

The Word of God  
Language in Creation Myth

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
Graduation with Honors to the Department of Languages and Literature  
At Carroll College, Helena, Montana.

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April, 2003

SIGNATURE PAGE

This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Carroll College  
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## Acknowledgements

When a fellow student asked me a few months ago whether or not I was going to turn my senior English paper into a thesis, I was amused and a bit anxious about the idea. I had convinced myself over the first four and a half years of my education at Carroll that a thesis, on top of two senior projects from two different departments, would be too much. However, after thinking and discussing it with people wiser and more experienced than I, the decision was made to forge onward. This unexpected process has, of course, been greatly aided along the way by several people.

I would like to thank Dr. Ron Stottlemeyer, who has been an enthusiastic director, a compassionate advisor, and an educational inspiration over the last five years. It was due to his encouragement, specifically in the experimental "Myth, Epic, and Romance" class, which led to the work of this thesis. In addition, I would like to thank Professor Joan Stottlemeyer for her scrupulous examination of my sometimes erratic grammar and syntax, in addition to her help and support as the director of the Academic Resource Center, and Professor Loren Graham, whose enthusiasm for linguistic study and breadth of knowledge on the subject were a welcome contribution to my own limited experience.

I greatly appreciate the comments also offered by my mother, Angelen Parrish, and Geraldine Matthias at Idaho State University, on the issues discussed in this work. Thank you as well to Mrs. Margaret Peterson and Mr. Layne Gardner of Blackfoot High School for introducing me to the world of literature. And finally, without the support of my parents, Gene and Angelen; family; friends; and forensics team, I am certain that this thesis would have never been completed. But now it is. I hope.

### Abstract

The study of both mythology and language has become increasingly critical in a multi-cultural, globalized world. Mythology embodies the worldview of its culture of origin and language communicates that worldview to others. Consequently, much has been written on the origin of both language and myth and on the linguistic style of certain myths. However, in cultures around the world, language is used not only to communicate myths, but is often a key player within them. Examining the treatment of language as a separate, unique entity in myths, and especially in creation myths, can reveal much about how ancient mythmakers viewed language. Where creation myth specifically gives language an identity, gods or creative spirits are either identified as Language, e.g., the Word, or use the powers of language as a medium of their creation. The ability of humans to speak, and thus create, is also given special importance. This role of language in creation myth can be explained by examining the connections between language and myth and language and creation. Both language and myth are dependent on the use of symbol, and the development of culture is inherently connected to this dependence. Language and creation are both relational in nature, and both involve a movement from chaos to order. The "breath of life" is a useful metaphor to conceptualize this movement. The examination of language in creation myth can shed new light on the understanding of cultures both ancient and modern as well as on the importance of language to humanity.

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Myths are the instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experience intelligible to ourselves. [...] Without such images, experience is chaotic, fragmentary and merely phenomenal.

Mark Schorer, "The Necessity of Myth"

From the beginning of human culture, peoples have attempted to understand the origins of the world in creation myths. These myths both explain and embody the worldview of the society from which they originate. A key element in understanding any culture, then, is to understand its mythology. Unfortunately, many myths no longer exist in their original linguistic form. Both the translation and transcription of oral literature automatically introduce elements of subjectivity from the scholar or scribe, and it is impossible to examine the precise worldview that many of these myths contained. Mythologists of today, including Joseph Campbell, have overcome this barrier by looking for patterns and consistencies in myths, such as the frequent references to human sacrifice as a means of salvation. In doing so, they have been able to identify nearly universal themes and elements in myths from around the world. When myth is viewed as a type of cultural artifact, it can reveal much about the identity of humankind and the values that are widely held.

A consistent factor in many myths is the unique role that language plays in creation. It is not merely a vehicle for relating the creation myth stories,<sup>1</sup> but plays an essential part in the creation itself. The "Sacred Language" entry in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* states, "Perhaps the most interesting examples of the intersection of religion and language are those cases in which language has been viewed [...] as an actual

manifestation of sacred power” (Wheelock 439). While the importance of language is certainly recognized by the academic world of today, understanding the unique role of language in creation myth is essential to understanding human culture both ancient and modern. This essay will outline the role of both myth and language to early humans, survey the presence of language in creation myth, and discuss the essential connections between the elements of language, myth, and creation.

## I

### The Role of Myth

In order to establish the importance of language in creation myth, it is first necessary to outline the function that myth may have played in ancient cultures.

