

Weaving Voices Article (Feb-July 2000)

Contributions of the Members of the C. G. Jung Society of Sydney

We are always on the lookout for material for Weaving Voices. If you would like to submit an article of 1700 words or suggest something, please contact one of the committee members.

The Language We Are

AN ESSAY BY KEITH SMITH

**The heavens declare the glory of God;
The skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
Night after night they display knowledge.
There is no speech or language
Where their voice is not heard.
Their voice goes out into all the earth,
Their words to the ends of the world.**

Psalm 19:1-4 (NIV)

(all un-referenced quotes below are from *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*)

Does language have psyche? Is there a psyche of language? Are the varieties of English, French, Chinese, Aboriginal, etc, languages multiple expressions of that consciousness? Does language have a mind of its own? Can we say that a language speaks us, rather than we it; that it lives us, lives itself through us? All languages have a story to tell. And I believe this story is our story, a story about ourselves.

In my reading of Jung, I have yet to come across (or have failed to recollect) any of his observations on his experiences as a language learner, apart from the pithy “in the German class I was rather mediocre, for the subject matter, especially German grammar and syntax, did not interest me at all”. Yet here was a man who, in addition to his mother tongue (and presumably Swiss German dialect), was able to assimilate a vast linguistic knowledge into his Germanic consciousness.

He had known his first foreign language, Latin, since he was six and I find it thought-provoking to note that it was only by throwing himself into his Latin grammar studies that he was at all able to break the neurotic attacks of fainting spells that afflicted him as a child. Is it too far-fetched to consider that the transformative and generative processes of grammar, the meta-message within all languages, expressed something of those self-same dynamics that characterise the self and thus assisted in activating a strengthening and stabilizing of his fragile ego? Or shall we just deride the nature of his studies as a suitable obdurate wall against which to bang some commonsense back into his head?

Jung was to undergo the distillatory process of language learning again and again in his life, with English, French, Greek, Swahili – and who knows what else (and as a consequence so have some of the rest of us in order to decipher those archaic fragments he liberally sprinkles his collected works with!). Clearly he esteems language very highly, although he wrote off his father’s PhD (“He had studied Oriental languages in Gottingen and had done his dissertation on the Arabic version of

the Dong of Songs”) with the dismissive “but he was merely a philologist and linguist”. However, Dr Jung Snr might have got his own back if he could only have seen his son in later life struggling to make himself intelligible with the “ample use of a small dictionary” on the African continent.

Now imagine the challenge I would feel if, in my capacity as a teacher of EFL (English as a Foreign Language), I were to find on Monday morning a young or not so young Carl Jung sitting somewhat warily in my class, his small Swahili dictionary traded in for a massive spankingly-new German-English one; the man whose autobiography had been my introduction to the language I had always longed to hear but didn't know existed. How could his profound knowledge of the psyche help me to teach him the true nature of that “:lead (which) is possessed of a demon that drives men mad”? (C. G. Jung CW 13 Alchemical Studies, par 430) That's right, grammar!

Together we might first try to conceive that “this stone is below thee, as to obedience; above thee, as to dominion; therefore from thee, as to knowledge; about thee, as to equals.” And to include within Jung's application of this passage to the self the grammar of the language we find ourselves to be, and want to be when we seek to learn a new language.” This would mean; ‘the self is subordinate to you, yet on the other hand rules you. It is dependent on your own efforts and your knowledge, but transcends you and embraces all those who are of like mind.’

Might he recognise amongst his “numerous parallels from other fields of study” the language and grammar he was studying as also embodying the “unconscious archetypal assumptions, which also underlie other domains of human thought”?

I have come to believe that there is a “symbolic aspect” to grammar, and that such an awareness is a pre-eminently practical one. As Jung again writes, “This does not mean that the adept ceased to work in the laboratory, only that he kept an eye on the symbolic aspect of his transmutations.” The vicissitudes of the classroom are not turned in for some abstract pursuit, but as the teacher keeps working with the ordinary matter of language, we are also to seek to acknowledge the Mercurius within that “the nature of the archetype may be permitted to “Glimmer through”, for he is the “Inventor of the words of the tongue – guardian of the many-sounding tongue.”

The etymology of words has undoubtedly yielded rich deposits of insight, but the patterning dynamics of language as expressed through its grammar have not been recognised in Jungian circles, and yet language has been described as the most quintessential human attribute.

I have come to believe that grammar is ripe for Jungian interpretation. If “our linguistic system is inextricably interwoven with the rest of our physical and cognitive selves” (Eve E. Sweetner, From *Etymology to Pragmatics: Metaphorical and Cultural Aspects of Semantic Structure*) a Jungian approach would affirm language as an interface that resides within an organic and holistic conception of our Physio-psychic nature. The fruits of such an exploration would not only reward the analyst with a more sensitive use of language, but act to redeem Mercurius from the leaden prison we all too often make of the grammar of the language we are.