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Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy Of Language

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Abstract

In this article I reconstruct Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of language and refine the non-predicational view of meaning often attributed to him. By situating his 1916 essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” within the context of his struggle with Russell’s paradox and its implications for phenomenology, I show how Benjamin arrives at his conception of non-conceptual content as an environmentally embedded affordance that is directly apprehended by appropriately situated and capable agents. This affordance-like character of meaning explains Benjamin’s account of communication, Adamic naming, and his famous distinction between linguistic and spiritual essences (sprachliche- and geistige Wesen). I conclude by showing why translation is central to his views on expression and communication, and how it reinforces his account of language-use.

Commentators generally agree that Walter Benjamin develops an explicitly non-discursive account of meaning, language use, and expression,¹ which functions as a cipher for the rest of his work. Uwe Steiner, for instance, claims that “the true significance of Benjamin’s philosophy of language is discernible not so much as the theme of his writings but as their foundation” (Steiner 2010, 42). Despite the consensus on its importance, what Benjamin’s philosophy of language amounts to remains obscure. Various interpretations have been proposed. For instance, Winfried Menninghaus (1980) sees Benjamin as developing a conception of language similar to the one offered by Russian formalists (who distinguished between the referential and poetic uses of language). Kai Rolker (2002), on the other hand, aligns Benjamin’s theory of naming with Kripke’s theory of designation. Finally, Margarete Kohlenbach (2002) takes a much less sympathetic tack, arguing that Benjamin fails to give us anything like a coherent philosophy of
language (or, indeed, any kind of coherent philosophical position at all – a sentiment she shares with Witte [1983]). Here I will propose a different reading. As I will show, Benjamin’s philosophy of language comes astonishingly close to contemporary affordance theories of meaning, with which it shares a view of meaning as a relational and agent-relative feature of an environment that can be apprehended directly – i.e. without discursive mediation. On this view, language use is an enactive process of meaning creation, which affords an appropriately situated and capable agent specific potentials for further action.

Of course, as most seasoned readers of Benjamin know, the actual stakes and consequences of his endeavours rarely appear on the surface of his texts, or as his most proximal object of concern. His work generally abounds in MacGuffins. Consequently, nowhere will we find him explicitly claiming that he is developing an affordance-like theory of meaning and language use. Nevertheless, I believe that the philosophical coherence of Benjamin’s efforts hinge on precisely this gambit, which only comes into view when we go back – as I do here – to the early fragments associated with his famous 1916 essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” (GS II.1: 140-157/ SW 1: 62-74). These fragments are youthful and generally unsuccessful attempts to wrestle with a very specific problem affecting phenomenology and mathematical logic: reflexive relations. As is well known, unchecked reflexivity generates bad regresses or paradoxes. Benjamin takes up such consequences of reflexivity for logic and phenomenology in a handful of fragments written around the same time as his Language-essay, such as ‘Das Urteil der Bezeichnung’ (GS VI: 9-11) and ‘Lösungsversuch des Russellschen Paradoxons’ (GS VI: 11), where he tries to eliminate reflexive predication and dissolve Russell’s paradox by introducing a hierarchy of expression types. Then, in a short response paper entitled ‘Eidos und Begriff’ (GS VI: 29-31), Benjamin criticizes the unorthodox Husserlian P.F. Linke’s account of ‘givenness’ on the grounds that – Linke’s protestations to the contrary notwithstanding – phenomenological reflection entails conceptual mediation. Conceptual mediation, in turn, generates an indefinite regress of concepts and essences.
Benjamin’s approach to Russell-style paradoxes thus generates a problem for (Linke’s) phenomenology: a hierarchy of expressive types makes it impossible to claim that what is given at one level of experience or analysis is identical to what is given at another. Benjamin’s philosophy of language hinges on this realization. As I will show, it clarifies the roles played by concepts like translation and the paired notions of linguistic and spiritual essence (sprachliche- and geistige Wesen), which Benjamin introduces in an attempt to synthesize his views on language, mathematics, and phenomenology in “On language as Such and on the Language of Man.” The result is a theory of non-discursive content that grounds discursively-structured experience. In it, Benjamin reaffirms his doctrine of linguistic types in which conceptual mediation depends on immediately meaningful environmental immersion, not the other way round.

1. The Roots of Benjamin’s Philosophy of Language

It is never remarked enough in the literature that “On Language as Such” is not a conventional essay. Shown only to his closest friends and unpublished in his lifetime, Benjamin’s piece began life as a letter to Scholem. Benjamin penned it in an effort to answer a series of questions Scholem had posed to him concerning the relationship among mathematics, language, and thought (GS II.1: 931). After 18 pages, Benjamin abandoned it, conceding that “my thoughts on these infinitely difficult themes still remain largely unfinished” (ibid.). Given the contingencies of its composition, it is safe to say that the Language-essay is not—nor ever pretended to be—a self-contained piece of academic prose. This point is worth underscoring, as it forecloses any attempt to treat the essay in isolation or as a stand-alone academic piece aiming to justify a clearly stated thesis. A significant amount of rational and historical reconstruction is required to understand it.

Though rarely discussed, Benjamin’s struggle with Russell’s paradox is the central piece of this historical and philosophical puzzle. In the two fragments mentioned above, written sometime between 1915 and 1916, Benjamin argues that Russell-style paradoxes fuse together three logically distinct forms of expression, which he labels ‘judgments of reference’ (Urteile der
Bezeichnung), ‘predications,’ and ‘judgments of meaning’ (Urteile der Bedeutung) (GS VI: 9). These judgment forms imply a hierarchy of expression-types – not dissimilar to Aquinas’ metaphysical hierarchies – in which judgments of reference individuate and name objects, predicative expressions make claims about them, and judgments of meaning analyze predicative expressions.

