

**The Challenge of  
Spiritual Language:  
Rudolf Steiner's  
Linguistic Style**

By *Martina Maria Sam*  
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*The Challenge of Spiritual Language* presents the results of Martina Maria Sam's many years of research into the language and style that Rudolf Steiner used when attempting to put into words insights he

had received from the spiritual realm. She began her research after observing that many people 'had problems' reading Steiner's works. Various criticisms had been put forward by them, such as that his style was 'irritating', 'laborious', 'complicated', or 'unscientific'. Such criticisms led the author to begin to look into what it was about Steiner's way of putting things over to his readers, or his listening audiences, that might be causing them a problem. Essays resulting from her research were published in the German anthroposophical journal *Das Goetheanum* in 2003, and it is these essays, translated into English (by Marguerite and Douglas Miller) that comprise the seven chapters of this book, in each of which Sam comments upon a particular characteristic of Steiner's use of language.

In the first chapter several examples of the criticisms mentioned above are given. If Steiner used "unusual linguistic structures" was it because of his poor command of the language? Sam remarks, however, that Steiner "chose and formed his lecture and writing style in full consciousness". He wrote: "Modern educated people simply say that I write in a poor style, that I do not write in proper German, because they are accustomed to putting the words in a certain order, one after the other, like clockwork. They do not speak from the soul. Therefore they are unaccustomed to someone forming his sentences differently than they do."

In the second chapter Sam explores Steiner's "battle with the language" when trying to express spiritual insights through a "language [...] calibrated to the sensory world." He strove to find the "spirit of the language" where words "cease to 'mean' what they usually mean and slip into what is observed." Furthermore Steiner stated: "that it is more important how the seer says something than what he says." The author shares many of Steiner's comments on his difficulties and how "he was obliged to deal with the language differently than is usually the case." An "inner activity", "a collaboration of soul" was what was required from the reader or listener and the more they had to grapple to understand the concepts the better, as that provided an "inner training" that would help in forming a good relationship with the spiritual world.

In the next chapter Sam gives examples of how Steiner strove to "re-enliven" the language at his disposal, how he had to find new ways of dealing with it and what a "laborious process it [was] to bring into words what is observed in the spirit." She describes

how "lecturing and writing were quite different things in his consciousness and technique." Whereas his written works came more out of what he himself wanted to bring privately, when lecturing he was attentive to the "soul needs" of his audience and he spoke spontaneously out of what arose in him from these, whilst also taking into account the location he was in and who he was speaking to. Sam mentions several lectures in particular in which one can quite clearly see a distinct difference in how Steiner delivered them. For instance, in the lectures he gave to the workmen building the Goetheanum (the Swiss headquarters of the worldwide Anthroposophical Society) he used what some would deem a "peculiar" style whereby he often "moved the verb forward" into a subordinate clause (in German the place for the verb is usually at the end of the whole sentence). He did this quite deliberately to "help... the listener". Using an example of an extract from one of these lectures, Sam demonstrates that when reading the sentence aloud it "fits the rhythm of breathing and speaking."

Sam addresses the subject of repetition in Steiner's lectures, which some found irritating. She comments that it "is only repetition at first glance; on second glance, we see that what was said was changed through fine nuances, that a new aspect is presented as a result, that what was apparently repeated has taken on a new colour as a result of what was said in the mean time." Further support for repetition comes from Steiner himself, saying that an oral lecture allowed the possibility of "turning and moving the language, and making things understandable through repetitions, so that we do not so strongly feel the shortcomings in our language which is not yet adequate for such super-sensible existence."

Sam writes that Steiner saw it as "tragic... that today people think in words rather than thoughts" and that they should "emancipate" themselves from language, and liberate themselves from "the purely lexicographic element of language". Furthermore he felt that, "our language in the present time is actually suited only to the physical world. The adequate phrase, the appropriate word no longer exists for the whole complexity of spiritual or psychological facts as they once did in times past." So there lies his problem. Steiner found Goethe's approach to language a great help, especially his ability to "set concepts and ideas in motion". With the help of this concept, he developed a method in his presentations whereby he *characterised* rather than *defined* concepts, leaving them "living" as opposed to set in concrete. Sam points to some examples of this in action in Steiner's texts. Not only was Steiner reproached for his repetition, but also for his numerous contradictions. Sam writes that Steiner justified his contradictions, saying that "later works that contradict earlier ones arise out of a spiritual perception of the spiritual world." The author explores Steiner's thoughtful and deliberate selection of the word order in his sentences. Sometimes he used an unconventional structure intentionally in order to "grab the listener by the ear" and at other times because a specific word order was required to express "delicate nuances of the spiritual". She goes on to explore other aspects of Steiner's style, for example his preference for using verbs rather than nouns. Why did he chose verbs over nouns? Because "what emerges from the spirit cannot

speak well in nouns. Because the spirit is not active in what nouns are. The spirit is in constant motion" and therefore is "of the nature of the verb."

