

From Thou to IT: Information Technology from the Perspective of the Language Philosophy of Rosenzweig and Rosenstock-Huessy

Otto Kroesen

Information Technology and Living Speech

Information technology is conquering the world. Internet, communication by email and all kinds of data traffic constitute not only a climax of technological development, they also constitute the backbone of the global economy. By means of the zeroes and ones of computer language, IT is making all the different cultural groups, professional groups, classes and castes, tribes and consumer societies compatible with one another. The question, however, is whether the exchange of information can produce more than superficial communication. Can it also bring the representatives of different human cultures and religions into each other's moral neighbourhood?

This contribution contends that information technology in itself does not lead to mutual understanding. Rather, it is mutual understanding, the correlation of people facing one another, that leads to new technology. Information technology is therefore to be considered as the result of human communication. To summarize this contention: communication leads to information.

The development of technology thus goes through the full cycle of speech that is described by the 'grammatical method'.

The Grammatical Method

If indeed communication leads to information and thus to technology, then our present world needs the challenge of and dialogue between the representatives of the different cultures and religions of this planet. That same need was felt by two Jewish friends in the crisis at the beginning of the twentieth century. When, during and after World War I, the two friends Rosenstock-Huessy and Rosenzweig discovered for the first time the meaning of living speech, they developed what Rosenstock-Huessy later called the 'grammatical method'. It is significant that this new method, which describes the living process of human speech, was not discovered behind the desk of individual scientists but in the process of living speech itself.¹ This might be paradigmatic for the type of planetary communication that religions and cultures have to embark on.

Traditional philosophy still operates with a set of oppositions: subject as opposed to object, symbol opposed to number, means to goals, meaningful existence to anonymous systems. Thanks to this set of binary oppositions it becomes impossible to bridge the gaps. It is here – remarkable as it may seem – that the language philosophy of Rosenzweig and Rosenstock-Huessy proves helpful, because here for the first time the philosophy of human speech offers a thorough alternative for the binary oppositions that both philosophy and theology inherited from Descartes (Rosenstock-Huessy 1970, 1–19). Both Rosenzweig and Rosenstock-Huessy perceive the world and human society as constantly renewed by the dialogue between challenge and response, need and solution, God and man. The historical process of human speech dynamizes the static opposition between subject and object. In the tension between past and future time, again a new language is created, which serves to articulate common experience in response to the challenges of the future. The universe does not consist only of the two poles of subject and object, but also of the two other poles of past and future, and thereby the unity of the human subject is restored.

Both Rosenstock-Huessy and Rosenzweig drew upon a specific tradition of speech in formulating their conception of language. Central to Rosenzweig is his experience of being part of the Jewish community, which as it were realizes salvation in its internal community life, in its feasts and in its moral awareness. Central to Rosenstock-Huessy is his being part of the history of the church in which time and again the Christian soul conquers new terrain, creates new institutions and new types of man. In other words, where Rosenzweig concentrates on the central event of language, which is the

revelation of love, Rosenstock-Huessy concentrates on ever-new modulations of human speech and human existence as an act of faith, the confidence to enter upon a new and unknown future.

Their philosophies of language are in dialectical opposition to one another, as expressed by the titles of their main works: *Star of Redemption* and *Cross of Reality*.² For both friends, however, more important than their differences was their common opposition against the German idealist philosophy of the nineteenth century, which they considered to be a form of 'pagan' philosophy. In *The Star of Redemption* Rosenzweig expresses a conception of paganism as the human attempt to come to grips with the surrounding universe exclusively by means of thought and logic. In such a universe, thought can construct reality in any imaginable way. There is no fixed point of reference, no authority, no orientation (Rosenzweig 1976 [1921], 91–99). Everything may as well be true and untrue.

A similar thing happens in the creation and construction of technology. Just as the construction of meaning in language, the construction of technology is like swimming in an ocean. One research group may invent a new type of asphalt; another group may invent a machine to cut onions into pieces; yet another group may develop a new television screen. It is not only the interpretation of language that seems to be affected by postmodernism; technological development makes a postmodern impression as well. There is no common language to provide orientation. When no common terms are established, the only thing that remains is the ability to speak to one another, to try to create a common interpretation of reality by facing one another. This is the process the 'grammatical method' tries to describe.