With this hierarchy Benjamin aims to define out of existence the kind of reflexive relations central to Russell-style paradoxes. He begins with an example of a judgment of reference: “Let a refer to (bezeichnet) the side BC of a triangle” (GS VI: 9). What the stipulative definition illustrates, on Benjamin’s account, is that the logical subject of a judgment of reference has no proper or intrinsic meaning (eigentliche Bedeutung) of its own. It denotes without connotation. The constant a “means (bedeutet) a verbally and graphically fixable complex, [and] not the first letter of the alphabet” (ibid.). That is, the sign ‘a’ is not an object in its own right (like, say, the first letter of the Latin alphabet) and the judgment of reference does not attribute any meaning to it. Rather, this judgment picks out an object (i.e. the side BC of a triangle) ostensively in a specific context. Were reference not indexed to a specific context in this way, Benjamin reasons, we could not make sense of the fact that one and the same constant can pick out different objects on different occasions or in different contexts of use (ibid.), and hence can be analyzed differently. Benjamin takes the ostensive character of judgments of reference to sufficiently distinguish them from predicative expressions, since predicative expressions have a sense and express truth-apt claims. This difference, he concludes, means that that ‘reference’ is not a predicate and that reference cannot be established by predication (ibid.).

Moreover, if judgments of reference pick out objects ostensively without attributing any intrinsic meaning to the referring sign, and predicative expressions attribute specific properties to a referent, then judgments of meaning explicate the proper meanings of such attributions. “Logical analysis therefore begins with judgments of meaning” (GS VI: 10), for “the essential logical form of judgment does not come to the surface in the formulation ‘it is true that …’ but emerges from the latter’s transformation into a judgment of meaning: ‘<S is P> means [bedeuten]
that S is P’’’ (ibid.). The move from predicative expressions to judgments of meaning thus involves some kind of semantic ascent. Two things are to be noted here: first, that Benjamin’s hierarchy of referring, predicating, and explicating expressions maps fairly well the differences one finds in formal languages. We are used to stipulatively defining logical primitives (say, ‘→’), forming expressions with them (e.g. ‘c→b’), and then interpreting and clarifying these expressions in a metalanguage (e.g. “when interpreted truth-functionally, ‘c materially implies b’ is true unless the values assigned to ‘c’ and ‘b’ are 0 and 1 respectively”). Secondly, we begin to understand why Benjamin thinks that his hierarchy dissolves Russell’s paradox. Since each level is asymmetrically related to the next one, it becomes impossible to even formulate something like Russell’s paradox. To see that, let us take one version of it involving predication, where Russell stipulatively defines a predicate ‘is impredicable.’ He then takes ‘is impredicable’ to define an object (i.e. class-concept) and asks whether this object has certain properties – among them the one denoted by ‘is impredicable.’ Hence the paradox: in at least one instance (namely itself), ‘is impredicable’ applies to an object when it does not apply, and does not apply when it applies. For a more intuitive version, consider Russell’s discussion of the Barber paradox in his Philosophy of Logical Atomism (1972, 100f). If we define ‘barber’ as “one who shaves all those, and only those, who do not shave themselves” (101), and ask whether the Barber shaves himself, we can generate something similar to Russell’s paradox: the Barber must shave himself only if he does not, and cannot shave himself if in fact he does! Benjamin’s hierarchy of expression types promises to avoid this kind of semantic paradox by blocking the reflexive application of predicates to themselves (as a direct consequence of the asymmetrical relationship among types). On Benjamin’s account, the graphic sign ‘is impredicable’ is first defined by a judgment of reference, which picks out a property pragmatically without having any intrinsic properties of its own. The graphic complex ‘is impredicable’ merely names a unary property and does not instantiate it. The predicate may then be used as part of a formal language to form predicative expressions, for whose analysis one must ascend semantically to judgments of meaning. If judgments of
reference, predicative expressions, and judgments of meaning are logically distinct, it simply makes no sense to ask whether a referring expression has a property that includes it within its own extension. The very question involves a category error.

Of course, Benjamin’s proposed solution to Russell’s paradox fails. The failure is evident from the fact that Benjamin seems to treat all stipulative definitions as ostensive, and talks only about expressions containing constants and not about ones containing (free) variables. Indeed, as Russell himself pointed out (see Russell 1903, 102-104), the paradox does not hinge on any inherent problem with predicates – reflexive or otherwise – per se, but on the supposition that class membership can be defined by unary predicates ranging over free variables (as in, e.g., naïve set-theory’s comprehension axiom). The paradox stems from an ambiguity in quantification (i.e. a problem of specifying a function’s domain), which allows a propositional function to define set- or class-membership and to take itself as an argument. Although Benjamin’s proposal to distinguish among logical types of expression intuitively identifies the problem, it fails to address its source, just as it fails to show that Russell had overlooked anything (as Benjamin insists [GS VI: 9]).

