

# **Gregory of Nazianzus on the Nature of Human Language**

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## **Introduction**

The subject of universals with reference to natural human language involves a bundle of three interwoven strands running through the tapestry of linguistics. One of these strands, and certainly the oldest as a developed academic discipline, pertains to elements of language at the phonetic/phonemic and morpho-syntactic levels that are present in all, or common to and collocational in many, of the world's languages. The next and most recent, relatively speaking, strand relates to semantics and perception, inferring the operations and structures of human cognition particularly from the lexical aspect of language. The third and least-frequently discussed strand, often assumed as a foundation for cross-linguistic or diachronic studies, is variously labeled the "universality" or "uniformitarian" principle, and has as its foundational position the assumption that certain dynamics of language remain diachronically and cross-linguistically similar, if not constant.<sup>1</sup> Together, these strands run through an impressive body of literature pertaining to "universals" that has vastly expanded the frontiers of language philosophy and methodology in recent years, and yet they include some frontiers which, interestingly enough, were explored in the past by classical Christian writers, often with delicate nuance.

This paper explores select conceptions of language articulated by certain patristic Christian writers, particularly those of the Cappadocian father Gregory of Nazianzus (329-390), with a view to an implicit assumption of universalism. As a linguist with sociological and educational interests, I enjoy seeing "modern" concepts of the field adumbrated in ancient writings. It is certainly intriguing, for example, that the second century Letter to Diognetus is quoted in one modern theology on work with the note that "Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they

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<sup>1</sup> On the first and second of these, see the summation in this author's paper, "The Principle of Universality in Sociolinguistics, with Implications for Acts 22:2," presented to the Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics Section of the Society of Biblical Literature, Nov. 22, 2014; also, the author's "Diminutive Suffixes in the Greek New Testament: A Cross-Linguistic Study," *Biblical and Ancient Greek Linguistics 2* (2013):29-74. On the second topic, see also, for example, George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) and Anna Wierzbicka, *Semantics, Culture, and Cognition: Universal Human Concepts in Culture-Specific Configurations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). For discussion of the third, see Alexander Bergs, "The Uniformitarian Principle and the Risk of Anachronisms in Language and Social History," in *The Handbook of Historical Sociolinguistics*, ed. Juan Manuel Hernández-Campoy and Juan Camilo Conde-Silvestre (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), which locates the origins of the concept within eighteenth century research in the natural sciences.

do not use a peculiar form of speech ...”<sup>2</sup> Language is eminently human, and human societies, unlike much that inhabits the field of linguistics today, are unflinchingly religious.

Consequently, this paper first reviews some ground-level issues involved in the language-universal strands of the past half century, and then acknowledges some Eastern patristic theologians, particularly Gregory of Nazianzus,<sup>3</sup> with a view to locating their shared perception of language as a gift from God in the context of cataphatic (positive) and apophatic (negative) approaches to theology.<sup>4</sup> These approaches facilitated the patristics’ appreciation for a language phenomenon that expresses the particulars of divine revelation in profound detail, even as the writers could see the limitations of a human facility bound up with fractured perception, imprecise expression, and obfuscation caused by the shifting sands of diachronic semantic change and cross-linguistic differences of all sorts. Finally, we will show how the topic of linguagenesis necessarily fit into the patristic discussions of language universals, specifically because the classical writers being consulted connected the phenomenon of human language to the Divine Trinity even as they resisted “the trashy myths of old”<sup>5</sup> which grossly literalized metaphors or ascribed features of morphology, such as grammatical gender, to the Creator’s attributes.<sup>6</sup> Patristic writers were constructing a “theological anthropology of language”<sup>7</sup> which contrasted in content with pagan perceptions of the world and offered as a starting point something very different from the empirically-based, theoretically value-neutral approaches typical of the often religion-avoidant field of general linguistics.

### **A Half Century of Language Universals**

A language *universal* represents an attempt to capture and categorize patterns in phenomena that transcend particular languages, communities, and speakers. However, these attempts at generalization fall along three lines. Often the discussion relates to the first strand, addressing the phonetic, lexical, and morpho-syntactic aspects of language, reaching to identify the transcendent features that are “capable of generating the very different syntaxes of all human languages” and constitute “one of our basic endowments, rather than something we learn.”<sup>8</sup> Curiously, one universal *of* language is really a universal *about* language, namely, that natural languages tend to be redundant:

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<sup>2</sup> Hugh Whelchel, *How Then Should We Work?* (McLean, VA: Institute for Faith, Work and Economics, 2012), 59.