Debating whether myth or culture developed first is at best a chicken-and-egg discussion, as scientific and anthropological evidence proving the origin of myth can only be indirect and universally accepted definitions of either myth or culture simply do not exist. G.S. Kirk even questions those who would assume that mythological origins *could* be discovered:

Most investigations of the mode of mythical expression are based on the premise that one can determine the origin of myths. Yet perhaps the best one can do is discover how myths seem to have been used in those cultures of the past for which significant documentation exists. (280)

At worst, this debate is a failure to recognize the inherent inter-connectedness and co-dependency of myth and culture.

Mythology is a way of communicating its culture between peoples and across time. Learning about other cultures, and one's own, through myth is perhaps their most valuable role. Based on the study of myths from cultures around the world, Joseph Campbell and many others have concluded that the universality of myth and its essential connection with mental and cultural well-being makes it fundamental to human culture. Campbell clarifies the relatedness of culture and myth:

Man, apparently, cannot maintain himself in the universe without belief in some arrangement of the general inheritance of myth. In fact, the fullness of his life would even seem to stand in a direct ratio to the depth and range, not of his rational thought, but of his local mythology. (20)

The specific details within these local myths can also reveal much about the culture they came from. It is difficult to imagine an extensive discussion of the different forms of ice, as exists in Norse creation myth, emerging out of sub-Saharan Africa. Less obvious details in myths can be just as indicative of the cultures they come from. Even the modern creation myth of the Big Bang reveals certain values about the culture that created it. Brian Swimme, in relating the story of the way things came to be, claims that "we are the first generation to live with an empirical view of the origin of the universe."<sup>2</sup> While this assertion is certainly debatable, the Big Bang theory, and the scientific means of developing it, reflects a particular world-view of a particular time, one that values empirical evidence and the scientific process. Though some scientists scoff at interpreting fact as myth, the symbolic ways in which those facts are communicated are no more "real" to modern culture than the realities embodied in creation myths of others.<sup>3</sup>

Ways in which specific myths were used in their own cultures are a bit more difficult to determine. However, the study and interpretation of myths has become increasingly popular in recent decades, and the various ways of interpreting myth can be easily transferred to a discussion of the role of myths in ancient cultures. Michael Webster, professor at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, categorizes the myriad ways of understanding and interpreting myth into twelve groups, including myth as a belief system, disguised history or philosophy, explanation, and/or an attempt to embody fundamental social conflicts.<sup>4</sup> He points out that most myths can be interpreted through any and all of these lenses, and that none of them are mutually exclusive. Given that modern research has more of a compartmentalizing tendency than did the culture it studies, it is likely that the purpose of myths to ancient peoples was more holistic.

Creation myths are often the most difficult myths to interpret because they frequently deal with the farthest removed events in time and are often deeply metaphysical. However, their specific nature as attempts to discuss or explain creation makes a certain amount of interpretation less complicated. As quoted by Robert Hood in *The Journal of Religious Thought*, Claus Westermann identifies the basic purpose of creation myth: "The primary function of the [creation] myth is to maintain the stability of the present state." To achieve this end, creation myths are both an explanatory mechanism and a moral guide to action. Furthermore, a culture that develops and reflects a particular creation myth would undoubtedly grasp the symbolic importance of that creation myth. For example, the Egyptian story of Osiris, Isis, and Horus has Thoth and Moon playing several games in succession, each of which results in Thoth's taking a

small bit of the light of the moon away. This story surely would have been recognized as a story of explanation or origin of a real event.

### Role of Language

The treatment of language in these myths, as discussed below, is indicative of the importance that it held in cultures. It is necessary, however, to first discuss what role language could have played for the myth-makers thousands of years ago. Identifying the origins of language has proved notoriously difficult, as archaeological evidence for specific sounds simply does not exist. Linguists who study languages of even a few centuries ago must look toward indirect evidence, such as poetry or the parallels between different languages of the same origin, to determine how certain words were pronounced. It is even more difficult to establish when or how specific sounds were originally used to symbolize objects or ideas.<sup>5</sup> Fortunately, identifying the role of language in human culture is somewhat easier than identifying the role of myth. And while modern theories will perhaps never agree on the specific origin of language, we can be relatively certain that ancient myth-makers were also unaware of the origin of language. Our ignorance on this point may actually be a blessing, facilitating analysis of language and myth through a common unknown and preventing the bias that may come through increased discovery.

The modern theories of evolution, however, can shed important light on the prehistoric role of language. Language is necessary for the evolutionary survival of the human species. Naming an object, event, or idea aids significantly in the recall of that thing, thus increasing chances for survival in humans, who were physically inferior to both their predators and prey (Hewes 15). Other species have also utilized this advantage

for their own survival. Research by Erick Greene and Tom Meagher on red squirrels in Montana revealed that red squirrels not only “produce alarm calls when they detect a potential predator,” but have alarm calls specific to the species and direction of a predator threat (511). The ability to identify a threat and communicate that threat to others significantly increases chance of survival for the population.