In what kinds of situations does living speech originate? When do we really need to speak? Apparently this is always the case in situations of crisis and conflict (Rosenstock-Huessy 1981, 9).³ When disaster comes upon human beings and when war is waged, then human beings need to speak. But at that very moment first we cannot speak. A new problem puts stress upon us, and no solution, and therefore no words, no names can serve as yet to reach a common understanding. In such a situation the first priority is to find the right name, the new name, which may articulate the present predicament. The articulation of a new name, which functions as a new imperative, is therefore the starting point of living speech. The answer is not yet found, but the item is on the agenda. It is named.

Since the meaning of the new name still has to be found, different answers are tried. In this second phase of speech there is opposition as well as dialogue between the different parties and participants. The word 'party' expresses exactly what is happening: everybody is capturing part of the truth. Everybody tries and wishes for a solution. The present, therefore, is not the present of the indicative, it is the present of the subjunctive.⁴ The indicative

'indicates' states of affairs, but the subjunctive contains a longing. In the imperative the 'more than human' is bearing upon us; in the subjunctive it is the human being who speaks. People who give their different answers are confronting one another and opening up towards one another; they expose themselves to one another and at the same time they are striving for a new peace, a new community. Every existing community once came into being thanks to this process of answering to a common call. No community is just 'natural'.

When an issue is settled, when the different parties find 'speaking terms', a solution is found. Now the process of opposition and dialogue is more or less coming to an end. We know how the problem, the imperative that started the whole process, should be handled. 'We!' The parties belonging to this 'we' may still bear the scars of their conflicts, but in the end they have found new practices, a new code of existence that from now on is their common heritage. Let us, for example, look at the French revolution and the way it tried among other things to instill a more rational way of measuring (Rosenstock-Huessy 1993 [1938], 201). The inch, foot and yard – measurement standards derived from the human body – were in need of replacement with more rational standards. The centimetre, metre and all the other features of the decimal system derived from the globe of the earth. It was primarily England, proud of its traditions, that showed intense resistance to this new method. But even England could not escape the necessity of standardizing measurement yardsticks that imposed itself thanks to the progress and the progressive application of science and technology.

The grammatical form of the imperative is an articulation of the future that imposes itself as urgent on the present. The subjunctive articulates the present, in which new solutions are tried. And the form of the verb, which articulates the past in which a common solution has been found, is the participle. When the issue is 'settled', when new terms are 'speaking', the huge problem that started the whole process of language is reduced to a technical question, a 'technicality'. Settling the issue by creating a common past is the third phase of speech.

Once we know how to handle the issue, what remains is implementation. Even on this level many problems need to be solved. But these are no longer problems between man and man, but between man and nature. At this stage in the language process we are confronted with problems related to the world outside. We need to create institutions; we need to create the material infrastructure for the whole fabric of human intercourse in order to make nature serve man. At this stage 'dead' matter is renewed and again made part of living processes (Rosenstock-Huessy 1963, 178).⁵ This metaphor provides us with a nice definition of technology.

In this fourth phase the indicative is the predominant grammatical form of

speech. The indicative indicates states of affairs, facts in the world outside. The world outside entails a whole set of institutions, practices, regulations, social agreements and human qualities, so it is quite appropriate to talk about technological regimes, which represent the prevailing paradigms of the relationship between human beings and the surrounding material and institutional world (van de Poel 1998, 12). Since technology is more effective if applied on a large scale, it is evident that effective technology cannot do without human agreement, common understanding and procedures. The ecological problems of our present world as well as the poverty that still plagues one-third of the world population are not primarily technological problems. Basically what is lacking is the establishment of human agreement on the way to handle the problems. The people involved have not gone through the full cycle of speech. There is too much application with lack of orientation.⁶

Information Technology

Information technology has become the most influential technology of the twentieth century. Is that only coincidence? A matter of fortune and contingency? No, it isn't. It is the end result of a long historical development in which large parts of humanity, foremost in Europe and America, increasingly found a form of agreement and common understanding, in which technology in general and information technology as a climax could find its way and flourish.