<sup>3</sup> This paper draws in part from Gregory of Nazianzus’ *On God and Christ: Five Theological Orations*. See also the discussion in Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clark, 1973). Augustine’s philosophy of language is not engaged here because he tends to address other topics such as language acquisition, and the relationship between signs (*verba*) and referents (*res*), and also because the literature on Augustine is extensive. However, this paper will acknowledge how Augustine conceived of the purposes of language in *Confessions* and *De Magistro* and briefly references the relationship Augustine saw between cognition and lexicon, given their universal relevance. I wish to thank colleagues Byron Curtis and Robert Frazier for invaluable assistance at various points, although the shortcomings of this paper are solely the responsibility of its author.

<sup>4</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 23-43.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory, Oration 31.

<sup>6</sup> The objects of Gregory’s incisive discussion are early examples of tendencies present in some modern exegesis and preaching, as critiqued by D. A. Carson in *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> Arseniy Chernikin, *Philosophy of Language in Greek Patristics* (Curator Ignotus, 2014), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Hitchings, *The Language Wars: A History of Proper English* (New York: Picador, 2011), 16.

“Languages are not wholly consistent. They are not perfectly logical. In fact, they are loaded with redundant information. Typically, this performs a social function; it may make meaning easier to decode, or it may support the connection between people who might struggle otherwise to communicate ... To expect a natural language to behave like mathematics is akin to expecting a child to behave like an iPod.”<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, discussions of universals sometimes acquire a distinctly sociological flavor, given the human and relational baggage that necessarily comes with language.

This first strand of universals developed empirically, at ground level, in contrast with the quite different deductive approach of the patristics. A convenient—and oft-cited—departure point for it was a Conference on Language Universals held at Dobbs Ferry, NY, in 1961, sponsored by the Linguistics and Psychology Committee of the Social Science Research Council and composed of anthropologists, psychologists, and linguists. Its proceedings, edited and published by Joseph H. Greenberg, noted that “Underlying the endless and fascinating idiosyncrasies of the world’s languages there are uniformities of universal scope. Amid infinite diversity, all languages are, as it were, cut from the same pattern.”<sup>10</sup> With this involvement, Greenberg was on his way to becoming the reputed “father of language universals,” and *Universals of Language* was released in 1963; a second edition was to follow just three years later. A similar symposium met in 1967 at the University of Texas in Austin, and many more have since been convened at academic institutions across North America and Europe.

The then-Stanford professor Charles Ferguson<sup>11</sup> put the matter this way: “As soon as human beings began to make systematic observations about one another’s languages, they were probably impressed by the paradox that all languages are in some fundamental sense one and the same, and yet they are also strikingly different from one another.” He mused further that the “search for oneness may be as old as the study of language, [although] the expression ‘universal grammar’ dates from the beginning of the seventeenth century ... and the expressions ‘language universals’ and ‘linguistic universals’ came into linguistic terminology in the 1940’s and 1960’s, respectively ...”

The groundswell of interest in this strand of universals would continue to surge, being fed by the above-quoted volume which was itself the fruit of the “Project on Language Universals” that ran from 1967 to 1976. Led by Greenberg and Ferguson, its extensive yet preliminary findings were packed into a monumental four-volume basket known as the *Universals of Human Language* series (Vol. 1 – Method and Theory; Vol. 2 – Phonology; Vol. 3 – Word Structure; Vol. 4 – Syntax), edited by Greenberg, Ferguson, and Edith Moravcsik. A major idea of its voluminous cross-linguistic survey, where Greenberg himself was working with some thirty languages – listed in Greenberg,<sup>12</sup> was that even as some 45 language universals were being identified, “cross-linguistic variation is to some extent limited by the fact that certain items and structures in language systems are dependent on one another.” Yet despite the explosion of knowledge and theoretical advances evidenced through conferences and publications, so much remains tentative, for with more than seven thousand living languages today, there will continue to be additional languages subjected to scrutiny with the potential for challenging the present state of