Communication, and thus language, is also essential for the maintenance of society and for the collective memory of that society. Constance Holden in *Science* quotes Ian Tattersal of the American Museum of Natural History as claiming that “empathy, intuitive reasoning, and future planning are impossible without language” (1455). Language allowed for ever more complex societies that were connected by both a language and the world-view that it contained. Thus, the use of language and the symbolic processes it involved made possible the transition from a human *population* to a human *culture*. Though it is improbable that ancient peoples would have recognized the specific evolutionary advantages of language, its importance to survival and culture would certainly have been noticed. Using myths as cultural artifacts can also function to establish this importance.

Additionally, the ability to use language is often seen as a defining characteristic of humans. In 1968, Jean Danielou explained that there are two criteria in anthropology for separating pre-human primates from sub-species more closely related to modern humans: the use of tools and art and the existence of worship and rite (11). Though more recent research has suggested that other species may also have a capacity for language, a *Science* article from 2002 comments that this capacity does not mean that language in other species is nearly as sophisticated as human language: “Most current

commentators agree that, although bees dance, birds sing, and chimpanzees grunt, these systems of communication differ qualitatively from human language.” These animal languages specifically lack human language’s “rich expressive and open-ended power” (Hauser 1570).<sup>6</sup> Worship and rite, especially, are often dependent on this symbolic expression and open-endedness, through incantation, prayer, song, storytelling, etc.

Finally, the nature of language as a universal ability is an important aspect of its function in culture. Though the secret arts of literacy and the use of written language were notoriously guarded in later cultures by a few religious or political leaders, spoken (or even signed) language is by its very nature non-exclusive. The use of this tool was, with few exceptions, open to all. In fact, studies in grammar and language patterns have shown that every human brain is hard-wired for language. Steven Pinker discusses several situations that support this conclusion in his book *The Language Instinct*: stone-age cultures discovered in New Guinea in the 1930’s, the languages that developed when slaves from several different language backgrounds were forced to work together on plantations, and several cases involving deaf children. Pinker admits that the final step in establishing the inherentness of language to the human brain—a specific gene or neural connection—has yet to be found, but does discuss current research in this area. As a list displaying process-of-elimination research, he states:

Complex grammar is displayed across the full range of human habitats. You don’t need to have left the stone age; [...] you don’t even need to be old enough for school. [...] You don’t need the intellectual wherewithal to function in society, the skills to keep house and home together, or a particularly firm grip on reality.

Indeed, you can possess all these advantages and still not be a competent language user, if you lack just the right genes or just the right bits of brain. (54)

If language is universal, then it must be important to all of humanity and not a specific group of priests or leaders. Its presence in myths that describe the origins of the entire world is certainly appropriate.

## II

### Language in Creation Myth

Many creation myths, from varied cultures, regions, and language groups, include language as a fundamental agent of the creation itself. There are two ways that language is presented in creation myths: one, the Word and the Creator as one and the same, and two, the fundamental act of creation as an act of speaking. The latter can also be divided into two categories: creation through a general speaking act and the creation of individual things through their being called forth by name. The distinction among these categories is admittedly imprecise, and the difference is often in the emphasis of the myth rather than the exclusion of one form or another. Though the reasons for these differences may later be examined for cultural importance, here they serve only as a convenient way to separate and discuss the meaning of language in creation myth.

The identification of the Word with the Creator seems to be the least common way of introducing language into creation, and the Word-as-God is primarily associated with historically related texts: the Christian gospel of John, Gnostic texts from the first centuries AD, Indian Yoga philosophy, and Egyptian creation myth. The Gospel of John, 1:1 states, "In the beginning was the Word / and the Word was with God, and the Word

was God” (New American Version). Later in the same gospel, Jesus is identified as the Word made flesh, which corresponds with the belief that Jesus is the human manifestation of God. The *Nag Hammadi Library* translation of Gnostic scripture describes the origin of the world: “A likeness then emanated from Pistis (Faith); it is called Sophia (Wisdom). It exercised volition and became a product resembling the primeval light” (172). Many scholars have pointed to historical association between the theology of John’s Gospel and Gnosticism (both pre-Christian and Christian Gnosticism). R. Wilson, in *Gnosis and the New Testament* explains that, though the actual connection between the Gospel and Gnosticism is unknown, the historical and theological parallels are unquestionable (46). For example, both of these traditions emphasize a Logos as the force of creation. Hindu writings associated with the Yoga tradition identify the creative spirit with a specific word, Om. Swami Prabhavananda’s *The Spiritual Heritage of India* explains this identification:

