of Man. Even when one learns another nation's language, this does not guarantee that one penetrates that barrier, though this can definitely make the first step. In many cases enemies do have knowledge of the other side's language, knowledge which does not lead to further understanding at all. In order to turn the learning of a language as a finished product of a long cultural development into an understanding of that culture from the inside, something else has to be added, either living with the people of that culture for a long time or connecting to the process which led to the forming of their language.

What does it mean, connecting to that process? To answer this question we shall have to first concentrate on those elements which lie in the foundation of all languages. All the babies around the whole globe, in all the different races and cultures, all babble in the same way. It is as though, on the way to learning the speaking of their specific language, they

naturally have to go through the stage of what may be called universal language. It is a universal language, for babbling consists of that which is universal for all languages, namely, consonants and vowels. We are normally aware of these only in their capacity to form words, in endless possibilities. For babies however, these curious groups of single sounds seem to hold a value of their own. They taste them, experiment with them and express much of their inner experiences through the sounds themselves. To the renewal of this intimate relationship with the single sounds of language do the various exercises of Philophonetics attempt to bring us once again, only now in a way suitable for adults.

We shall come back to this later on.

So in the babbling of babies we are, in a way, back in what was left of that primal language which, according to the Bible, prevailed amongst human beings before the destruction of the Tower of Babylon. (The word babbling seems to be the transformation into a verb of the ancient Hebrew biblical Babel, which later became Babylon, where according to tradition, the Tower of Babylon was built. The word Babel is a derivative from the Hebrew word Ballal, which means to mix, confuse, confound).

An old wisdom, contained within this myth, attributes the origin of the various human languages to one primordial universal language which once existed. If it be true that the growing embryo, baby and child repeats in his/her development all of the previous stages mankind has gone through in its evolution, then babbling maybe 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. The same object would have another name in another language. The time of Babylon is here reiterated, re-experienced, in the life of each individual. In Babylon, according to the myth, with the strength of unity their common language gave them, the members of the then united family of man resolved to build a tower high enough to reach the heavens. God, in his/her attempt to prevent that untimely ascent of unripe humanity to the heights, made their task impossible by weakening their unity. The one common language was divided into the many tongues of the various folks and they were scattered around the earth, now unable to understand each other's speech.

The baby who begins to name things in his/her specific mother tongue becomes part of that divided civilisation. He/she thus unconsciously descends into the particular point of view on reality that this particular language gives him/her. In future, in order to understand his/her fellow human beings, who were born at the same time, across the cultural borders, a very conscious effort will have to be made to ascend again to a common ground, from which the other point of view can be understood. Only at a later stage of the child's development do

single words start to be combined, that separate names of things are put into sentences and later the child learns to express his/her particular relationship to these things.

Grammatical structures, instinctively and through imitation, become parts of his/her budding mental process and so moves from “naming” into “speaking”. Gradually his/her own individual language is developed. The consciousness of the single sounds has disappeared into consciousness of the single words, then the consciousness of the wonder of the single words gradually disappears in the forming of the personal expression, in sentences. The consciousness of the personal experience continues to grow. The universal language, shared by all babies that gave rise to the particular mother tongue, completely disappears.

So we can follow the human being as he/she journeys in their development in language from the universal sphere, through that of their native culture, into the sphere of their own individual expression. The further development of the personal expression in language leads not only to a loss of a universal understanding between cultures, but also to a partial loss of communication between individuals of the same culture. That phenomenon became painfully conscious in the West towards the middle of this century, where it was termed “alienation”.

Comparing the poetry of ancient cultures with the poetry of the twentieth century can sharply illustrate this evolution. In reading for instance, the *Illiad* 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 *Illiad*, it is the Muse, a heavenly being, who speaks through him when he is inspired, the common heritage of the story of his ancestors.