Still, a hierarchy of expression-types proves to be fundamental for Benjamin’s evolving conception of language. Benjamin refines this hierarchy in his short response-paper from 1916, entitled “Eidos and Concept.” In this piece (also unpublished in his lifetime), Benjamin criticizes the Husserlian phenomenologist P.F. Linke’s theory of givenness, because his ‘phenomenological reflection’ entails its own hierarchy of types, where lower levels exemplify higher levels. Benjamin objects to Linke’s approach by pointing out that the exemplary nature of the connection among strata of reflection contradicts Linke’s own claim that “eidetic objects [Gegenstände] are immediately given” (GS VI: 29). On Benjamin’s view, Linke fails to distinguish sufficiently and without question begging among a concrete particular, its concept, its essence, and the concept of its essence. Once properly distinguished, however, these strata generate a regress.
Benjamin’s criticisms take advantage of his doctrine of expressive types to distinguish a particular thing from its essence and explain how both particular and essence can be independent from the concepts we use to identify them. This requires Benjamin to revisit the ostensive character of judgments of reference and introduce – rather ham-fistedly – an *indexical* theory of conceptual content, which rests on two fundamental claims. First, concepts are only meaningful in virtue of their connection to a contingent situation that they cannot, however, refer to. Second, concepts remain nevertheless necessary, because they help individuate entities and therefore cannot be dispensed with entirely. These commitments lead Benjamin to treat concepts as contextually bound *names*, and the relationship among concept, essence and thing as pragmatic – hence, contingent, practical, and situational – rather than simply descriptive or representational. This in turn allows Benjamin to differentiate between two essences (of things and concepts) by appealing to the pragmatic differences in their contextual uses.

The crux of Benjamin’s criticism of Linke lies in problematizing the connection among the strata of experience and reflection. For the phenomenologist needs some kind of symmetric relation between experience and reflection to move among these strata unproblematically. Benjamin argues that no such relation obtains. If content is indexical, and reflection nests one content in a different practice or context, then reflection triggers a semantic transformation. And such a transformation would spell the end of any kind of reflexive relationship. Linke is therefore wrong to think that what is given in phenomenological reflection is identical to what is given in first-order experience, because the performances involved in these distinctive activities (and associated contexts) make different contributions, and therefore produce different meanings, essences, etc. Benjamin’s main objection to Linke, then, is that phenomenology differentiates a first order practice from higher levels of generality, while maintaining that what is given at each successive level is somehow internal to (and extensionally equivalent with) each antecedent one. But this, Benjamin argues, is absurd.
To make the case, Benjamin sets out to develop a conception of indexical content. He begins by insisting that, “one may not under any circumstance take there to be an equivalence with regards to content between concept and essence” (GS VI: 31). They “both can refer to (bezeichnet) the same thing. But if I were to say that a word refers to the thing’s concept my claim would signify something toto genere different than if I were to say that it refers to the thing’s essence” (ibid., emph. added). The point here is that concepts and essences differ from one another in virtue of the practical features involved in their manner of referring to individuals. Such practical differences in turn imply context specificity. He draws out this conclusion by appealing to the distinctive spatiotemporal features of the terms ‘concept’ and ‘essence,’ which “in themselves” and “essentially” are “timeless” (GS VI: 30). Yet, as Benjamin notes in taking up Linke’s example, “it belongs to the concept of this ink blotter that it exists at this point in real time and in real space; in other words, singular actuality is essential for the concept, but is simply immaterial for the essence” (GS VI: 30). Benjamin attempts to clarify this further:

The concept too is based on its one object; it is simply a concept ‘of’ this object – and even when this its object is a singularly actual one, it can also be a concept of this singular actuality. But the eidos of a singularly actual object is never also the eidos of the singular actuality thereof.

_Auch der Begriff ist auf seinen einen Gegenstand gegründet, er ist einfach Begriff ›von‹ diesem Gegenstande – und er kann sogar wenn dieser sein Gegenstand ein singulär-tatsächlicher ist, Begriff auch von diesem singulär-tatsächlichen sein. Ein Eidos aber von einem singulär-tatsächlichen Gegenstand ist niemals Eidos auch des Singulär-tatsächlichen daran._

(GS VI: 31)

By attending to the genitival constructions at work in this passage we can get a sense of how Benjamin delimits the pragmatic features of concept from those of essence. The play of genitives indicates a staggered relation among object, object’s essence, the concept of the object, and the concept’s essence. The staggering of things, essences of things, concepts, and the essences of concepts, moreover, marks the fundamentally different roles these objects (in the widest sense of the term) play in our cognitive lives.
The difference between the ‘singularly actual object’ (*der singulär-tatsächliche Gegenstand*) and the ‘singular actuality’ (*das Singulär-tatsächliche*) that is not ‘the same’ as this object but is nevertheless intimately connected with it proves to be decisive for Benjamin. Although concepts are by definition abstract (atemporal and non-spatial), their content never is. Because their content is bound up with a contextualized practice, it crucially remains connected to the (spatiotemporal) situations in which it is expressed. Benjamin’s ‘singular actuality’ (*das Singulär-tatsächliche*) thus *serves to spell out the concept’s content indexically*. And this pragmatically inflected account of content entails a theory of dual, non-coincident essences, i.e. an essence of a singularly actual object (which we never truly grasp), and the essence of that object’s individuating concept, its singular actuality.

Considered pragmatically, Linke’s phenomenology thus begs the question. It elides the differences among experiential content, the essential referential structure of individuating concepts, and the essences of the objects themselves in order to assume that objects are eidetically given. However, a concept is not only ‘of’ the object but also the very means by which this object – *its* object, as Benjamin insists – is individualized, singled out in the here and now of a cognitive encounter. Hence, the concept ‘of’ a singularly actual object – say, an ink blotter – is then also the concept of *this specific* ink blotter considered as a ‘singular actuality’. We can therefore consider concepts in two distinct and divergent ways: in terms of their actual contributions to a specific (spatiotemporal) situation where they name or refer to concrete individuals, or in terms of their abstract structure, which we can analyze according to the abstract structure’s intrinsic meaning. But this means that between actual concept-use and our reflection on it falls the shadow: there is no givenness, and no straightforward connection between the two.