To a Hindu mind, the expressed sensible universe is the form behind which stands the eternal Sphota, the inexpressible, the Logos or Word. This eternal Sphota, the essential material of all ideas or names, is the power through which God creates all things. [...] Says Swami Vivekananda: “This Sphota has one word as its only possible symbol and this is Om. And by no possible means of analysis can we separate the word from the idea, this Om and the eternal Sphota are inseparable; and therefore it is out of the holiest of all holy words, the mother of all names and forms, the eternal Om, that the whole universe may be supposed to have been created.” (231-232)

An Egyptian narrative also shows striking similarity to these other myths, as the Eternal Spirit in the myth is the “creator of the Word [ . . . and] the Creator of the Order wherein I live.” This Spirit also admits, “I am the Word, which will never be annihilated in this my name of Soul.” Also in this myth is the proclamation, “The Word came into being.”<sup>7</sup> In the Egyptian myth, these statements are made before anything else—lesser gods, the earth, and mankind—is created.<sup>8</sup> Though the contributory relationships between these myths may never be fully established, it is perhaps no coincidence that they all originated in the Middle Eastern region among the Indo-European language group.

A second way that creation myth deals with language is through a creative act of speaking. This type of mythical performative language is common in the Americas, and does not name specific things but brings forth creation with only a few words. In the Mayan myth, God considers the necessity of man and light, then says, “Let the emptiness be filled! Let the earth appear!’ And the earth appeared, with mountains, valleys, rivers, lakes, grass and trees and vines.” God sees his creation and asks questions about its characteristics, and immediately, animals appear. The Maidu tribe from what is now northern California explains that creation is a declarative act of Coyote, and the Gros Ventre, or A'aninin, people in north central Montana credit the creation of the world to the spoken words of the god Nichant. The Hopi Indians describe the thoughts of the first gods as being translated into song, as the Two “sat them side by side, swaying their beautiful bronze bodies to the pulsing music of their own great voices, making the First Magic Song, a song of rushing winds and flowing waters, as song of light and sound and life.”<sup>9</sup> Cultures of the “Old” World also have myths with this type of performative language. The first chapter of Genesis is explicit that creation happened

through and because of a proclamation of God: “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”<sup>10</sup> The Qur’an repeats this origin: “When He [creator of heavens and earth] decrees a thing, He need only say ‘Be’ and it is.”

Creation of the things of the world through the naming of them is a more precise version of this performative act. In naming, god(s) do not speak in generalities about life and earth, but call the elements of creation forth through specific labels. In an ancient Hindu legend, Lord Prajapati created Earth, Atmosphere, and Sky specifically from the exclamation of their names, *Bhus*, *Bhuvah*, and *Svar*. The Mesopotamian *Enuma Elish* identifies the pre-creation world by saying that “the heaven had not been named [. . .] When no gods whatever had been brought into being, / Uncalled by name, their destinies undetermined.” At the time of creation, “Lahmu and Lahamu were brought forth, by name they were called.” The two events are presented as concurrent and parallel. Thoth calls the gods into existence in Egyptian myth, and the Gilgamesh epic of Mesopotamia also identifies creation with naming. In Tablet XII of the Sumerian Gilgamesh poems, as translated by Douglas Frayne, the creation of the world is discussed in a preamble to an adventure story. The poem states, “In those days, in those far-off days [. . .] When heaven had been separated from earth, / When earth had parted from heaven, / When the name of mankind had been determined” (130).

#### Patterns in Creation-Language Myths

When creation myths are separated into categories based on their treatment of language, certain patterns can be recognized: that language is important, that language is not anthropogenic, and that language is different from other human abilities.

The concept that language is not a human creation is inherent in most of the creation myths. David Crystal, in *Linguistics, Language, and Religion*, claims that the most universal theories about the origin of language point to a divine source. The Indian *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* makes the divine source explicit. When the Soul in the form of the Man first says, "I am," the word "I" is created. Only much later in the myth are the world and its inhabitants produced; language is a creation distinctly separate from humanity. In all of the creation myths examined, language is manifested far prior to the creation of humanity, whether through the identification of language with the creator specifically or through the use of language by the creator. Furthermore, in mythologies containing a "fall" of humans from the grace of God or a divinely ordained catastrophe, the timeline of creation places language before these events. Language is part of the original creation and is not a result of anything that humankind has done.

