

The Critical Potential of Language
Journal für Psychologie Special Issue
Call for Papers.

Spawned by the *linguistic turn*, and in psychology specifically by the *narrative turn* associated with the names of Theodor Sarbin and Jerome Bruner, language became the central focus in many areas of the social sciences. The special issue of the German Journal für Psychologie aims to look behind the curtains of this development to investigate the meaning of language for our understanding of psychic life as the core subject matter of psychological investigations. Specifically, language shall be investigated with respect to its critical potential for psychology in particular and the social sciences more generally.

The works of Giambattista Vico and Johann Gottfried Herder mark an important starting point for two different developments in the conceptualization of language. The positivistic approach regards language as a tool, used by actors to communicate. Language is seen to be a specifically human ability, a system to be investigated. It is merely used in order to describe reality, from which it is completely detached. Hence, language is not seen to be actively creating something, but merely an ability to describe and capture reality.

In contrast, the aim to define language can also be understood as an investigation into the being-in-the-world of subjects. The major categories such as 'world', 'reality', 'nature', 'humanity' may be counterposed or related to the category 'language', but it seems clear that all categories, including the category 'language', are themselves constructions in language, and can thus only within a particular system of thought be separated from language for relational inquiry. Thus, language is not seen as a passive tool but as the active praxis of subjects to create the world. Fundamental for this understanding are the works of Mikhail Bakhtin. He introduced a new understanding of the 'sign' which is never equivalent to what it signifies, but instead derives its meaning from social convention. Bakhtin, therefore, not only rejects a positivistic understanding of language but also de-individualizes language and renders it a social element which makes possible collaborative action. It was Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky who utilized these insights for psychology by studying the internalization of these social signs in the process of language acquisition.

Another point of departure for investigations into language can be found in the works of Karl Marx. His ideas and concepts are present - even though implicitly - in the works of Bakhtin as well as the Vygotsky School. Similarly implicit is the way in which Marx treats the phenomenon of language. Most commonly quoted are the Theses on Feuerbach, in which an idealistic understanding of language is countered with a dynamic-dialectical approach. Language is thus rendered as practical consciousness and combines the creative and active character of language with its analytic character.

While the above outlines only a few approaches among many to a critical understanding of language, this special issue of the Journal für Psychologie aims at exploring language as a concept that is capable of critique. Is language emancipatory per se, creative, and as such critical? Or do we need a specific concept of language in order to unfold its critical potential? Is it possible to deconstruct existing illusions, ideologies and fetish form by means of language? And most importantly: To what extent is it possible to envision a critical psychology that utilizes the power of language?

Abstracts (approx. 2 pages) should be submitted to mdege@clarku.edu no later than August 31, 2010.