2. **Before Words and Things: Adamic Naming**

As we have just seen, Benjamin’s first step in formulating his philosophy of language was to introduce a typology of expression based on the pragmatic differences between reference fixation and meaning attribution, with a view to barring reflexive relations. We then saw him expand this
approach in ‘Eidos und Begriff’ to introduce a twofold notion of essence and an indexical theory of conceptual content. Both features entailed non-symmetry among expressive types. His next step takes place in “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” where he tries to specify this non-symmetric relation among expression types by folding his theory of content into a theory of language use. This yields a metaphysics of communication in which the non-coincidence of essences is further refined into a distinction between linguistic and spiritual essences (sprachliche and geistige Wesen), while the relation among concepts and essences is articulated in terms of translation. Benjamin’s ‘language as such’ articulates a notion of contextualized participation with situated entities that is tantamount to an affordance theory of meaning.

The idea of affordances has received a great deal of attention in the last decade, but perhaps a brief overview would not be redundant. The ecological psychologist J.J. Gibson first introduced the concept in his 1977 paper “The Theory of Affordances,” to designate the meaningful latencies of an environment for an actor (human or not), i.e. the positive or negative possibilities for action that the entities of an ecological niche afford an agent. These action potentials, moreover, are relational in nature. They are not unary properties of specific entities, but express or manifest themselves only in the right kind of environment and only to suitably sensitive agents who are engaged in particular activities. “The different substances of the environment have different affordances for nutrition and for manufacture. The different objects of the environment have different affordances for manipulation. The other animals afford […] a rich and complex set of interactions, sexual, predatory, nurturing, fighting, playing, cooperating, and communicating. What other persons afford comprises the whole realm of social significance for human beings” (Gibson 128).

Even on this minimal characterization, Benjamin’s spiritual essence (geistige Wesen) appears to behave like an affordance: for, when he earnestly asks, “to whom does the lamp communicate itself?” (GS II.1: 143/SW I: 64), and answers, “to man” (ibid.), Benjamin satisfies the most general feature of Gibson’s model, namely that the action possibilities inherent in the
environment are manifest relative to the action capabilities of an actor. Yet the affinity between
Gibson’s affordance and Benjamin’s geistige Wesen runs even deeper. For, as others have noted,
“The crucial empirical hypothesis of ecological psychology is that [...] affordances constitute [...] ecological meanings or values,” and “that meanings/values are perceivable” (Scarantino 953). And though there are several competing ways to make good on this hypothesis,¹⁰ every affordance theory is committed to the idea that a value or a meaning is a contextual and organism-relative feature of an environment that designates an opportunity for the exercise of a specific capacity or potential. An affordance is therefore intrinsic to an organism’s ecological niche, and directly perceivable by or manifest to this organism. A theory of direct perception (i.e. the view that meaning is not mediated by conceptual or inferential activity) is thus usually par for the course in affordance theories, and entails in turn a realist, albeit non-physicalist ontology. For in “direct theories of perception,” as Chemero points out,¹¹ “meaning is in the environment, and perception does not depend on meaning-conferring inferences. Instead the animal simply gathers information from a meaning laden environment. The environment is meaning laden in that it contains affordances, and affordances are meaningful to animals. But if the environment contains meanings, then it cannot be merely physical” (Chemero 135).

Benjamin’s position in “Über Sprache überhaupt” shares these commitments. Consider, for instance, Adamic naming: as a direct or non-mediated communicative encounter, Adamic naming “completes creation” (GS II.1: 144/ SW 1: 65), instantiating a complementary relationship between things and the human being relative to a paradisiacal – counterfactual – environment, which frames our potentials to act and flourish. In effect, this complementary relation is simply the expression of meaning as a concrete action potential in an environment. Benjamin’s theory of communication is therefore a theory of affordances avant la lettre, which hinges on the intensive infinitudes introduced in “Eidos and Concept,” interpreted now in terms of the intensively infinite structures of individual languages and their interactions. The singularly actual entity
becomes a linguistic essence, while its singular actuality – the specific action potentials it affords an agent – now names its spiritual essence.

This categorial translation makes it possible for Benjamin’s to treat ‘communication’ as a form of direct apprehension – or perception – satisfying an affordance theory’s commitments. Indeed, “On Language as Such” does just that, and from the very beginning. Thus, what Benjamin calls a spiritual essence – a meaning – expresses itself relative to an agent, an entity, and a communicative context or medium: “in this terminology every expression counts as language insofar as it communicates a spiritual content” (GS II.1: 141/ SW 1: 62-63). Moreover, “this communicable is directly language itself. Or: the language of a spiritual essence is directly that which, in it, is communicable. […] Or, more precisely, each language communicates itself in itself; it is in the purest sense the ‘medium’ of communication. Mediality, which is the immediacy of all spiritual communication, is the founding problem of the philosophy of language” (GS II.1: 142/ SW 1: 64).

Although characteristically opaque, Benjamin’s remarks are noteworthy for at least three reasons. First, we find him insisting that meanings – ‘spiritual content’ – are not mediated by discursive structures or unilaterally conferred upon objects of experience by a cognizing subject. Hence, they must be constituents of a given context and directly apprehended, for otherwise we would not be able to make sense of Benjamin’s repeated claims that the communication of spiritual contents is direct or immediate. Second, since Benjamin also insists that the expression of meaning or spiritual content hinges on a relational feature or property, namely its communicability (more on Benjamin’s penchant for ‘–abilities’ below), he is committed to the view that meaning expresses itself only within a context and only to an appropriately situated and capable agent. In brief, spiritual content affords some kind of action potential: “The spiritual essence is identical to the linguistic one only insofar as it is communicable” (GS II.1: 142/ SW 1:
Third, given the relational character of meaning, it also follows that all expression is context- or medium-relative and that this medium-relativity needs to be spelled out.  