It could be said that spoken language is not necessary for creation and that gods would just as easily be able to create by thinking. Ernst Cassirer appears to support this view, and claims, "Thought and its verbal utterance are usually taken directly as one; for the mind that thinks and the tongue that speaks belong essentially together" (46). While he is certainly correct in the relatedness of thought and word, several myths explicitly separate the performative language from the preceding thoughts. The Hopi creation myth explains, "And then it came about that these Two had one Thought and it was a mighty Thought," and from this thought they create their spoken song. Gnostic scripture likewise discusses the origin of verbal expression: "When [Sophia] saw [Pistis] moving about in the depths of the waters she said to him, 'Child, pass through to here,' whose equivalent is 'yalda baoth.' Since that day there appeared the principle of verbal

expression.” A while later in the story, “the ruler had a thought—consistent with nature—and by means of verbal expression he created an androgyne.” If language was only important as an expression of thought, these distinctions would be unnecessary.

Not only is the speaking of the gods important, but the specific words they use to create or address creation are also significant. The name of God is the most obvious of these principle words. Hebrew scribes, when writing the name of God into their copies of the Torah, would wash their hands three times both before and after writing the word (Fishman, “The Jewish Roots of Catholicism”). The destruction of created humans in the Mayan *Popol-Vuh* was because, though the first men were able to speak, they were unable to use language appropriately: “They could speak, but what they said didn’t make sense.” These creations did not know the names of God, so God destroys them and starts over. Indian Yoga philosophy identifies the creative spirit with the specific, all encompassing word of “Om.” The words spoken by the gods are also of great importance. Many creation myths use direct quotation to discuss creation rather than expository narrative. Lord Prajapati in Hindu myth had to utter three specific words to call for the creation of Earth, Atmosphere, and Sky. The First Magic Song of the Hopi gods certainly could not have been summarized or paraphrased and have the same meaning.

Of course, there are many creation myths in which language is not specifically created or used to create, as in the *Rig Veda* or Hesiod’s *Theogony* of Greek myths. Non-linguistic creation myths often discuss creation as purely existential, as creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), or as creation out of a particular medium—the god’s own body, clay, water, etc.<sup>11</sup> Yet it is certain that the absence of language in the creation

myths of these cultures does not reflect an absence of language in the cultures themselves, but only a difference in emphasis and importance of certain ideas or objects in world-view.

The importance of language to creation can also be seen in the comparison of language to other elements of creation myth. When myths are seen as cultural artifacts, the frequency and placement of certain elements can indicate the importance of those elements in the respective culture. The most common means of creation other than language is through the act of sex. The creation myth of the Wulamba aborigines in Australia is explicit that the eternal being Djanggawul mated with his sisters to create humans. The most interesting similarity between the two performative acts of language and sexual creation is that humans have the power to do both. While individuals cannot bring about life by making a clay statue or create a new form of life by cutting themselves into pieces, humans do have the ability to create new life through sex and to create or change metaphysical reality by speaking. Creative power seems to be passed on to humanity in two powerful, and equally important forms.

However, when both sex and language are used in the same myth, it is most often that language appears before sex. There are rarely two original creative spirits who can unite in an act of creation, so one pre-creation god will often create divine offspring, and those offspring mate with the original creator, as in the creation of human beings in a myth from New Zealand; with each other, such as the mating of the Japanese gods Izanagi and Izanami; or with some non-divine aspect of creation, as the Greek gods often mate with humans they find attractive. There is often a combination of these creative forms within the same myth. The *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* describes the loneliness of

the Soul, the creation of the word “I,” the self-division of the Soul into half-fragments, and only then the birth of mankind through the union of these two pieces.<sup>12</sup>

Another frequently occurring reference in myth is to the tools that have been passed from gods to humans.<sup>13</sup> Language could also be seen as only a useful tool, similar to the fire used for heating and cooking. However, language is treated much differently than fire in mythology. In a story of the Yaruro tribe in South America, hot coals are delivered to the people through the trickery of Juma. Prometheus also gave fire to humans in violation of divine order. A more benign transfer is seen in the Bantu myth of Africa: “Mankind was without fire until Bumba showed the people how to draw fire out of trees.” However, despite the obvious importance of fire to prehistoric peoples, it is never as essential to the creation of the world or mankind as language. If anything, fire is used as a destructive tool after the world has been created.

