The Unity of Word: Language in C.S. Lewis' Trilogy

Brian C. Bond

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Abstract
Discusses the theme of language in the Ransom trilogy. Notes Barfield’s theories of language and Lewis's apparent agreement with them.

Additional Keywords
Barfield, Owen—Influence on C.S. Lewis; Lewis, C.S.—Theory of language; Lewis, C.S. Space Trilogy—Language
The tower of Babel scene at the end of That Hideous Strength, which represents just one more victory for Logres in its long, unending war with Britain, is the climax not only of C.S. Lewis' Trilogy, but of the theme of language that is prominent throughout. It is a theme, as both Dabney Adams Hart and Richard B. Cunningham have pointed out, that is closely allied with Lewis' theory of myth. Because of the connection between myth and language, it seems best to discuss what Lewis has to say about the origin of language before we see what part it plays as one of the unifying factors in the trilogy.

Throughout his writings Lewis pays tribute to Owen Barfield. He dedicated his first scholarly work, The Allegory of Love, "To Owen Barfield: wisest and best of my unofficial teachers," and in Surprised by Joy, Lewis describes Barfield as a "Second Friend," or one "who shares your interests" but who "disagrees with you about everything." That this feeling was mutual is suggested by Barfield's dedication to Poetic Diction, published eight years before The Allegory of Love: "To C.S. Lewis, 'Opposition is true friendship'". In Poetic Diction, Barfield proposes a theory of language which Lewis wholeheartedly endorsed. The basis of Barfield's theory is that human experience was once a unity by which man immediately comprehended concrete reality. Language expressed what was immediately perceived; there was neither a place nor a need for metaphorical thought:

Men do not invent those mysterious relations between separate external objects, and between objects and feelings or ideas, which it is the function of poetry to reveal. These relations exist independently, not indeed of Thought, but of any individual thinker. And according to whether the footsteps are echoed in primitive language or, later on, in the made metaphors of poets, we hear them after a different fashion and for different reasons. The language of primitive man reports them as direct perceptual experience. The speaker has observed a unity, and is not therefore himself conscious of relation. But we, in the development of consciousness, have lost the power to see this one as one. Our sophistication, like Odin's, has cost us an eye; and now it is the language of poets, in so far as they create true metaphors, which must restore this unity conceptually, after it has been lost from perception.

Barfield goes on to discuss the two opposing principles in the development of consciousness: "Firstly, there is a force by which ... single meanings tend to split up into a number of separate and often isolated concepts." Secondly there is "the nature of language itself at its birth. It is the principle of living unity." In this second principle is the secret of the meaning of myth: "Mythology is the ghost of concrete meaning. Connections between discrete phenomena, connections which are now apprehended as metaphor, were once perceived as immediate realities." Originally, then, there was no split between the physical and the spiritual. Lewis makes this clear in Miracles, while at the same time showing that he agreed with what Barfield has
soon we hear it to be a world of unembodied spirits. A real rubbish, perhaps, but it is made to sound very nearly true, for the language which he first hears spoken on a thing is more nearly like what we later learn is a hross: the creature has been brought to Malacandra as a sacrifice—Ransom finally has been brought to Malacandra as a sacrifice and soon after has escaped from the two scientists who kidnapped him. Ransom wanders about the planet, he has been carried away and sees himself writing a Malacandrian story, he has been influenced by Greek nous, and it is still the same. You cannot do that with the songs of the hrossas. Weston takes this opportunity to do so because he has had no other communication with the silent planet. Weston has learned Old Solar. And it is through the means of speech that he tempts the Green Lady to leave the 'earth' or planet as a whole. Soon he would find out what Malac meant. In the meantime 'H' disappears after C' he noted, and made his first step in Malacandrian phonetics.

Some of the vocabulary of this new language would be familiar to any reader of Lewis' trilogy. Words like Perelandra and Thulcandra obviously, and eldil and Cyaras, are all Old Solar. One is tempted to make an etymological study of these and other words, but in one of his letters Lewis indicates that it would not be worthwhile.

There is no conscious connection between any of the phonetic elements in my 'Old Solar' words and those of any actual language. I am always playing with syllables and fitting them together (purely by ear) to see if I can hatch up new words that please me. I want them to have an emotional, not intellectual, suggestiveness; the heaviness of sound for as huge a planet as Jupiter, the vibrating, titillating quality of virilitriba for the subtlety of Mercury, the liquidity, of Maladil. The only exception is 'hannah' which may (but I don't know) have been influenced by Greek nous."

Hannah, Ransom learns later in Out of the Silent Planet, is a term which includes all rational creatures except those having spiritual rather than material bodies: It became clear that Maleldil was a spirit without body, parts or passions. 'He is not hannah,' said the hrossa. 'What is hannah,' asked Ransom. 'You are hannah, I am hannah, the seroni are hannah."

The Seroni are hannah. (Q, 68)

Soon after recovering from the shock that hrossa can speak, Ransom next discovers that all the creatures listed above speak the same language. Unlike the development in language from unity toward duality which Barfield describes in Poetic Diction, all the rational creatures on Malacandra speak Old Solar. We have all had different speeches and we still have at home. But everyone had learned the speech of the hrossas."