Information technology is the result of a deep conviction that Rosenstock-Huussy dates back even to the cloister of Cluny and the days in which the feast of all souls was installed (Rosenstock-Huussy 1989 [1931], 122). The feast of all souls, the day after the feast of all saints, marks a new view on reality. It says that salvation is no longer a matter of heaven only, but it is also about changing our earthly existence. From now on redeemed man should partake in salvation by establishing and ordering justice in this world. This imperative lasted a thousand years. Its inspiration runs through all western history, from the moment the church formulated civil law thanks to the law book of Gratian in the Middle Ages, via the aspiration of natural scientists to discover the laws of nature (Toulmin 1993, 69) until the Russian revolution with its aim to have technology satisfy all the needs of mass society.

The famous theologian and philosopher Pascal tried to invent a calculation machine. On the one hand he emphasized the grace of God over against human selfishness. On the other hand if God then showed himself to be merciful, human beings should be served, helped and sustained in their concrete material existence. The need for information automation was felt in those areas where a massive amount of data had to be processed. Accounts

of computer history emphasize that the need for this calculation device was felt both in military industry and in those institutions that had to coordinate and fulfil the needs of mass society (Mowshowitz 1989 [1976], 40, 43).

The participation of every human being on the globe in the emerging world society and the introduction and the development of information technology are bound together. In a sense, the computerization of society has become the concrete form of Christian universality. When every person counts, no person can refuse also to be counted with. The original inspiration for exchange of information via telephone lines, and so on, from which the Internet originated consisted of the aspiration for scientific progress and its acceleration. The drive to serve mankind is the original inspiration behind the scientific development of the western world. In antiquity, people would not share their inventions but keep them secret. The longing to serve humankind pushes the self-interest of the scientists involved to the background.

The 'We' of Trial and Temptation

Rosenzweig starts where Rosenstock-Huessy ends. He begins with the minimum of knowledge about language that philosophy had agreed upon, and he takes care to corroborate every point of his discourse before taking the next step. This means that he starts with the 'indicative', the language of mathematics and logic and also the language of philosophy. His first question is 'What can a logical mind know about God, world and man?' After a long discussion, his conclusion is that the only thing the human mind can do is make an intellectual construction of these three realities, whatever they are. Yet the human mind can do one more important little thing: it establishes the insight that these constructions of God, world and man are only constructions of the mind, so far. They lack reality. 'Reality' is like an infinite small number, approaching zero, but never reached (Rosenzweig 1976 [1921], 23, 96). From where does the human mind have this knowledge?

The human mind does know it, because being human is more than thinking. We were always already there. This 'always already there' represents a life that is already more than thought. There is already some order, some rightness, some kindness, some goodness, even in natural existence. This self-sufficiency and feeling alright and living straightforward is what we could call the 'pagan phase' of human life, that is, the phase of tradition, of repetition (Rosenstock-Huessy 1993 [1938], 219–29).

But this phase is only a preliminary to the second phase, in which a human being receives a calling and destination. When a person receives a calling, is chosen and assigned with a necessary task, then that person is singled out, is loved. Being loved and receiving a commandment is one and the same experience (Rosenzweig 1976 [1921], 197).⁷ It is what Rosenstock-

Huessy called the state of receiving an imperative (Rosenstock-Huessy 1963, 759).⁸

A new imperative establishes a new community. Rosenzweig of course stresses the importance of Jewish community life as the decisive human answer to the imperative of the love of God. But he nonetheless leaves room for the Christian answer to this same call, which does not consist of the Jewish answer of 'eternalization', the marginal perpetuation of Jewish community life. Rather, the Christian answer encompasses the conquering of the world part after part, realizing time and again new partial attempts at an answer and recreating the world accordingly (Rosenzweig 1976 [1921], 378–80). The Jewish and the Christian answers represent a dialogue to be continued throughout history.

Now of main importance for us, keeping in mind the debate on information technology and technology in general, is the translation of the imperative heard in the answer given. In other words, the challenge put before us by history, or by God in history, is translated into a new community life, into a new 'we'. Here the word 'trial' is key. In German, Rosenzweig uses the word 'versuchen', which could also be translated as 'temptation', as is used in the prayer: Do not lead us into temptation . . . (Rosenzweig 1976 [1921], 296). The idea behind the use of this word is that every human answer consists of an attempt, a trial and a temptation as well.