### III

#### Myth-Language Connection

The connections between myth and language are most easily understood within the framework of culture. As stated before, human culture can be recognized by its artistic and linguistic capabilities. Both of these criteria exist only if humans are able to recognize and manipulate symbolic thought processes, which can identify something in the tangible world with something intangible, such as emotion or language, or embody the intangible in a tangible form. This symbolism is the first and most essential connection between myth and language. Myth is often interpreted as metaphor, or rhetorical symbol, for some aspect of reality—gods, natural phenomena, human behavior,

and so on. The basic function of language is also in its symbolic nature, in its ability to relate two ontologically different things—the sound and act of a word and a separate event, object, or idea—and form an association to enable regular and predictable patterns of thought and communication.

The symbolism of myth and language is different, however, from the symbolism of a dove for peace or the string around a finger reminding someone to wash the car. Bernice Slote, in a forward to *Myth and Symbol*, explains this difference: “The doubleness of literature [is] that what is given in language and form is only the embodiment of something more that is not, that cannot, be wholly stated” (v). Yet myth and language also imply a connection with reality; they are related to things that are not merely products of the imagination. John Knox, in “An Essay on the Language of Faith,” explains that myth assumes a relation to factual truth, that it is more than hypothetical and imaginative (23). A myth is not just a story that happens to be based in reality, but is assumed to say something specific *about* reality. In order for it to be a myth, it has to be believed. Language, too, is primarily based in reality; even when discussing purely theoretical objects, humans use metaphors of actual objects. Carl Jung, as quoted by Mark Schorer in “The Necessity of Myth,” observes, “Speech is a storehouse of images founded in experience, and therefore concepts which are too abstract do not easily take root in it, or quickly die out again for lack of contact with reality” (356).

As symbols that bridge a gap between the real and the imagined, language and myth cannot be merely mimicry of sounds or events, respectively. Like all narrative, myth narrative involves some aspect of interpretation. However, creation myth describes events that are remote from, or in many cases completely removed from, familiar space

and time. This nature leads interpretation of creation myth, especially, away from the literal, and leads the myths themselves away from the strict restatement of actual events. G.S. Kirk and Joseph Campbell both claim that myth stories began as narrative and only later assumed the character of myth, but myth's essential nature of more-than-symbol is dependent on the functions and allowances of a language-tuned brain. It is difficult to imagine creation myths, especially, as ever being devoid of their symbolic character.

Similarly, language most likely did not begin as mimicry. In examining what we know of language development, Eric Lenneberg has concluded that there was never such a thing as pre-phoneme, pre-grammar language (588). In the macro-development of language in cultures, language did not precede symbolic understanding. In the micro-development of language acquisition in individuals (e.g., children and people learning new languages), the understanding of language actually precedes speaking. People are usually able to understand both words and patterns in language long before they are able to translate their own thoughts into that language. Thus, the idea that words could exist before meaning is irrational. Language, Lenneberg claims, did not come about through a gradual and selective evolutionary process, but was virtually spontaneous. In a famous review of B.F. Skinner, Noam Chomsky destroys the basis for a behaviorist development of language based on classical stimulus, response, and reinforcement activities (547-578). Language was never devoid of its symbolic nature, and it was never only mimicry.

Recent biological research seems to support the spontaneous generation hypothesis of Lenneberg. Stephen Mithen claims that, somewhere around 40,000 years ago, the "walls" between specialized modules in the brain collapsed, and suddenly different areas of the brain were able to communicate with each other, thus enabling the

generalizing and symbolic thought processes that language requires (1455-58). This spontaneous breaking down of brain barriers was, according to Mithen, a result of social changes in prehistoric peoples. Of course, the opposite may also be true, that these very social changes were a result of the breakdown of mental barriers. Once again, researchers are faced with uncertainty. However, the important concept here is that the capacities of symbolism, and all of its implications, did not develop and could not have developed gradually, nor did the manifestations of symbolism in myth and language necessarily develop separately. Even when viewing primarily non-biological evidence, Ernst Cassirer proposed that the most primitive forms of myth and language are inherently connected in their genesis, and that one cannot exist without the other.

#### Language-Creation Connection

The most interesting connection that can be drawn from language in creation myth is the inherent relation of language to creation. The act of speaking a name, or any word, is an act by which a person (or a god) makes known his or her thoughts. In doing so, the speaker/creator is separating these thoughts from himself or herself and making them into separate entities. Words at once establish a distance and a bond between the idea and the speaker, and join two distinct beings that remain different. Yves Congar in *The Word and the Spirit* explains that spoken language satisfies the need of speakers to express themselves and is a way for the speaker to exist outside of him or herself (9). As speaking involves a decision to put thoughts into some form, that also means that creation, especially through speaking, is a voluntary and personal decision of a god. Creation is also often justified in these terms, that an overflowing of self-identity (at

times conceived of as Love) embodied itself in the outward expression of the identified into a separate and new entity. Many of the creation myths, as in the myth from India, establish that the reason for creation was because the god(s) did not want to be alone.