The reason why everyone has learned this particular language is that the hrossas are the poets of Malacandra. They still retain the ability to see the unity of the world about them, and the Malacandrians are wise enough to recognize this ability. The pfiftriggi, who are sculptors, describe the hrossas as the great speakers and singers. They have more words and better. No one learns the speech of my people, for we have to say is said in stone and sons' blood and stars' milk and all can see them. No one learns the seroni speech, for you can change their knowledge into any words and it is still the same. You cannot do that with the songs of the hrossas. (Q, 114)

The part that language plays in Out of the Silent Planet comes to a climax during the great meeting at the conclusion of the book among Cyaras, Ransom, and scientist Weston. Weston and his partner have killed one of the hrossas. Weston, knowing that Weston has spent his time among the hrossas, later takes this opportunity to do so because he has had no other communication with the silent planet. Weston was bent hannah, as he was brought before a large gathering of hrossas, seroni, and pfiftriggi. The occasion is the funeral procession for the murdered hrossas, but this leads to a long discussion among these three. "Cyara learns a great deal about Thulcandra (including the story of Christ). He takes this opportunity to do so because he has had no other communication with the silent planet. Weston persists in claiming that everything must bow to the advancement of science. If necessary, the Malacandrians will be killed in the name of progress. Cyara, of course, wins the argument. Weston, as an outsider, does not know Old Solar, and is forced to use Ransom as a reliable interpreter. Cyara, in Weston's control, says of the beaten Weston: "He is not only a talking animal and in my world he could do no more evil than an animal" (Q, 139).

In Perelandra, Weston becomes a talking spirit. Before he leaves Earth to travel to Perelandra the bent eldila enter his body and soon after his arrival have taken it over completely. The use of language in this second volume continues the theme with which Out of the Silent Planet had been concluded, i.e., language used for argumentative rather than poetic purposes. In the intermin between the times when he was on Malacandra and the time when he arrives on Perelandra, Weston has learned Old Solar. And it is through the means of speech that he tempts the Green Lady to leave the
floating islands and spend the night on the Fixed-Land. His arguments are always countered by Ransom, but Weston is the more persuasive in his reasoning and Ransom finally must resort to physical force.

During the first part of Perelandra, when Ransom, Weston and the Green Lady are all discussing the role of the first woman on Perelandra, the Green Lady of course learns a great deal. She is constantly making statements like: "I was young yesterday," or "You make me grow older more quickly than I can bear!" The emphasis is on language as communication. At the same time, one realizes that language can express falsehood as well as truth, and that the innocent have no way of telling the difference between them. When falsehood begins to gain the upper hand, the truth has no choice but to use force, and in using this force, it has no assurance that it will win. It is when Ransom comes to this realization that he finally understands the significance of his name. A voice calls out to him: "It is not for nothing that you are nothing named Ransom." Ransom knows that the voice is not his own, for he also knows that his name is derived from Ranolf's son and has no other meaning:

To connect the name Ransom with the act of ransoming would have been for him a mere pun. But even his voluble self did not now dare to suggest that the Voice was making a play upon words. (P. 147)

Perelandra, however, does not end on the note of language used for argument, but rather on language used correctly as the medium of poetry and music. Ransom, the new "Adam and Eve," and all the powers of the universe come together after evil has been driven away from the planet. For a year they participate in "the Great Game, of the Great Dance": The voice that spoke next seemed to be that of Mars, but Ransom was not certain. And who spoke after that, he does not know at all. For in the conversation that followed—if it can be called a conversation—though he believes that he himself was sometimes the speaker, he never knew which words were his or another's, or even whether a man or an eldil was talking. The speeches followed one another—i.e., indeed, they did not all take place at the same time—like the parts of a music... " (P. 214)

That Hideous Strength also ends with a great dance. But rather than taking place on a mountain top as in Perelandra, this dance takes place at Belbury, the headquarters of N. I. C. E., and all the powers of the universe come together after evil has been driven away from the planet. For a year they participate in "the Great Game, of the Great Dance": The voice that spoke next seemed to be that of Mars, but Ransom was not certain. And who spoke after that, he does not know at all. For in the conversation that followed—if it can be called a conversation—though he believes that he himself was sometimes the speaker, he never knew which words were his or another's, or even whether a man or an eldil was talking. The speeches followed one another—i.e., indeed, they did not all take place at the same time—like the parts of a music...


10. C. S. Lewis, That Hideous Strength (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 180. Hereafter references to the Macmillan paperback editions of Lewis' trilogy will be abbreviated in the text as follows: Out of the Silent Planet, P; Perelandra, F; and That Hideous Strength, T.
13. See Joy, p. 159.
14. Lewis writes in The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge U. P., 1967), p. 107 that in Martianus Capella's De Nuptiis Mercury "is the bridegroom of Philologia—who is Learning or even Literature rather than what we call 'philology.'"