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<sup>9</sup> Hitchings, *Language Wars*, 17-18.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Greenberg, ed., *Universals of Language*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1966), xv.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Ferguson, “Historical Background of Universals Research,” in *Universals of Human Language*, ed. Joseph Greenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 8-9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-74.

thinking.<sup>13</sup> Early on, Greenberg sagely observed that, “The tentative nature of the conclusions set forth here should be evident to the reader.”<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the grasp for universals remains important because they imply some standard reference set *of something* common to human beings despite the plethora of obvious differences existing between genetically-divergent speech codes. This tantalizing commonness haunts many corners of the fields embraced under the label “universals,” though perhaps it was not so for those who were accustomed to talking the “language” of a transcendent God whose creatures bear His image.

Some alleviation of the tension between the fundamental commonality and differences of human languages would come in the form of the second strand of the discussion of universals, which attends particularly to the lexical level of language and provides frameworks for understanding human cognition. This strand delves into the relationship between meaning and language; Wierzbicka<sup>15</sup> notes that “language does not represent objects, but rather the concepts which, in the process of speech, have been formed by the mind independent of those objects.” To the degree this observation is correct, inter-language translation is a complex venture at best, as Italians say *traduttore traditore* – i.e. ‘translation is a traitor.’ Cognitive linguists search for universals of the human mind that are grammaticalized by, but not simply to be equated with, natural human language.

The third strand in the universals discussion relates to cross-linguistic and diachronic assumptions of universality, as recently discussed in Bergs.<sup>16</sup> Labeled either the Uniformitarian Principle or the Principle of Uniformity, it “claims that the processes which we observe in the present can help us gain knowledge about processes in the past.”<sup>17</sup> The roots of this rather necessary assumption are planted amongst the natural sciences, and it has often taken shape in matters of historical sociolinguistics though, as Bergs documents, the principle must be handled carefully, since the “risk of anachronisms” in the form of what can be termed conceptual and cognitive category differences could belie certain presumptions of consistency. Bergs draws on examples of social class, gender, and relational networking. As Bergs sees it, “the principle is indeed helpful when studying language structures in isolation, but that its applicability in historical sociolinguistics must be viewed with much caution.”<sup>18</sup>

This brief overview of “universals” will have to suffice as preparation for the subsequent discussion of selected patristic conceptions of language. Regardless of where in the three zones of the universals discussion they fall, as considered above—structural features, semantics and cognition, or diachronic cross-linguistics—something unflinchingly human keeps arising, and in the estimation of the earliest i.e. 1960s vintage protagonists, the door is wide open to consideration of universals in other fields too, including biology, sociology, and music. In this present discussion, however, the tables have been turned, for it is not so much that universals

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<sup>13</sup> Ethnologue.com, consulted by this writer for the original paper prepared during summer 2015, listed 7102 languages of the world today, classifying 578 of them as “institutional,” 1598 as “developing,” and 2479 as “vigorous,” while 1531 were “in trouble” and another 916 “dying.”

<sup>14</sup> Greenberg, *Universals*, 73.

<sup>15</sup> Wierzbicka, *Semantics*, 5, and quoting Humboldt with approval.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Bergs, “The Uniformitarian Principle and the Risk of Anachronisms in Language and Social History,” in *The Handbook of Historical Sociolinguistics*, eds. Juan Manuel Hernández-Campoy and Juan Camilo Conde-Silvestre (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 80-98.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

are being applied to the field of theology, rather, theology has become the watershed for one's conceptions regarding language.

### **Augustine and Other Patristic Writers on Language**

Language philosophy, for the patristic writers, was tied to human anthropology, *Biblically* framed. Whereas ancient pagan writers often perceived of language as a gift from the gods, some Christian writers specifically saw language as essential to relations within the Trinity. Patristic writers were influenced by the classical education they had received, directed as it was to grammatical, logical, and rhetorical themes.<sup>19</sup> But their approaches typically involved a "theological anthropology of language." As Chernikin elaborates:

"First, it is a very old idea that language is of divine origin ... Second, it is an old belief that the gods have a language of their own, which is as different from the human language as Greek is different from the barbarian languages. The very notion that human language is the gift of the gods exists in almost all world mythological systems, and can by no means be regarded as exclusively Greek."<sup>20</sup>

At least, such was the background for the patristic writers, even as the picture of their language philosophy was painted with more colors.