Human beings are obliged and challenged to answer the imperative and yet their answer may be wrong. It is wrong if it is not right on time, when it is too early for this answer or when this answer is already out of date. One cannot establish the kingdom of God all at once. One can only take the next step required. Many victims fall when untimely answers are put into practice, too early or too late. The answer is given too early or too late when people stop listening and speaking with one another. Then an old language, one that does not fit the present situation, is spoken too long and new aspirations are ignored, or a new language is established by revolution too early, without recognizing the heritage of the past (Rosenstock-Huessy 1963, 471–79). The challenge of the moment (1), the answer given (2), the human community that agrees on this solution (3) and the state of affairs in history (4) must come together at the right time to give effectiveness to this one answer.

The (Un)timeliness of Technology and of IT

It looks as if information technology did come right on time. It was the answer of technology to the emerging mass society of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It seems appropriate to call the twentieth century the technological century. In a sense, the somewhat cynical aspiration of the Russian revolution has become the only language common to all mankind –

the mere fulfilment of human needs with the help of technology and organization or ‘electrification and Soviets’, as Lenin called it; quoted in Rosenstock-Huessy 1993 [1938], 170.

The language of technology, figures and numbers has become the one and only language that all people of this earth came to agree upon. And since large-scale technology depends on human understanding and agreement for its effectiveness, this agreement has proven to be a tremendous power in changing the face of the earth. The emerging global economy is the result of it. Correctly stated, it is the result not only of technological hardware as such, but even more of the technological mentality of humanity. Whatever country or civilization is involved, whatever critical attitude people may express towards western affluent nations, the great ambition of every nation and civilization is to have its turn to enter the era of technology and to share in its fruits.

Information technology came right on time because here is a technology that creates the capacity for the organization of mass society. But from another perspective the reverse seems the case. Are we not rushing too quickly into a future that in fact overlooks the one next step that should be taken now? This rush into the future in fact victimizes large numbers of people all over the world, who do not have the power, whether it be production power or purchasing power, to cope with this global field of forces and who become marginalized more and more.

It appears that information technology shares the ambivalence of the entire technological era. The emerging global society cannot do without it and at the same time it has great problems with it. It – IT – is the fulfilment of the European utopia, the European ambition to reorder the world with the help of judiciary and natural laws. A worldwide economy of money and information is realized, but what is lacking is a worldwide economy of human qualities from different times and layers of history (Kroesen 2001, 143–59). Therefore in fact only half of Europe’s ambition is fulfilled. Europe has always consisted of a plurality of cultural forms, which came into existence in a series of revolutionary efforts taking place in different countries and at different times. This plurality implies more than coordination alone.

Every European nation has gone through a learning process in which it had to receive and inherit qualities of cultures that it initially did not like, and maybe will not like in the future. Even Italy needs to inherit the qualities of the German civil servant; even England must make room for French individualism and genius and for France’s appetite for the new; even Russia has to make room for England’s parliamentarism. The fast communication of information technology cannot make redundant the slow communication process involved in the inheritance of different peoples and cultures. In this sense, information technology is not only a fulfilment of the European

utopia, but also a temptation. Europe cannot escape the need to turn the technological neighbourhood of the global village into a moral neighbourhood as well.

Humanities and Technology

Theology as well as philosophy has a long tradition of criticizing technology. The time has come to give technology its due honour for having established a living standard like never before for masses of people, for enabling a global economy that no people on this earth can do without. But it is also clear that the exchange of information cannot replace face-to-face communication between living people in opposition and dialogue, wherein people who start by being different end up finding common terms for their existence. Even in Europe the monetary unity is not sufficient to bring real unity. The European Parliament is the weakest part of the European Community because the peoples of Europe have not yet conceived something like a European citizenship together with a charter of political rights conferred in belonging to it (Ullman 1998, 89–90).

Speech, exchange of meaning, is needed to establish more than economic relationships. The humanities should no longer be proud that they are of no economical use, as if they were some luxurious nonsense. Instead they should emphasize their necessity, even their economical necessity. The ‘grammatical method’ of Rosenzweig and Rosenstock-Huessy shows that the humanities and the sciences do not constitute two separate spheres of existence in opposition to one another, but that they need one another and are part of the one process of human speech. They together and in their opposition constitute the recreation process in which the word of God (in secular language, the challenge society faces at this moment) echoes in the dialogue of human beings, in commonly accepted solutions and in the speechless (Rosenstock-Huessy 1963, 226) functioning of technology.

