ANGELIC LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

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In his classic essay on the task of the translator, Walter Benjamin advances the claim that the ability to render a text into another language presupposes a “language of truth,” which Benjamin takes to be the foundation underlying all particular tongues.¹ On Benjamin’s telling, the translator bases his work on this “true language,” from whose peak he surveys the surrounding “forest” of languages, all of which can be traced back to it.² If we were looking for a contemporary parallel to Benjamin’s postulate of a purely mental language, assumed to be the functional matrix and the underlying structure of all spoken languages (Benjamin himself would have spoken here of the *lingua adamsica*), we could perhaps think of something like Jerry Fodor’s proposal of a “language of thought.”³ In the Late Medieval philosophy of language, the effort to get a definite handle on these sorts of pre-conditions of every real language became an important field of research—not, however, within the purview of the theory of language proper but, rather, within the domain of angelology. What is the mode of communication among those purely spiritual substances, known to Christian theology as “angels,” who are not dependent upon any sort of corporeal speech-organ and can converse independently of space and without relying on any sort of media? If we remove from the picture all the organic properties that characterize actual human language in the sensible world, such as sounds, written signs, and forms of articulation,


This chapter builds in part on the initial chapters of my habilitation thesis: *Locutio angelica: Die Diskussion der Engelsprache als Antizipation einer Sprechakttheorie in Mittelelter und Früher Neuzeit* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008). For the purposes of the present publication, the material has been revised and given a more up-to-date bibliography.

² Benjamin, “The Translator’s Task,” 159.

what is the substrate—the pure language with its pure speech-acts\(^4\)—that remains as the irreducible basis of all spoken utterances? What defines the core of communication \textit{per se}?\n
In a similar vein, contemporary experimental linguistics seeks to lay bare the development of grammar and the genesis of syntactic structures through computer simulation techniques and the construction of fictional speech-situations untouched by any outside influences. Within this sort of experimental framework, an ideal group of individuals sharing a pre-defined set of meanings can be used to demonstrate how languages develop and how they adapt in ever more complex ways to the needs of their respective speakers.\(^5\) Late Medieval Scholasticism, for its part, had ready to hand an analogous kind of experimental “laboratory”: the linguistic community formed by the angels, that is, by those non-human, yet rational, individuals who have no need for any of the instruments of communication that are indispensable to humans. This “laboratory” made it possible, in turn, for medieval thinkers to discuss a whole range of questions having to do with the speech-act in its purity and, therefore, with the essential characteristics of communication as such. The answers to these questions could then be used to shed light on the nature of human speech. True, the presuppositions and interests of Late Medieval angelology were largely of a theological character that would be foreign to much of the contemporary discussion about language. Nevertheless, the Late Medieval debates about angelic speech offer much that is of philosophical interest and relevance even today. So, what were the issues that preoccupied the Late Medievals in this context?

The first point requiring clarification was whether perfect individuals even need to communicate in the first place. Supposing, though, that there \textit{was} still a point to communication among members of an ideal community possessed of a virtually perfect degree of knowledge, the Scholastics next

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\(^4\) In what follows, I will be employing the term “speech act” in a very broad sense to describe any performance of rational communication. Given the topic under investigation, it is natural that “speech act” should refer chiefly to the performance of communication among pure spirits, which is supposed to occur without any sort of dependence on bodily media and instruments. This term is not to be confused with “speech-act” in the narrow technical sense given it by John Searle and J. L. Austin.