The complexity is visible from much that has been discussed: the lion's share of studies at this intersection of patristics and linguistics has gone to Augustine, who referred to aspects of human language in various contexts, articulating a connection between cognition and lexicon. For example, he lamented the divisive effects of multilingualism, noting that "all the similarity of their common human nature is of no avail to unite them in fellowship. So true is this that a man would be more cheerful with his dog for company than a foreigner."<sup>21</sup> In an early statement on imperial pragmatism and language ideology, he noted that Rome "has been at pains to impose on conquered peoples not only her yoke but her language also, as a bond of peace and fellowship ... " In *Confessions*, Augustine famously commented on childhood language acquisition and how his seniors did not formally teach him how to speak, but, "When they named anything, and as they spoke turned toward it, I saw and remembered that they called what they would point out by the name they uttered," continuing that, "The natural language ... of all nations, expressed by the countenance, glances of the eye, gestures of the limbs, and tones of the voice, indicating the affections of the mind ... And thus by constantly hearing words, as they occurred in various sentences, I collected gradually for what they stood ... "<sup>22</sup> It is not that Augustine was ignoring the "data," but that he was in fact deeply influenced in his perception of the data by his theology. He has more to say about this subject in *De Magistro*, and also in *De Doctrina Christiana*, as also discussed in Jackson,<sup>23</sup> there offering his theory on signs related to the things they point to,

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<sup>19</sup> Chernikin, *Philosophy of Language*, 180; he shows Clement's dependence upon Plato for some conceptions.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, Book XIX.7 (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1984), 861.

<sup>22</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 1.8.

<sup>23</sup> B. Darrell Jackson, "The Theory of Signs in St. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*," in *Augustine: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. R. A. Markus (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1972), 92-137.

in what would become standard terminology in modern semantics and semiotics in signs (signa) vs. the present realia.<sup>24</sup>

Yet despite the fact that so much that has been written along these lines,<sup>25</sup> Chernikin claims that, aside from work on Augustine and language, there still has been “remarkably little research on the massive corpus of Patristic writings on language.”<sup>26</sup> So, it is appropriate next to turn to the Cappadocian, Gregory of Nazianzus (c.330-c.390), who also commented on natural human language, specifically with reference to what today falls under some portion of the universals umbrella.

### **Gregory of Nazianzus on Language**

Gregory of Nazianzus, “The Theologian,” made a number of language-related observations in connection with the doctrine of God, the theme that runs through what would come to be known as his “Five Theological Orations” (Orations 27-31). For example, he commented on the miracle of tongues at Pentecost (Acts 2),<sup>27</sup> questioning whether the miracle occurred via the mouth of the speakers or in the minds of the hearers. Most importantly, he fastened not only his pastoral theology<sup>28</sup> but also his perception of the nature of language upon a firm bedrock of Trinitarian theology. Gregory repeatedly raises speech and language issues in these Orations, as follows in their order of appearance:

- Every speech has two parts to it. One part aims at establishing one’s own position; the other refutes the opposing case. This is the method we shall try, expounding our own, before refuting our opponents’ arguments (29.1).
- We, after all, understand and preach the Son’s Godhead on the basis of their grand and sublime language. What do we mean here: expressions like “God,” “Word,” “he who is in the beginning,” who was “with the beginning,” who was “the beginning,” “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God,” and “with you is the beginning,” and “who calls it the beginning from the generations of old”? ... Plainly these, and all the expressions synonymous with these, refer to the Son. None of them is a later acquisition, not became attached at a later stage to the Son or to the Spirit any more than to the Father, for perfection does not result from additions. It was never the case that he was without his Word ... (29.17).
- Count up the phrases that in your ignorance you set over against these – “My God and your God” ... Put in, if you like all the even lowlier expressions used about him – the fact that he “slept,” “was hungry,” “got tired,” “wept,” “was in agony,” “was subjected” ... It is not hard to clear away the stumbling block that the literal text of Scripture contains – that is, if your stumbling is real and not just willful malice. In sum, you must predicate the more sublime

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<sup>24</sup> R. A. Markus, “St. Augustine on Signs,” in *Ibid.*, 61-91. See also Stacy J. Stoyanoff, “Language Learning Theory: A Comparison between Wittgenstein and Augustine’s *De Magistro*,” *Philosophy of Education* (1998): 295-303.