In comparison, there is nothing ready-made in T.S. Eliot’s poetic work “*The Wasteland*”. The Muse speaks not through him, but he himself, T.S. Eliot the man, speaks. No universal pictures will be revealed to the reader, unless through his/her individual effort he/she enters and understands T.S. Eliot’s individual, one-time experience. Then however, having entered into the poet’s individual experience, the world may reveal itself to the reader in a unique way. So, we gained individual language at the expense of the universal and even the social ability to communicate.

Is there a way to reverse that process? I’m afraid not, for that process is right, inevitable and full of meaning. Human evolution goes forward and the fruits of one epoch turn in time into the seeds of another. The development of individual language is an enormous achievement of humanity. There is no need to reverse it in order to regain mutual,

social and universal understanding, but to take a step further. I suggest that one aspect of this next step consists of the conscious penetration into the way in which our inner content finds its expression, in words. From this, a new understanding of one's own language may arise. This can further lead to a next step that can then be achieved, through awakening to the way in which particular combinations of sounds enable words to be bearers of meaning for a particular experience; a new understanding of the universal character of the single sounds of language. In this new understanding the lost universal language, last experienced through babbling, may echo.

Take for instance the word *tree*. In English, we normally take it for granted that it designates those tall, branchy things standing around, as though it were just a common agreement to designate them in this way. But truly, it is more than just a common agreement. A very particular experience and picture lives in the form of this word. The form is not arbitrarily made up. It arises naturally from a particular way of observing that which we call in English, a tree. The word can be explored, just like as a work of art. A lot will be found through such an exploration. It may reveal for instance, the way in which that phenomenon is looked at in the English language which is very different to the way in which the German language looks at the same object. The German experience of that phenomenon needs another form for its expression: it uses the form *Baum* for it.