Benjamin’s notions of communication [Mitteilung] and spiritual essence thus exhibit the commitments of an affordance theory, in that they entail a realist but non-physicalist theory of meaning, an indexical theory of content, and a direct, non-reflective account of meaning apprehension. In short, Benjamin’s emerging conception of language implicates environmentally situated entities, Adamic namers, and spiritual essences in an ephemeral moment of mutual fulfillment (the communicative act of naming), which makes manifest a specific set of possibilities for practical action within a given context.

Benjamin’s own argument for these claims is indirect, relying on a structural homology: the relationship obtaining between the infinite number of conceptual forms and the singular, intensively infinite historical individual they present or communicate, is identical to the relationship between the infinitude of expressions of a language and the language itself. We can reconstruct this analogy by juxtaposing Benjamin’s two examples:

The German language, for example, is by no means the expression of everything that we could – theoretically – express through it, but is the direct expression of that which communicates itself in it. This ‘itself’ is a spiritual essence.

\( \text{(GS II.1: 141/ SW 1: 63)} \)

And,

The language of this lamp, for example, communicates not the lamp (for the spiritual essence of the lamp, insofar as it is communicable is by no means the lamp itself) but the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression. For in language, this is the situation: the linguistic essence of all things is their language.

\( \text{(GS II.1: 142/ SW 1: 63)} \)

Benjamin’s first example illustrates the difference between an intensively infinite entity (here the German language) and each of its adumbrations (what one can say ‘through’ it), but also shows that the essence of the German language as a whole (what it affords a speaker) remains available in each individual German sentence as that language’s spiritual essence. The essence of German, we
might say, is in its use – and no two speakers use it the same way. Benjamin’s second example makes the same point at the level of ontological discourse. For in precisely the same way that we do not – cannot – encounter the whole of the German language in a single turn of phrase, the limited compass of an ephemeral experience does not subtend the entirety of an experienced object. We never encounter Benjamin’s lamp in its entirety, as a linguistic essence, but the very manner of our interaction thematizes its spiritual essence, since this latter ‘essence’ accounts for the possibilities and comportments we can countenance in relation to it. Insofar as we are licensed to speak of a lamp’s language, then, we can claim that this language never communicates its linguistic essence because we only encounter adumbrations of its intensive infinity. Nonetheless, as the outcome of our particular mode of communicating with this particular being, the very fact that anything of the lamp manifests at all is due to its spiritual essence. Benjamin’s ‘geistige Wesen’ thus identifies a set of abilities or affordances whose expression remains relative to the interactions and environment in which it is found. Synthetically rephrased, Benjamin’s ‘language as such’ is synonymous with an ontology of intensively structured singularities, a metaphysics of meaning, wherein the complex interactions among languages entail a distinction between the singular being (its sprachliche Wesen) and its expressive power relative to us (its geistige Wesen). This difference in turn is a function of our own intensively infinite language, and the modes of participation it makes possible.

If we understand his account of Adamic language in these terms, Benjamin’s enigmatic allusions to pre- and post-lapsarian human language begin to make sense as an ingenious account of the transition from identifying (naming) what a singularly actual object affords us to forming claims about it. Through the use of ideal types such as Adamic naming and pre-lapsarian language, this account thematizes the chasm that separates a ‘mimetic,’ ‘participatory,’ or causal-interactive process of affordance-identification and reference-fixation from the discursive process of judgment formation – and rejects the ascent, or leap required to bridge it.
3. Linguistic Communities & Translation

“On Language as Such” thus coordinates the distinctions Benjamin originally introduced in his efforts to dissolve Russell-style paradoxes and to criticize Linke. The result is an affordance-like – i.e. enactivist, expressive, response-relative – account of meaning in which one’s *immersion in* a given context and *participation with* similarly situated entities *creates* meaning. Benjamin calls this whole process *communication*. In its initial paradisiacal setting, which is best understood idealtypically, or counterfactually, Adam’s communicative encounter with creation culminates in the act of naming, which expresses *his* spiritual essence along with the spiritual essences of things. The expression of these essences completes creation, and communicates itself to God.

Of course, Benjamin’s account faces several difficulties. In the first instance, his theory of meaning seems to entail a radical (potentially self-defeating) semantic relativism. That is, since agents will never be identically situated and will never approach a situation the same way, it follows that they will not be privy to the same spiritual essence. Such a stance seems to imply a private language. Second, characterizing meaning in terms of directly apprehended potentials for action seems to be a partial story at best since it excludes the kind of meaning we are most familiar with – namely, conceptual or discursive. And one might wonder how non-conceptual and conceptual content are connected.

Benjamin’s response is simple and ingenious: he accepts semantic relativity, but mitigates its consequences by introducing the notion of *translation*, which allows him to refine the relational character of communication, emphasize the affordance-like nature of content, and show how incommensurable contents can be carried over into distinctive expressive media. Translation is important to Benjamin precisely because it is an *irreflexive, asymmetric* and *intransitive relation*, and thus embodies all of the features Benjamin had attributed to meaning and communication. It also gives us precise criteria for distinguishing Benjamin’s theory of language use from what he calls the ‘bourgeois’ philosophies of language.
Consider the uniqueness of ‘translation’: a literary work cannot be a translation of itself; in other words, a translation is always grounded by an original, and the translation of a literary work’s translation simply isn’t a translation of the original literary work. Translation, in short, always entails non-equivalence and difference between the original text and the translated one. Now, the very core of Benjamin’s theory of meaning is that all expression involves translation. If, after all, each intensively infinite thing is a language, there are as many languages as intensively infinite things. In Benjamin’s words, “there is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake in language, since it is essential [wesentlich] to each to communicate its spiritual content” (GS II.1: 140-141 / SW 1: 62). More explicitly, “the language of an entity [Wesen] is the medium in which it communicates its spiritual essence” (GS II.1: 157 / SW 1: 74). Benjamin’s theory of translation is thus an account of meaning genesis. Translation specifies the relations among meanings (GS II.1: 150-151 / SW 1: 69-70), while clarifying why propositional language so often devolves into chatter (GS II.1: 153 / SW 1: 71), that is, a kind of human communication that is symmetric and transitive (and hence also reflexive).