<sup>25</sup> See discussion in Gerard Watson, “St. Augustine’s Theory of Language,” *The Maynooth Review* 6, no.2 (1982): 4-20.

<sup>26</sup> Chernikin, *Philosophy of Language*, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Oration 41:15-16.

<sup>28</sup> On which see, e.g. Barry J. York, “Trinitarianism in the Pastoral Theology of Gregory Nazianzen,” *Reformed Presbyterian Theological Journal* 1(Spring 2015): 59-71.

expressions of the Godhead, of the nature which transcends bodily experiences, and the lowlier ones of the compound, of him who because of you was emptied, became incarnate and (to use equally valid language) was “made man” (29.18).

- The ancient Hebrews used special symbols to venerate the divine and did not allow anything inferior to God to be written with the same letters as the word “God,” on the ground that the divine should not be put on even this much of a level with things human. Would they ever have accepted the ideas that the uniquely indissoluble nature could be expressed by evanescent speech? No man has yet breathed all the air; no mind has yet contained or language embraced God’s substance in its fullness. No, we use facts connected with him to outline qualities that correspond with him, collecting a faint and feeble mental image from various quarters. Our noblest theologian is not one who has discovered the whole ... (30.17).
- So stands the doctrine of the Son. It has passed through the midst of its adversaries unscathed by their stones. The Word cannot be stoned. The Word, if you like, flings tones, striking the wild beasts, the arguments, which mischievously approach the mount (31.1).
- [B]ecause the Son is “Son” in a more elevated sense of the word, and since we have no other term to express his consubstantial derivation from God, it does not follow that we ought to think it essential to transfer wholesale to the divine sphere the earthly names of human family ties. Do you take it, by the same token, that our God is a male, because of the masculine nouns “God” and “Father”? Is the Godhead a female, because in Greek the word is feminine? Is the word “Spirit” neuter in Greek, because the Spirit is sterile? If you want to take the joke further you could say, as the trashy myths of old did, that God coupled with his own will and fathered the Son. We should then be faced with the bisexual God of Marcion, who pictured those outlandish aeons (31:7)
- The Son does not fall short in some particular of being Father. Sonship is no defect, yet that does not mean he is Father. By the same token, the Father would fall short of being Son – the Father is not Son. No, the language here gives no grounds for any deficiency, for any subordination in being (31:9).
- Some things mentioned in the Bible are not factual; some factual things are not mentioned; some nonfactual things receive no mention there; some things are both factual and mentioned. Do you ask for my proofs here? I am ready to offer them. In the Bible, God “sleeps,” “wakes up,” “is angered,” “walks,” and has a “throne of cherubim.” Yet when has God ever been subject to emotion? When do you ever hear that God is a bodily being? This is a nonfactual, mental picture. We have used names derived from human experience and applied them, so far as we could, to aspects of God ... [With regard to other metaphors, e.g., “sitting” and “being enthroned”] this too is human language: the divine abides in none as it abides in the saints ... Indeed every faculty or activity of God has given us a corresponding picture in terms of something bodily (31.22).
- There really is a great deal of diversity inherent in names and things, so why are you so dreadfully servile to the letter, so much the partisan of Jewish lore, following the syllables while you let the realities go? (31.24).
- So, in the end, I resolved that it was best to say “goodbye” to images and shadows, deceptive and utterly inadequate as they are to express the reality. I resolved to keep close to the more truly religious view and rest content with some few words, taking the Spirit as my guide ... (31.33).

Some observations regarding context and substance are in order. The fourth century constituted a critical period in which the Church needed to formulate essential agreement on the *content* of

orthodox truth, and that would necessitate agreement on *formulation* or *wording*. The challenges to catholic Christianity came from what were then called Anomeans or Eunomians—the first label pointed to dissimilarity, i.e., of substance; the second arose from the name of an early proponent—defenders of what came to be known more widely as Arianism. There has been ample discussion, with stridently divergent opinions, concerning which classical Greek philosophers, especially Plato and Aristotle, were behind the different players on both sides of the heresy battle.<sup>29</sup> What is clear is the animosity: Gregory characterized them as people who “delight in the ‘profane and vain babblings and contradictions of the Knowledge falsely so-called’, and in ‘strife of words’ which leaders to all elaborate verbiage by Paul ... These people I speak of have versatile tongues, and are resourceful in attacking doctrines nobler and worthier than their own.”<sup>30</sup>