Sam's next essay explores Steiner's "stylistic tools", such as the use of the pictorial element of words; using words that 'approximately' described something rather than pinning it down; his use of similes and comparisons and his tendency "to translate tightly woven concepts into loosely woven concepts." In this chapter Sam also looks at Steiner's use of blackboard drawings at his lectures, and how he used these to reveal the "gestures that became visible in the movement of drawing" and in which the audience could participate (inwardly) in creating. Of real interest is his statement on what "needs to enter into our education of children today: the fewest possible finished drawings, the most possible drawings created in the moment, where the child can see every stroke as it arises. In this way the child participates inwardly and thus human beings are roused to inner activity which then makes it possible to live more into the spiritual element and acquire understanding for the spiritual."

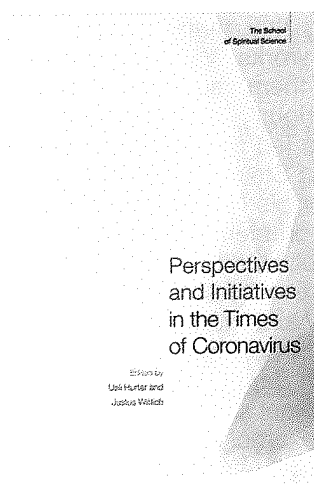
In the next essay the author examines the style Steiner used in his non-prose writings – the meditative verses, mantras and Mystery Dramas. Sam provides some examples and points out their characteristics and what effect these were intended to have on the soul of the person reading or listening. Especially important, in particular for the mantras, were the sounds of the words, for which Steiner asked that we develop an intimate *understanding* and *feeling*. On this subject he had this to say: "Language, in its sounds, is really a vastly wondrous instrument. It is much, much cleverer than human beings, and we would do well to listen to its wisdom."

If Steiner found it impossible to express himself by means of existing words, he would create new ones, both verbs and nouns in his striving "to bring life into the language." He would frequently join two or even three separate nouns together to form a compound noun, the result of which, through the combining of each individual noun's 'gesture', created what Sam refers to as "word paintings". She also points out Steiner's frequent use of "serial intensifications". Here is the example given by the author to illustrate this (it is referring to Hegel's worldview): "to a certain extent, a many-membered body of thought comprised of a multitude of individual thoughts that mutually *carry*, *support*, *move*, *enliven*, *illuminate* one another." The italicised verbs in this sentence are shown by Sam to have the nature of a "dynamic progression" from one to the other.

Sam's final essay deals with why Steiner did not make his works easier to read. We find the reason for this is that his aim was to awaken the spiritual life within the reader, to activate their thinking and arouse their mental participation. He knew that this would be difficult for some readers, but that others would put in the necessary work (the "inner training") and thus reap the benefits. He likened his works to "musical scores" that the reader was, in a way, expected to 'listen to'. As a spiritual scientist, Steiner wrote these 'musical scores' by getting in touch with the creative powers of language. Sam relates how Steiner experienced this process. She concludes with a look at the future of spiritual science, with Steiner warning that we must

emancipate ourselves from the language "as it exists today" and fructify it and predicting that in the far future a new language will be 'born' out of spiritual science. Primarily, *The Challenge of Spiritual Language* cannot fail to encourage those who have ever grappled with any of Rudolf Steiner's works to look more kindly on him once they become aware of the fundamental intention that underlies his linguistic style. As someone with a keen interest in linguistics, I found Martina Maria Sam's essays fascinating and I can imagine that those who lecture or who speak publicly would find the information this book imparts about the use of language of particular interest. It is a slim book, but a very interesting one and well worth the price.

Rosemary Usselman



### **Perspectives and Initiatives in the Times of the Coronavirus**

*Edited by Ueli Hurter and Justus Wittich*

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The unprecedented lockdown imposed in response to the Coronavirus outbreak has resulted in a great deal of reflection regarding our personal lives, the world

we live in and how we respond to a health crisis. The draconian measures imposed have affected all spheres of life and meant that most cultural activities have had to cease and events that bring people together, be cancelled. This of course has also applied to activities at the Goetheanum, in Dornach, Switzerland, the world headquarters of the Anthroposophical Society. For several months the building has had to be closed to the public.

The Goetheanum leadership decided to take the opportunity presented by this closure to work together on the issues underlying the crisis and tease out what they felt to be the essentials.

This book is one outcome of an intense period of work that took place in March of this year.

It begins with a concise summary of the task and mission of the School of Spiritual Science at the Goetheanum: "*The Goetheanum in Dornach is the centre of the School of Spiritual Science. This was founded by Rudolf Steiner Ph.D (1861-1925) and his co-workers with the aim of fostering training and study, further education and practical initiatives in various aspects of civilization. The founding of this school was based on the insight that an exclusively reductionistic scientific approach cannot effectively address the complex problems of the individual areas of life. Rather, it was considered necessary to bring about holistic, ecologically rational concepts for a productive connection between the natural sciences and humanities, art and religion. From the very beginning, a new understanding of the living*