The real problem, then, for Benjamin is to explicate how ‘translation’ can connect the distinctive languages, or linguistic essences, and modes of communication to one another, without instantiating a reflexive, symmetric, or transitive relation. His first step is to reintroduce his typology of expressive types, and insist that communication is fundamentally asymmetric. An entity always communicates itself to another, and does not communicate to itself. As we saw, Benjamin introduces this idea early in the Language-essay, when he asks, “to whom does the lamp communicate itself?” (GS II.1: 143 / SW 1: 64), and answers “to man” (ibid.). Similarly, he insists that “in the name, Man’s spiritual essence communicates itself to God” (GS II.1: 144 / SW 1: 65). Finally, as anyone familiar with the story of Genesis will recall, all of creation springs from God’s language. Benjamin uses this asymmetry to define three distinctive communicative communities: “the material community” (stoffliche Gemeinschaft) of mute nature (GS II.1: 147 / SW 1: 67), the “purely spiritual community” of human speakers (ibid.), and God’s creative expression. Once we
group languages into communities, it becomes clear that communication is intransitive. Mute nature communicates its spiritual essences to man and man communicates to God, but what man communicates to God is not what nature communicates to man. Different spiritual essences are produced in these communicative events.

The asymmetric, irreflexive, and intransitive nature of communication explains why translation is central to Benjamin’s thinking: for not only is translation similarly asymmetric and irreflexive, but it also grants access to distinctive language-communities and reinforces the affordance-like character of meaning, thus mitigating the pernicious effects of semantic relativism. “Translation,” Benjamin writes, “is the transfer of one language to another [ist die Überführung der einen Sprache in die andere] through a continuum of transformations [Verwandlungen]. Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract areas of identity and similarity” (GS II.1: 151/ SW 1: 70; translation modified). Each translation thus generates new affordances by transforming what was ‘given’ in one language through an interaction with another. Indeed, the transformative nature of translation explains why Benjamin insists that there is no self-identical content that is carried over from one language to another, but rather that content is created or discovered in a new communicative setting. Translation is central for Benjamin’s philosophy of language, then, because it solves a problem we identified in the earlier fragments: it relates and gives access to the various strata of language use, while cultivating a typology of expression that hinges on an affordance-like – mimetic – account of meaning and language.

A very important associated concept in this regard is what Benjamin calls Übersetzbarkeit in “The Task of the Translator”:

The question concerning the translatability of a work is ambiguous. It can mean: will the work find its adequate translator amongst the totality of its readers? Or, more pertinently, does the essence of the work admit of translation and therefore – in keeping with the meaning of this form [i.e. translation] – also demand it? […] Only superficial thinking, by denying the independent meaning of the latter question, will declare both to be of equal significance. Contra such thinking, it should be noted that certain relational concepts retain their meaning, and possibly their strongest sense, when they are not from the outset used exclusively with reference to man. It should be possible, for instance, to speak of an unforgettable life or moment, even if all men have forgotten it. […] Hence the following claim holds: if translation is a form, then translatability must be essential to certain works.

(GS IV.1: 10/ SW 1: 254)
Benjamin’s characterization of ‘translatability’ (Übersetzbarkeit) is, with one word, dispositional: it is relational, context-dependent, and involves some kind of stimulus or interaction that makes a distinct phenomenon manifest. Some texts thus afford translation, and the normative or practical attitudes we hold with respect to these environmentally situated affordances allow us to better specify what Benjamin has in mind when he invokes ‘mimesis.’ Although a full reconstruction of Benjamin’s theory of mimetic comportment is well beyond the scope of the present article, it is possible to outline here briefly in what sense, like most of Benjamin’s work in general, it too is motivated by his sensitivity to the affordance-theoretic character of meaning. Such sensitivity explains why Benjamin favours the German suffix ‘-bar’ (and the associated nominalizing suffix ‘-barkeit’) over ‘-lich’: it is a consequence of his dispositional (rather than adverbal) account of meaning, which is the cornerstone of his concept of critique.