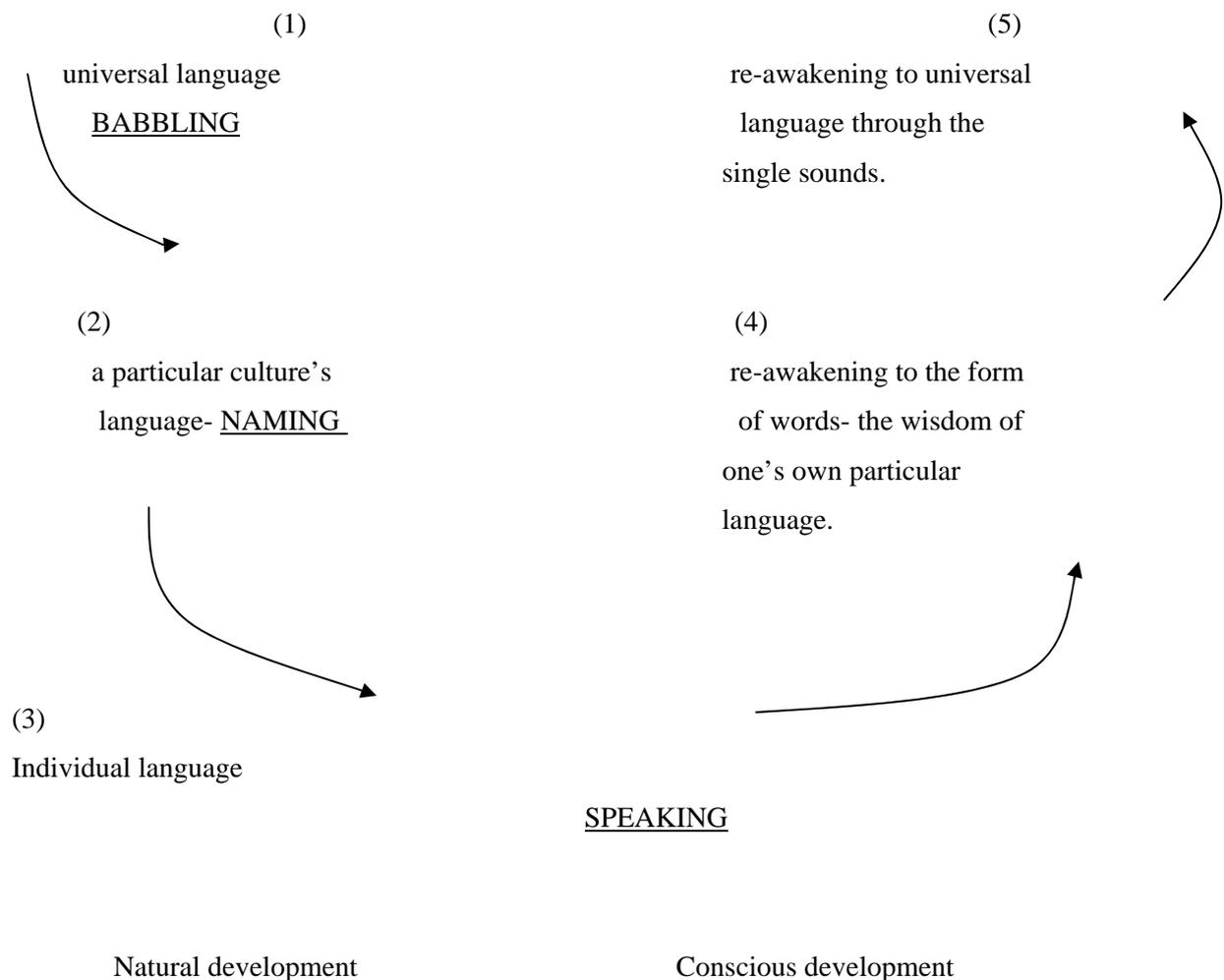
Yet another level of exploration waits behind the study of the single sounds of that word and their particular significance. The sound 'T' is an expression of a range of very specific experiences. One has to experiment with the sound 'T' in the ways Philophonetics provides in order to become conscious of it: one has to sense it, feel it, act it and play with it. The sound 'T' will then be able to reveal its various characteristics. It will appear to be pointy, tight, penetrating, tough, strong, ticklish. It will make sense then why a word like *tree* starts with 'T', while a word like *post* ends with it. The first starts from its strong grip in the ground and ends in its free movement in the air above, expressed by the 'R' of *tree*; the second comes into the ground from above, gets stuck in the ground, where it stays at rest. Likewise, in Hebrew, to take a language whose source is very far from English, the word for cutting a tree is *Karat*- the tree whirls in the air before it falls to the ground, where it stays at rest. On the other hand, the word for blowing a trumpet in Hebrew *Truah*- the air is accumulated, static, in the lungs before it bursts into the mouthpiece of the trumpet where, in its channelled release, it creates a sound. The reasons for the choice and positioning of 'T' in these words are the same in both languages. They will be found, in relation to 'T' in any other languages as well. There are characteristic cultural reasons for the differences between words

chosen to name the same phenomena in different languages. Beyond these cultural differences, there lies the universal human experience of the single sounds and the choice of a particular sound for the expression of a particular experience, is universal in its nature. It would take more than this essay to substantiate this statement scientifically but everyone can play and experiment with the sounds. Single sounds are being experienced in a similar way by different cultures not because of an international agreement about it, but because these sounds, by their very nature, embody and express personal experiences of each individual. They are woven into our very nature, as these sounds and our nature, beyond all our differences, is an universal human one, just as our basic human shape is also universal in its nature, beyond our racial colours and beyond our personal physiognomies.

So, in short, what am trying to illustrate by the foregoing is the following: what we express through a particular combination of words, in a sentence, is an individual experience; what is expressed through the choice of a word in naming a particular phenomena in a certain language expresses the experience which that language (and the culture behind it) has of that particular phenomenon; what is expressed through the connection between particular consonants and vowels and basic human experiences- is the universal- human nature, common to all human beings just as is the physical shape.