The words that are the embodiment of these creative urges are themselves powerful. Just as a creator has a certain amount of power over the creation, knowing the verbal representation of an object means that the speaker has both knowledge of the object and power over it. The one who controls the words can control the things they are connected to. This is why the Israelites were forbidden to speak the name of God. In the Mayan creation myth, the failure of the first humans to speak the proper names of God led to their destruction. Because of this relationship of power between the speaker and the spoken of, the name of something is also connected to the essential nature of that thing. In his book *Linguistics, Language, and Religion*, David Crystal associates words as connected to things with words as being things, meaning that the word used to symbolize something has unique importance (regardless of the arbitrariness of its origin). People from many different cultures change their names after certain rites of passage to indicate a change in the essential nature of their person. Ernst Cassirer attributes this name-changing to a mythic consciousness that “does not see human personality as something fixed and unchanging, but conceives every *phase* of a man’s life as a new personality, a new self” (12). A form of this name change is that of a woman taking her husband’s surname in marriage, and the modern trend of hyphenating last names suggests that the belief in the significance of names endures to this day.

Another connection between language and creation is in the relational nature of both. If creation is an attempt of the Creator to establish himself or herself as separate,

then that creation immediately implies some sort of relationship between the creator and the created. Most communication theories are based on the basic model of sender-receiver, and Wade Wheelock's entry into the *Encyclopedia of Religion* explains that every speech act consists of a language medium, a speaker, a hearer, a transmission medium, and a referential context. Hazard Adams claims that language does not merely reproduce an objective presence, but it establishes relationships between the speaker and the receiver (207). Both language and creation are inherently relational, and the importance of language as a creative agent in myth embodies this parallel.

Just as a creator establishes a relationship with the created through language, using language as incantation and/or as part of a ritual can reciprocate that relationship and allow the created to reconnect with the creator. Mircea Eliade, in *Myth and Reality*, asserts that the repetition of sacred rituals is a way for human beings to enter into mythic history and divine time (34). The creation myth of the Maori in New Zealand specifies that the words of creation can be repeated to enable worship and effect healing:

Those words [of creation] became impressed upon the minds of our ancestors, and by them were they transmitted down through generations, our priest joyously referred to them as being: The ancient and original sayings. / The ancient and original words. / The ancient and original cosmological wisdom (*wananga*) / Which caused growth from the void.

These same words of creation are repeated in Maori sacred rituals: in the implanting of children into a barren womb, enlightening both the mind and body, cheering a gloomy heart, and so forth. The Yoga system of Patanjali emphasizes that meditation on the word "Om" is the most perfect way of worshiping and reconnecting with the divine

(Prabhavananda 233).<sup>14</sup> The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes the Eucharist, the fundamental religious celebration of Catholics, as a way to “unite ourselves with the heavenly liturgy and anticipate eternal life, when God will be all in all” (¶1326). The Eucharist can only be celebrated by a priest reciting a particular phrase, which is, in turn, taken from the specific words of Christ—the Word made flesh who was present at the beginning of creation—as quoted in the New Testament.

Finally, almost all creation myths discuss creation as a movement from chaos to order. Language is also the structural manifestation, through sound, of thoughts. Hazard Adams describes language as form out of chaos, as “a process of differentiation growing out of a relatively undifferentiated state” (208). The unformed chaos of thought is changed into a physically recognizable object—it can be heard. Even gestures, an unspoken form of language, imply an “inner word” that is expressed through a physically recognizable action—it can be seen. Creation also contains this form-out-of-chaos pattern. Mircea Eliade states that creation is the “first manifestation of a thing that is significant and valid” (34). The first *manifestation*, the detectable embodiment, and not only the first concept, is important. Once again, the chaotic concept or idea of creation is essentially different from the first materialization thereof.

An additional transition of chaos to order can be made in the connection between the “breath of life” and the spoken word. As language is the structuralization of the chaotic imagination of the speaker, it is entirely possible that language as an entity is the imposition of structure on the chaotic, unformed breath of life. From chapter one of Genesis, “The earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind [the spirit of God] swept over the waters.” Immediately after this statement

is the “God said” description. Many other myths contain the “breath of God” identification, as well. In the New Zealand myth of the creation of humans, the god Tane blows the breath of life into a figure he has made from sacred red clay to create the first woman, Hine Ahu One. Just as human vocal cords form expelled air into recognizable sounds, the spirit of a god is differentiated in his or her creation, whether in a separate medium or in the breath itself. Psalm 19, “The heavens declare the glory of God, / and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. / Day pours out the word to day, / and night to night imparts knowledge,” takes on a much more literal meaning when the spirit of God itself is made manifest in the spoken work of creation.