According to the 25th edition of Heyse’s Deutsche Grammatik, the -bar suffix expresses a possibility or potential inhering (passively, according to Heyse) in something, whereas the -lich suffix signifies an instance’s fitness to a categorial frame (249-250). Take for example, the words offenbar, fruchtbar, and denkbar, on the one hand, and rötlich, männlich, buchstäblich, on the other. The -bar composites all share a passive sense of possibility, which inheres in the object they modify: something is apparent (offenbar), but the revelatory process (Offenbarung) is distinct, independent of it, and obscure; something is thinkable (denkbar), but of indeterminate value or use, and something is fecund (fruchtbar) for another but not necessarily for itself; to say that someone is manly (männlich), however, is to say this person exemplifies the characteristics associated with ‘man,’ just as to call an interpretation literal (buchstäblich) is to say that it conforms to the objectively present rules governing grammar and literal meaning, and to tease a loved one for their ruddy (rötlich) complexion is to point out that their cheeks instantiate a particular type. In sum, the -bar suffix (as itself derivative of an old verb bären, ‘to bear, to carry’; see Heyse 249) suggests that a potential inheres in something, awaiting its actualization through a further contribution, or whose
actualization is conditional on such further contribution. By contrast, the -lich suffix “generally indicates agreement or compliance [Übereinstimmung], similar Gestalt, befitting quality [angemessene Beschaffenheit]” (250). Furthermore, when attached to kind-terms (Gattungsnamen) -lich “signifies the form and manner of an activity or state of affairs, and thus its meaning is adverbial in nature, e.g. künstlich, schriftlich, bildlich” (ibid.). These differences can be summed up as follows: while -lich presupposes an evaluative schema that its composita can instantiate or exemplify, -bar identifies a potential inhering in the denotatum, but remains silent about how one would actualize it, or what value or use this potential could serve. As Heyse’s contrastive characterization of the two Nachsilben shows, -lich relies on the notion of instance-kind fitness, whereas the passive potential of yet uncertain value associated with -bar identifies an affordance: a translatable text bears within itself a transformative potential (as yet unschematized) that can be made manifest. Thus, what may initially appear as a mere stylistic quirk in Benjamin – his ‘-abilities’ (to use Samuel Weber’s pun) – is justified in fact by an affordance-theory of meaning.

We can now clarify why Benjamin treats discursively structured characterizations of communication as chatter (GS II.1: 153/SW 1: 71). Chatter fails to translate in Benjamin’s sense, because it moves through a space of identity and similarity (fitness of instance to conceptual scheme), of equivalence classes and intensions. As Benjamin understands it, chatter is a consequence of the fall, which he presents in terms of the mediate character of discursively structured language and judgment. Freed from context, conceptual content takes on a different communicative orientation. Man no longer communicates to God, but to other people. Consequently, a judgment’s expressive realizability no longer hinges on the contextual interactions among the various communicative communities identified by Benjamin. Conceptual content is simply inserted into a communicative practice like a worm into the blood. Language becomes a system of signs, whose meanings hold by convention, and through which only abstract conceptual contents are communicated. In its fallen state, language ceases to be productive or
transformative, and begins to exhibit the reflexive, symmetric and transitive properties that bog down mathematics and phenomenology.

In light of the foregoing, it should be no surprise that Benjamin’s philosophy of language is foundational for the rest of his work: it formulates a truly novel theory of meaning and language-use as a kind of transformative environmental immersion, which in turn serves to ground his philosophy of experience and his concept of critique. All of Benjamin’s subsequent work modulates or varies these themes. His love of allegory and his notions of truth- and material-content are paradigmatic in this regard. He even conceives of art criticism and cultural critique as eminently productive venues precisely because they generate new meanings by transforming – translating – what is being communicated in (the language of) their ‘object’ into a series of potentials for a new community.

Benjamin’s philosophy of language thus promises a nuanced, unifying reconstruction of his oeuvre, which better accommodates the often noted turn from an ‘early,’ theological or Idealist phase to a ‘late,’ Marxist or materialist one. Formally, both periods subscribe to the same theory of language, but anchor it in different phenomena. In the early work, the identification of spiritual essences – i.e. the specification of a first-order, primitive level of expression – was merely counterfactual. Adamic naming and pre-lapsarian communication remained ideal-typical. Although these notions allowed Benjamin to bring into relief the putative deficits incurred by discursively structured language use, they remained unactualizable, free-floating constructs. They offered no concrete alternative, but only useful diagnostic tools. Benjamin’s biblically themed analysis in the Language-essay suggests this much, since there is no conceivable way for us to return to or achieve the kind of expressive comportment exemplified by Adamic communication. His later work aims to redress the problem by reinterpreting the formal features of his theory of meaning in materialist terms so as to anchor his critical categories in the world as live possibilities for social transformation. In later works like “The Doctrine of the Similar” (GS II.1: 204-210/ SW 3: 694-698) and “On the Mimetic Faculty” (GS II.1: 210-213/ SW 3: 720-722), Benjamin will
interpret his affordance-capability model of meaning and communication materially and anthropologically. But, in general, it would be fair to say that the so-called ‘Marxist turn’ in Benjamin’s thought is the result of an effort on his part to deepen and operationalize his concepts of meaning and communication for a truly transformative form of social criticism.


Notes


2 Benjamin explicitly makes this claim in “On the Program for the Coming Philosophy” (GS II.1: 158/ SW 1: 101).

3 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Benjamin’s GS will be mine.

4 In my estimation, Kohlenbach (2002) is particularly guilty of such decontextualization.

5 See Russell 1903, 101-107. For background on Russell’s paradox and an overview of responses to it, see Klement 2010 (Part I & II).

6 If Benjamin’s strategy involves logical types, then Peter Fenves is wrong to claim that Benjamin adopts the same strategy as his great uncle, Arthur Schönflies (Fenves 2011, 125ff). The latter’s solution is a version of the ‘no classes strategy’ (see Klement 2010, Part I). Fenves’ discussion of these early fragments thus founders on a misunderstanding of both the problem and Benjamin’s attempted solution. This in turn renders his reconstruction of Benjamin’s philosophy of language problematic.

7 So far as I am aware, Quine introduced ‘semantic ascent’ in Word and Object (1964) to identify “the shift from talk of miles to talk of ‘mile,’” or “from talking in certain terms to talking about them” (271). Benjamin makes precisely the same point in ‘Das Urteil der Bezeichnung.’