Notes

- 1 At the end of their correspondence during World War I, Rosenzweig asked Rosenstock-Huessy about his views on language. Rosenstock-Huessy answered with a long letter entitled ‘Angewandte Seelenkunde’, which was later published in *Die Sprache des Menschengeschlechts*. Thereupon Rosenzweig wrote his famous book *Star of Redemption*, which presented his version of the ‘grammatical method’. His approach largely drew on the letter from Rosenstock-Huessy. Many years later Rosenstock-Huessy gave final form to his teachings on language in different works of which *Soziologie* and *Die Sprache des Menschengeschlechts* are the most important.
- 2 Rosenstock-Huessy published the first part of his *Soziologie* in 1956 and the second part in 1958 at Kohlhammer, Stuttgart. The title *Soziologie*, however, was forced

- upon him by the publisher, who considered as unacceptable the original title, which read: *Im Kreuz der Wirklichkeit – Eine Nachgoethische Soziologie* (Translation: *The Cross of Reality – A Post-Goethean Sociology*).
- 3 Rosenstock-Huessy: 'In plunging into the darkness in which man cannot yet speak or no longer does speak to his brother man today, we shall prepare ourselves best for the answer to the questions: what is speech?, how does it originate?, why do we speak?, which of course, are one and the same question in its diverse aspects.' When speech is approached in this way, it suddenly appears that it cannot have originated, for example, as a communication device in hunting. Rosenstock-Huessy suggests that the first layer of language consisted of names used to keep the spirits of the dead alive.
 - 4 The grammatical method of Rosenstock-Huessy and Rosenzweig gives us reason to stop the theological habit of talking about the love of God and God's mercy in terms of the 'indicative'. God's mercy is not a fact in outward reality, and there is no justification for talking about mercy in objectifying terms. Love is a vocative. Being loved is being called upon. God's love and mercy are an imperative by which we are awakened, challenged and authorized.
 - 5 Rosenstock-Huessy: 'Technik ist Abfallverwertung: rückgliedert die Abfälle, die Werkstoffe zurück ins Leben' (Translation: 'Technology is recycling of waste: bringing the wastes, the materials back into life').
 - 6 The large-scale 'Flood Action Plan' in the nineties of the last century in Bangladesh is a case in point. The plan did not fit with the local situation, and newly built dykes were even damaged because farmers needed the rising water to feed the soil.
 - 7 Rosenzweig: 'Aber das Imperativische Gebot, das unmittelbare, augenblicksentspringene und im Augenblick seines Entspringen auch schon lautwerdende – denn Lautwerden und Entspringen ist beim Imperativ eins –, das "Liebe mich" des Liebenden, das ist ganz vollkommener Ausdruck, ganze reine Sprache der Liebe' (Translation: 'But the commanding imperative, the immediate, momentous and momentarily resounding – the resounding and originating of an imperative is the same process – the "Love me!" of the loving, that is complete and perfect expression, pure speech of love').
 - 8 Rosenstock-Huessy: 'Liebe verwandelt. Sie beschwört und befiehlt. So wird das Du geradezu in der Liebesverwandlung des Imperativs erst entdeckt' (Translation: 'Love transforms. It conjures and orders. Thereby the thou is originally discovered in the transformation by a loving imperative').

References

- Kroesen, Otto
 2001 'The Empowerment of Floating Identities', in Anton Vedder (ed.), *Ethics and the Internet* (Antwerp: Intersentia).
- Mowshowitz, Abbe
 1989 [1976] *The Conquest of Will* (Delft: Eburon).
- Poel, Ibo van de
 1998 *Changing Technologies* (Twente: University Press).

Rosenstock-Huessy, Eugen

1963 *Die Sprache des Menschengeschlechts* (Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider).

1970 'Farewell to Descartes', in *I Am an Impure Thinker* (Norwich, VT: Argo Books).

1981 *The Origin of Speech* (Norwich, VT: Argo Books).

1989 [1931] *Die Europäischen Revolutionen und der Charakter der Nationen* (Moers: Brendow Verlag).

1993 [1938] *Out of Revolution: Autobiography of Western Man* (Norwich, VT: Argo Books).

Rosenzweig, Franz

1976 [1921] *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Den Haag: Nijhoff).

Toulmin, Stephan

1993 [1990] *Kosmopolis* (Kampen: Kok Agora).

Ullman, Wolfgang

1998 *Geduld liebe Dimut!* (Leipzig: Forum Verlag).