Arguments about words may entail conflicting views of epistemology and of language, and that is not, surprisingly, what arises in Gregory’s Theological Orations. It seems only fitting that in the debate over the essence of the Trinity, the matter of language necessarily finds its place, as it had done in much detail within the writings of Basil and Gregory of Nyssa. After all, the Bible introduces God the Creator as repeatedly speaking the world into existence (Gen. 1), the Son as “the Word ... in the beginning with God [and] all things made through him” (Jn. 1:1-3), along with the Spirit who “will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you” (Jn. 16:13). Human language announces the God who speaks. In that spirit, then, some observations on Gregory’s Orations are appropriate.

First, Gregory’s references to language and speech were implicitly universal because of their theological basis. Of course, this would hold true widely across patristic writers, and certainly for the Cappadocians. Any announcement of truth is “on the basis of their [i.e., God’s] grand and sublime language,” and observing of its words that, “None of them is a later acquisition,” because the Father was never “without his Word.”<sup>31</sup> Though Gregory refrains here from speculating on the type of language spoken in heaven, he does anchor the essence of language in the Creator Himself and implicitly shows the indebtedness of human codes to some sort of heavenly counterpart.<sup>32</sup>

Second, it follows from this theocentric approach to language that Gregory appreciated its power to influence people and to shape their conception of reality. When delineating differences between Father and Son without implications of economic inferiority, he insisted tersely: “No, the language here gives no grounds for any deficiency, for any subordination in being.”<sup>33</sup> Human language is capable of precision, he indicates, but there is some complexity to be considered here. Gregory of Nyssa conceived of human speech, in any language, as a strictly human phenomenon rather than something being bestowed directly from God. For Gregory of Nyssa, language evidences complex human nature, but that includes man’s limitations as well; language is imperfect because men are limited. For Gregory of Nazianzus, on the other hand, God always had with him “the Word,” and we use something that echoes God’s sublime

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<sup>29</sup> See Chernikin, *Philosophy of Language*, 214-342, for summary discussion of the controversy and Cappadocian views on language, specifically those of Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa.

<sup>30</sup> Gregory, *Orations* 27.1, and citing I Tim.6:20.

<sup>31</sup> Oration 29:17.

<sup>32</sup> By way of contrast, Origen believed the primordial language, like that of heaven, was Hebrew (Contra Celsus 5.30-31). See the related discussion in Chernikin, *Philosophy of Language*, 199-200; Clement was similarly inclined; Gregory of Nyssa argued it could not have been Hebrew (CE ii 256; 7ff, as quoted in Chernikin, *Philosophy of Language*, 335).

<sup>33</sup> Oration 31:9.

communication and not some later addition. In contrast to Gregory of Nyssa's line of demarcation between *heavenly thought and earthly speech*,<sup>34</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus seems to identify some common thread running between the two.

Third, Gregory of Nazianzus makes much of the highly metaphoric nature of human communication. He explains the inevitable use of anthropomorphisms, such as God sleeping or walking, in these words: "We have used names derived from human experience and applied them, so far as we could, to aspects of God ... [and] this too is human language: the divine abides in none as it abides in the saints ... Indeed every faculty or activity of God has given us a corresponding picture in terms of something bodily."<sup>35</sup> However, Gregory offsets the usefulness of metaphor in this way: "[B]ecause the Son is 'Son' in a more elevated sense of the word, and since we have no other term to express his consubstantial derivation from God, it does not follow that we ought to think it essential to transfer wholesale to the divine sphere the earthly names of human family ties."<sup>36</sup> Gregory properly objects to any use of metaphor which forces itself upon the interpretation rather than deriving from the metaphor some insightful quality to be seen in common between the items. In his thinking, metaphor held potential, but "in the end, I resolved that it was best to say 'goodbye' to images and shadows, deceptive and utterly inadequate as they are to express the reality. I resolved to keep close to the more truly religious view and rest content with some few words, taking the Spirit as my guide ..."<sup>37</sup>