Therefore, a natural process of journeying from the universal language through a particular cultural language to an individual one, can at least in theory, be accomplished by a conscious process of growing through the individual language. This can be achieved through a deeper understanding of one's own culture's language, into an understanding of the universal foundation of all languages, namely the experience behind the single sounds- the consonants and vowels.

In the following diagram we have an outline of a process leading to the re- awakening to that which is common to all languages, peoples and individuals, starting from that which is unique and different in them. If such a process could be taken up practically and seriously, a new dimension of communication- through differences- between groups and individuals could open up, supported by the means of the potent elements of language, the honest efforts of those who struggle to forge human communication, as a way of overcoming conflicts.



I suggest that out of that method of expressing language here called Philophonetics, a special variety of workshops can be developed with the aim of making the above theory applicable, for practical experience.

Philophonetics is a method of working with the elements of language, primarily consonants and vowels, which attempts to re-awaken and develop the personal sensitivity to the sounds. Through this method the inner experience of the single sounds reveals their profound significance for the soul- life, which is usually left unconscious. The experience of the sounds, once discovered, can then grow into an insight into the way in which words are formed. Words which were previously used unconsciously start to reveal an inherent richness of meaning and artistry underlying any human language. This method came into being out of my research into and experiments with, Rudolf Steiner's indications for a new approach to Speech development and Drama, which he gave in September, 1924.

Let us now imagine a form for such a workshop, designed with the intention of increasing the understanding between different groups, through a deeper experience of their

languages. Suppose we have in one group, Aboriginal people and people of English/Asiatic origin- in Australia; Zulu and English/Africaans speaking people in South Africa; Hebrew and Arabic speaking people in Israel; Turkish and Slavic speaking people in Bulgaria; or on the global scene, Russians and Americans in any opportunity of meeting. They share the land but not an understanding of the way the other experiences it. They wish to understand each other better. Of course, the wish must be there. It cannot be forced. The wish and the faith have to become practical experiences of understanding in order to become a reality of meeting.

Whatever the two languages involved, two words, one from each, can be chosen, designating the same natural or human phenomena. Then all the sounds contained in these two words can be experimented with as single sounds, in the ways that Philophonetics provides. The experiences of the single sounds will be simply human, personal and universal at the same time: Sensing the sounds, listening to their echo in your body and in your soul; expressing your experience in gesture and movement; trying to behave as the sound does in space; trying to enact the process of producing it. You speak and listen to it and so on. All the while, you share your experiences with your friends, who do the same process. A common experience of sound, in an experiential, rather than intellectual atmosphere, prevails in the space between you.

Then, from the abundance of these experiences, you start together to re- create the combination of these sounds into the two different words, of the two languages, from which you started. But now you don't simply understand these combinations of sounds to point to the same phenomena intellectually as a dictionary shows. Now, having experienced the depth of personal- and at the same time, universal- meaning of each sound, the word will reveal a surprising richness through its very structure: not only what it means will be shown, but also how it means it, what is the point of view on that phenomenon taken by each language and why. By coming to the different words again from the now established background of the shared experiences of their single sounds, the differences between the two words are profoundly understood, from the inside. Then it may dawn on you that the two words are not substitutes of each other, in the designation of the same object, but rather two different aspects of the same, shedding their light on each other and enriching the experience of that object.

From this experience, it may dawn on the participants, natives of different cultures, that the same maybe the case with the rest of the differences between their cultures. What was perceived to be a conflict of differences may be seen in this light as a mutual enrichment,

which any profound diversity may become once understood. I have tried to describe, in this form, the potential which Philophonetics, as a way of working with the sounds of language, has for the deepening of understanding between different cultures.

Philophonetics has its origin in a world view in which the right direction of development for human civilisation is that of a growing universal understanding and shared responsibility between nations and cultures, cultivated through the free striving of individuals. May this work do good service for that development and may it reach to those who are able to make good use of it.