

The direction of this change seems determined by the increasing fragility of the mimetic faculty. For clearly the perceptual world [*Merkwelt*] of modern man contains only minimal residues of the magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar to ancient peoples. The question is whether we are concerned with the decay of this faculty or with its transformation. Of the direction in which the latter might lie, some indications may be derived, even if indirectly, from astrology.

We must assume in principle that in the remote past the processes considered imitable included those in the sky. In dance, on other cultic occasions, such imitation could be produced, such similarity dealt with. But if the mimetic genius was really a life-determining force for the ancients, it is not difficult to imagine that the newborn child was thought to be in full possession of this gift, and in particular to be perfectly adapted to the form of cosmic being.

Allusion to the astrological sphere may supply a first reference point for an understanding of the concept of nonsensuous similarity. True, our existence no longer includes what once made it possible to speak of this kind of similarity: above all, the ability to produce it. Nevertheless we, too, possess a canon according to which the meaning of nonsensuous similarity can be at least partly clarified. And this canon is language.

From time immemorial, the mimetic faculty has been conceded some influence on language. Yet this was done without foundation—without consideration of a further meaning, still less a history, of the mimetic faculty. But above all, such considerations remained closely tied to the commonplace, sensuous realm of similarity. All the same, imitative behavior in language formation was acknowledged under the name of onomatopoeia. Now if language, as is evident to the insightful, is not an agreed-upon system of signs, we will, in attempting to approach language, be constantly obliged to have recourse to the kind of thoughts that appear in their most primitive form as the onomatopoeic mode of explanation. The question is whether this can be developed and adapted to improved understanding.

"Every word—and the whole of language," it has been asserted, "is onomatopoeic." It is difficult to conceive in any detail the program that might be implied by this proposition. But the concept of nonsensuous similarity is of some relevance. For if words meaning the same thing in different languages are arranged about that signified as their center, we have to inquire how they all—while often possessing not the slightest similarity to one another—are similar to the signified at their center. Yet this kind of similarity cannot be explained only by the relationships between words meaning the same thing in different languages, just as, in general, our reflections cannot be restricted to the spoken word. They are equally concerned with the written word. And here it is noteworthy that the latter—in some cases perhaps more vividly than the spoken word—illuminates, by the

On the Mimetic Faculty

Nature produces similarities; one need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man's. His gift for seeing similarity is nothing but a rudiment of the once powerful compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically. There is perhaps not a single one of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role.

This faculty has a history, however, in both the phylogenetic and the ontogenetic sense. As regards the latter, play is to a great extent its school. Children's play is everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behavior, and its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another. The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher, but also a windmill and a train. Of what use to him is this schooling of his mimetic faculty?

The answer presupposes an understanding of the phylogenetic significance of the mimetic faculty. Here it is not enough to think of what we understand today by the concept of similarity. As is known, the sphere of life that formerly seemed to be governed by the law of similarity was comprehensive; it ruled both microcosm and macrocosm. But these natural correspondences are given their true importance only if we see that they, one and all, are stimulants and awakeners of the mimetic faculty which answers them in man. It must be borne in mind that neither mimetic powers nor mimetic objects remain the same in the course of thousands of years. Rather, we must suppose that the gift for producing similarities (for example, in dances, whose oldest function this is), and therefore also the gift of recognizing them, have changed in the course of history.

relation of its written form [*Schriftbild*] to the signified, the nature of nonsensuous similarity. In brief, it is nonsensuous similarity that establishes the ties not only between what is said and what is meant but also between what is written and what is meant, and equally between the spoken and the written.

Graphology has taught us to recognize in handwriting images that the unconscious of the writer conceals in it. It may be supposed that the mimetic process which expresses itself in this way in the activity of the writer was, in the very distant times in which script originated, of utmost importance for writing. Script has thus become, like language, an archive of nonsensuous similarities, of nonsensuous correspondences.

But this aspect of language, as well as of script, does not develop in isolation from its other, semiotic aspect. Rather, the mimetic element in language can, like a flame, manifest itself only through a kind of bearer. This bearer is the semiotic element. Thus, the nexus of meaning of words or sentences is the bearer through which, like a flash, similarity appears. For its production by man—like its perception by him—is in many cases, and particularly the most important, tied to its flashing up. It flits past. It is not improbable that the rapidity of writing and reading heightens the fusion of the semiotic and the mimetic in the sphere of language.

"To read what was never written." Such reading is the most ancient: reading prior to all languages, from entrails, the stars, or dances. Later the mediating link of a new kind of reading, of runes and hieroglyphs, came into use. It seems fair to suppose that these were the stages by which the mimetic gift, formerly the foundation of occult practices, gained admittance to writing and language. In this way, language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity: a medium into which the earlier powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic.

Written April–September 1933; unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime. *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, 210–213. Translated by Edmund Jephcott.

Thought Figures

Death of an Old Man

The loss that a much younger person may feel directs his gaze, perhaps for the first time, to the laws that govern the relationship between people who are separated by a great distance in terms of age, but who may nevertheless be linked by bonds of affection. The dead man was a partner with whom the majority of things that concerned you, and the most important ones, could not possibly be discussed. Yet conversation with him had a freshness and a peaceful quality that could never be achieved with someone of the same age. This had two causes. First, any confirmation, however faint or uneffusive, that was forthcoming and that succeeded in bridging the gulf between the generations was far more convincing than confirmation between equals. Second, the younger partner found something that quite disappears later on, when the old have left him and until he himself grows old—namely, a dialogue that is free of calculation of every kind and the need to spare anyone's feelings, because neither has any expectations of the other and neither comes up against any feelings, except one that is rarely encountered: benevolence without admixture of any kind.

The Good Writer

The good writer says no more than he thinks.¹ And much depends on that. For speech is not simply the expression but also the making real of thought. In the same way that running is not just the expression of the desire to reach a goal, but also the realization of that goal. But the kind of realization—