■ *John Leavitt*
UNIVERSITÉ DE MONTRÉAL

Prophecy

In the modern West, prophecy implies public discourse with a future-oriented social or political message, so that the word can simply mean foretelling the future. The model figure is that of the Old Testament prophet crying God's word and decrying the sins of his people. Prophecy in this sense is found in only a limited number of societies. Yet it is not hard to expand the meaning of the term in a way that respects our own lexical intuitions: if we open up what we mean by *divine* to include all gods and lesser spirits, then the word *prophecy* comes to designate a much broader phenomenon. In every society, some among the speech forms available to speakers are recognized as closely related to, often as emanating from, what, for lack of better words, we might call a non-ordinary realm. Out of the speaker's mouth comes the voice of a possessing demon, revealing god, or inspiring muse; or the speaker tells, usually in highly marked language, what he or she has experienced in an otherworldly adventure. These kinds of practice are associated with a variety of terms in Western languages—*prophecy, inspiration, possession, mediumship, oracle, mysticism, trance, ecstasy*—all involving language the speaker of which is "outside" him or herself or who is reporting such an "outside" experience. Given the connotations of *prophecy*, it might be advisable to find another word for such language and experience; following Nora Chadwick, here I will use the less loaded term *mantic*, from a Greek word for an inspired soothsayer.

In many societies, mantic speech forms are of evident social and cultural importance. Work toward a better understanding of them can proceed in two ways: first, by continuing the comparative study of theories of language; second, by working toward opening up our own theoretical models.

1. A central concern of the ethnography of speaking has been the documentation and analysis of non-Western and popular theories of language. In the well-documented cases that we have, mantic language is recognized in one or more categories typified by such qualities as degrees of "heat" or

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power or even, in the Central Himalayas, of "shabbiness." Often these ways of classifying speech forms crosscut what seem to us to be evident divisions.

2. If we accept the legitimacy of other ways of theorizing, what are the implications for our own, one of the characteristics of which is to seek universal status? In the case in question, we can start with the fact that we think we recognize mantic language in many societies; it may thus be considered a form comparable to those we call poetic language, conversation, narrative, and so forth.

The literature on mantic experience has brought out a number of overlapping polarities, each of which directly involves language.

1. One is between situations in which one's consciousness journeys to a non-ordinary realm (a phenomenon sometimes, and controversially, labeled shamanism) and those in which non-ordinary agencies come into the body (spirit possession or oracular experience). Voyages "out" seem to be a central element in North and South American, Siberian, and Central Asian traditions; voyages "in" by spirits, for good or ill, seem more prevalent in Africa, South Asia, and ancient and traditional Europe. Other regions—Oceania, the ancient Middle East, including the Hebrew prophets—seem to combine both or alternate between them. Language plays a central role in both of these forms of spirit movement: to have a social effect, the spirit-journey must be recounted, and visiting spirits usually signal their presence discursively. The differences in these situations will be reflected in narrative vs. declamatory styles and marked by differences in deictics and discourse structure.

2. Who is doing the talking? Possessed language and other forms of ritual language involve a shift in speaking voice so that the prime speaker is no longer, as in less-marked situations, identified with the proximate speaker (to use John Du Bois's terminology). This shift will be linguistically keyed and suggests comparisons with the linguistics of multiple personalities or the classic model of hysteria, in which apparently distinct agencies share a single body and signal their presences largely by linguistic means.

3. Overlapping with the first distinction, between modes of spirit movement, is one between degrees of control. The common definition of the shaman as a healing spirit master, as in Siberia or the higher Himalayas, contrasts with forms of possession and oracular practice in which the practitioner gives up his or her body and voice to the god. Here the language used will index the nature of power relations between practitioner and spirit or god.

4. As the word *prophecy* implies, mantic language usually has a sociopolitical dimension: an oracle speaks from the god and to the society; a case of spirit possession allows the powerless to speak openly precisely because they are not the ones taken to be doing the speaking, something that has been repeatedly documented in South Asia and for traditional African religions.

5. The degree of bodily control involved in mantic experience can range from apparent catatonia, as is sometimes the case in the mystic traditions of the world religions, to the wildest movement. Since language is a bodily

function, how one speaks (or squeaks or shrieks) will be an aspect of an overall body technique, a mantic habitus.

6. To what degree can or should a mantic experience be expressed in words? Here the range is from absolutely ineffable experience, which must be pointed at rather than expressed directly, as in Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, and to a degree Christian and Jewish mystical traditions, to experiences that call for description or direct expression, as in many traditions, often called shamanic or oracular, that use mantic experience as a direct link to non-ordinary powers for social ends.

7. Mantic ways of speaking range from silence to non-linguistic noises to unintelligible yet phonologically structured glossolalia, as in Christian and other traditions of speaking in tongues, to more or less intelligible language that is sung, versified, riddling (Greek oracles and Greco-Roman sibyls), hortatory, marked by specialized or archaic vocabulary, all the way to conversation that is virtually indistinguishable from any other except that it happens to be a spirit who is speaking, not this body's usual subject, a situation most abundantly documented by Michael Lambek for the island of Mayotte off the East African coast.

8. Roman Jakobson has proposed understanding poetic language as language that calls attention to the message itself, thus implying an additional level of reflexivity. Mantic language, while often poetic, is recognized as such by its quality of either emanating from a state that the proximate subject does not control or telling an imaginal experience in which the subject is wholly absorbed. This suggests parallels between mantic language and, on the one hand, inspired, automatic, or dreamed poetry, on the other, the telling of dreams. What all of these share is the reverse of the heightened reflexivity of poetic language, a kind of collapse of reflexivity.

These polarities may help to orient a more serious study of mantic language. The nature of such language has hardly been addressed by linguistics; anthropology, psychology, and comparative religion have long studied the situations, states, and systems that give rise to it, but seem, with some honorable exceptions, not to have noticed that they are dealing centrally with forms of speech.

(See also *dreams, poetry, prayer, reflexivity, voice*)

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Département d'Anthropologie
Université de Montréal
C.P. 6128, Succursale Centre-Ville
Montréal, Quebec H3C 3J7
Canada