Fourth, Gregory's immense appreciation for the power of words in articulation and illustration is balanced in other ways too. He railed against those who equated grammatical form with the essence of reality, specifically illustrating this point with the confusion of grammatical for biological gender: "Do you take it, by the same token, that our God is a male, because of the masculine nouns 'God' and 'Father'? Is the Godhead a female, because in Greek the word is feminine? Is the word 'Spirit' neuter in Greek, because the Spirit is sterile?"<sup>38</sup> Strung somewhere between points three and four above, it appears that Gregory balances the blessings of specificity with the dangers of human finitude. Whereas Saussure is credited with delineating between denotational sign and material world, i.e., the thing toward which the sign points,<sup>39</sup> Gregory was wrestling with this centuries earlier and doing so not merely because Greek philosophers had delineated body from soul. Supposedly-modern linguistics concepts may find their origins in the minds of ancient proponents.

Fifth, a further nuance of that balance arises in connection with Gregory's sense of labels for things. It appears he has synonymy in mind, though he may also be reflecting on multiplicity of languages, when he says: "There really is a great deal of diversity inherent in names and things, so why are you so dreadfully servile to the letter, so much the partisan of Jewish lore, following the syllables while you let the realities go?"<sup>40</sup> Here again, he juxtaposes the specificity of language next to the vicissitudes of natural human language, noting there are many ways to express a single idea.

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<sup>34</sup> See related comments in Chernikin, *Philosophy of Language*, 308-310.

<sup>35</sup> Oration 31:22.

<sup>36</sup> Oration 31:7.

<sup>37</sup> Oration 31:33.

<sup>38</sup> Oration 31:7.

<sup>39</sup> On this see Judith Irvine. "When Talk Isn't Cheap: Language and Political Economy." *American Ethnologist* 16 (1989): 248.

<sup>40</sup> Oration 31:24.

Sixth, it may be cautiously suggested that Gregory's distinction between the words that point to things and a person's conception of those things constitutes a precursor to a defining mark of cognitive linguistics. Words or phrases ("names") help people understand their world, as do metaphors, but they do so quite imperfectly: "When do you ever hear that God is a bodily being? This is a nonfactual, mental picture. We have used names derived from human experience and applied them, so far as we could, to aspects of God ... [T]his too is human language: the divine abides in none as it abides in the saints ... Indeed every faculty or activity of God has given us a corresponding picture in terms of something bodily."<sup>41</sup> Gregory seems to go beyond Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified, taking steps toward distinguishing words from cognition.<sup>42</sup> Metaphors aid conception and words grammaticalize conception, but neither equates with cognition nor the 'real world.'

Throughout these six points, one may observe the rhetorical and theological method Gregory embraced in operation. He had said that the two basic parts of every speech involved establishing one's own position while also refuting the opponents',<sup>43</sup> i.e., his orations involved cataphatic (positive) and apophatic (negative) approaches to theology. Human speech may be distinct from its heavenly counterpart, whatever it ought to be called, but the Cappadocians conceived of mankind as endowed with a "majestic dignity" that enabled one's acoustic organs to produce meaningful speech.<sup>44</sup> Rightly used or misused, the capacity, if not the language system, or speech systems, themselves, is a divine gift, for, as Gregory of Nyssa<sup>45</sup> argued: "[N]o one would deny that he who has learned to practice an art for right purposes can also abuse it for wrong ones, so we say that the faculty of thought and conception was implanted by God in human nature for good, but, with those who abuse it as an instrument of discovery, it frequently becomes the handmaid of pernicious inventions."

Particular and explicit in its capacities, natural human language may effectively relate what is factual and discard the pernicious. Words, like metaphors, are nevertheless approximations of reality, with limits tied to human finitude and sinfulness, so they must not be construed in a dogmatic exercise of rank literalism. Words, like God, are knowable even though the total reality remains inscrutable. Whatever thrives within the insightful and lively nature of language does so because God is its Author and he has always had "the Word" present right beside him.

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<sup>41</sup> Oration 31:22.

<sup>42</sup> On which subject, see Wierzbicka, *Semantics*, 5; Irvine, "When Talk Isn't Cheap"; also Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Baker, 1984), particularly Chapter 2 on "Grammatical Fallacies," 62-90.

<sup>43</sup> Oration 29:1.

<sup>44</sup> As also did Chernikin, *Philosophy of Language*, 314.

<sup>45</sup> CE ii, 189; 15ff, and quoted in *Ibid.*, 327.