Understanding the role of myth and language, the treatment of language in creation myth, and ultimately the connections between all of these elements is essential to understanding the humanity that is based on these myths. Even though the origin of both language and myth are unknown, it is clear that language itself is an essential part of the definition of humanity. Further research must be done to develop a study of language as an archetype in myth, and to examine the cultural implications of the different ways of treating language in myth. Also, continued effort must be made to discover the earliest forms of myth so as to enable more accurate research on them as cultural artifacts. Regardless of the direction in which the study of language and myth develop, however, the importance of language to both prehistoric mythmakers and our modern understanding of the world is unmistakable.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, creation and other myths can be related in ways other than spoken stories. These ways would include other forms of symbolic art and ritual, such as dance, art, or song.

<sup>2</sup> The big bang theory is discussed as a modern myth in the Leeming collection. For a more technical discussion of the theory, see Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. Modern culture also seems to value the dismissal of previous claims about understanding of the universe, as many scientists are also devoted to the task of debunking the big bang theory. See Geoffrey Burbridge's "Why Only One Big Bang" in the February 1992 *Scientific American* for more on this subject.

<sup>3</sup> Defining what "reality" meant to these other cultures is of course also difficult. Professor Webster explains, "Often books on mythology conveniently forget that myth stories were once all believed to be 'true' (in some sense). The problem arises when we try to figure out in what sense. For example, most Greeks probably believed that there was a god in the sky named Zeus, but did they really believe that this god had all those affairs with mortal women? Because belief is often so personal and individual, questions like this are hard to answer."

<sup>4</sup> The twelve ways of interpreting myth, as well as an extensive discussion on the nature and definition of myth, can be found on the GVSU website, <<http://faculty.gvsu.edu/webster/>>

<sup>5</sup> In an e-mail communication, Dr. Catherine Ball of Georgetown University pointed to the lack of prehistoric drawings with "little sound waves coming out of mouths." "Re: thesis information request." E-mail to Carolyn Parrish. 3 Feb. 2003.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, many creation myths themselves often portray other animals and even inanimate objects as having the power of language. However, there does seem to be a drastic difference in the depth and amount of symbolic activity between human culture and the interests of other species. Furthermore, the task of this paper is to discuss language as present in creation myth, and it is not yet possible to identify the mythologies of other species, if they do exist. Therefore, while it may be true that language is not a uniquely human ability, brevity and focus of topic require that such a discussion be left to later research.

<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, myth references are taken from Philip Novak's *The World's Wisdom*, the David Adams Leeming collection, *The World of Myth*, Philip Freund's *Myths of Creation*, or *World Mythology* by Donna Rosenberg.

<sup>8</sup> The Uitito tribe of Columbia seems to be the only source for this concept of language in creation outside of the Indo-European cultures, and Freund translates the beginning of the myth as "In the beginning the word gave origin to the father." This statement certainly establishes the importance of the Word as creator, but the rest of the myth does not appear in the translation, so the context is unclear.

<sup>9</sup> The Kagaba tribe in South American also has this association of creation with song. "The mother of our songs, the mother of all our seed, bore us in the beginning of things."

<sup>10</sup> Though the translation of the Pawnee creation myth does not specifically quote the Creator or refer to the words of creation, it does say that "Mother Corn proclaims that the flood is gone, and the Earth [is] now green. / Mother Corn commands that people ascend to the surface," which seems to give importance to the vocal commands of the Creator, Mother Corn.

<sup>11</sup> Freund organizes the different mediums of creation into five categories: The Watery Birth, The Golden Egg, Out of the Monster, the Mating of the Gods, and The Edict.

<sup>12</sup> The exception to this "creation by union" may be in creation through the sexual act of only one god, as in masturbation or the bringing forth of the earth from a womb. However, this type of creation could also be seen as merely using a medium that comes from within the body of the god/goddess. It is interesting to note, however, that this type of creation has not been passed on to humanity.

<sup>13</sup> Even in later myths, this transfer of specific tools from the divine world to the human occurs, such as the sword Excalibur in the Arthurian legends.

<sup>14</sup> As an interesting note, Patanjali is also famous for recording and establishing one of the first grammar systems of language in the history of human culture, c. 220 B.C.

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