8 Importantly, the barber paradox is more of a riddle than a logical paradox, since it trades on an ambiguity between predication and definite description. It involves a faulty formalization, rather than a formal inconsistency. We can thus solve the riddle by removing the ambiguity or equivocation concerning the application of ‘barber’ to identify both a specific person and to define an occupation by better distinguishing between ‘barber’ as predicate (i.e as “one who shaves all those, and only those, who do not shave themselves” [101, emphasis added]) and ‘the barber’ as definite description, which picks out one unique individual. If “the barber” functions as a proper name, like ‘Carl,’ the semblance of paradox evaporates. When we say, “Carl is a barber” and ask “who shaves Carl?” we can now answer, “another barber” without fear of contradiction. For Russell’s discussion, see Russell 1972, 100ff. Benjamin’s own attempted solution, I should also point out, is remarkably similar to the one suggested here, and that explains why it is no solution at all: it simply misunderstands the stakes of Russell’s paradox.

9 Husserl’s mature phenomenology, it should be noted, does not succumb to this problem, which plagues only Linke’s presentation.

10 As Anthony Chemero has shown in his Radical Embodied Cognitive Science (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), there are three prominent accounts of affordances, namely resource models, body scale models, and finally dispositional accounts. (Chemero also offers his own – dynamical – model of affordance as a superior option to the traditional accounts.) What all three models have in common is the idea that an affordance is an organism-relative feature of an environmental niche that provides an opportunity for, and structures action. What these three (or four) theories disagree on is how to account for organism relativity. Resource models, for instance, interpret this feature in terms of natural selection such that ‘affordance’ can be understood as an objective feature of an environment to which an organism has adapted itself. Body scale theories typically
remain agnostic about the ontogenesis of affordances, choosing instead to show how the structure, form, and size of our physical bodies inform the ways we view and act in the world. Dispositional accounts remain the most neutral (or formal) theories, arguing that the manifestation of affordances is always relative to the ‘interactivity’ of properties distributed among environment, things, and organisms. This leads to the common affordance-effectivity pairing, which understands the organism-relativity of ‘affordance’ in terms of an organism’s contribution to the requisite circumstances and stimuli for the manifestation of a dispositional property. To my mind, the most compelling—or, at any rate, the most ‘Benjaminian’—general approach remains in fact the dispositional one, which treats the manifestation of an affordance as the outcome of a set of ambient environmental circumstances and the complementary relation of an organism’s capacities to a specific feature or set of properties of an object. On this issue, see Andrea Scarantino, “Affordances Explained,” *Philosophy of Science* 70.5 (2003): 949-961.

11 See Chemero Chapters 6 and 7.

12 As we will see, Benjamin introduces three linguistic communities, which are asymmetrically and intransitively related to one another; conjointly they constitute his notorious ‘Magic Circle’.

13 To preempt a misunderstanding, note that practical action is not synonymous with means-ends reasoning. To see why, recall Kant’s two springs of action in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*: when reflecting upon any action, we can consider the relationships it instantiates with others and the priorities it sets (i.e. categorically), or we can consider how it seeks to achieve its goals (i.e. hypothetically). Only the latter involves means-ends reasoning or instrumental calculation. Similarly, in Benjamin’s philosophy of language, contextual participation creates specific relations, expressing new and unique potentials that are constitutive of a given situation, agent, or community. However, as non-discursive and constitutive, these action potentials do not coincide with the instrumental calculation or purposive deliberation in which they may figure. They are pure means. Benjamin’s discussion of ‘violence’ in “On the Critique of Violence” hinges on precisely this understanding of expression and (collective) subject constitution.

14 If a relationship is asymmetric, it is also irreflexive, so no distinct proof is needed.

15 This is why Benjamin claims, in “The Task of the Translator,” that translation contributes to the afterlife of a work: for it finds something living in it (*GS* IV.1: 10-11/SW 1: 254). As we shall see shortly, the question concerning translatability, which opens the essay, turns on whether a work affords translation. Benjamin’s conception of truth-content in the essay on “Goethe’s Elective Affinities” works in precisely the same way.


17 Roughly corresponding to the English ‘-able’ and ‘-ly’, but with a great deal of overlap—especially for direct formations from verbs (e.g. Germ. *unbeschreiblich*, Eng. *indescribable*)—as well as contextual diversification (other English suffixes may serve to render either, or no suffix at all: e.g. Germ. *nützlich*, Eng. *useful*; Germ. *fruchtbar*, Eng. *fecund*). This by way of intimating the difficulty of translating Benjamin into English, a task that involves paying attention even to such minute aspects of the philosopher’s style.

Such adjectives – which result from the application of the suffix -bar to another adjective (here, offen) – are quite rare in German, but the possibility exists and I follow Heyse in highlighting it. In contrast, adjectival derivations directly from a verb are far more common: e.g. esbar, trinkbar, denkbar, schätzbar, genießbar, brauchbar, nutzbar, etc. The other frequent derivation possibility is from nouns, especially verbal nouns: fruchtbar, dankbar, dienstbar, furchtbar, kostbar, ehrbar, wunderbar, gangbar, etc. The passive connotation of -bar formations is more powerful and easy to spot in those adjectives formed directly from verbs (or verbal nouns), and they are the ones that Benjamin is usually drawn to (and the corresponding nominal formations with -barkeit: mitteilbar (communicable) and Mitteilbarkeit (communicability) in the Language-essay, übersetzbar (translatable) and Übersetzbarkeit (translatability) in the “Task of the Translator,” Reproduzierbarkeit (reproducibility) in the “Work of Art” essay, and so forth. Samuel Weber dedicated a whole book to Benjamin’s -abilities (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008), but failed to notice their affordance character. He overlooked the dispositional nature of Benjamin’s argument, relying instead on Derrida’s discussion of ‘iterability.’ Although illuminating, Weber’s account remained unfortunately at the grammatical level of Benjamin’s text.