Rahner on *Sprachregelung*:
Regulation of Language? Of Speech?

Frans Jozef van Beeck, S.J.

Introduction: Homage to Karl Rahner

The late Karl Rahner's elder Jesuit brother Hugo, a fine scholar as well as a fine stylist, is said to have quipped at one time that he hoped to become famous in his old age by translating Karl into German. Yet Karl's works did win for their author, in 1973, the Sigmund Freud Prize for Scholarly Prose of the German Academy for Language and Literature, with the citation stating: "The master of the literary word has succeeded in winning a new hearing for the word of religion" (Weger 1984:8). What a striking contrast between two appraisals!

The first, humorous remark calls to mind the high degree of abstraction, formalism, and technicality in Rahner's theology, where terms have to be distinguished: *existentiell* is not identical with *existential*, and *formell* is not the same as *formal*, and the "transcendental" must be carefully told apart from the "categorical." This aspect of Rahner's works, if we apply Walter Ong's analysis, is associated with the visual, the objectifying, the analytical, the logical—in short, with the kind of literacy that is associated with *reading*, with concentration on, and analysis of, words and terms, and further down the road, with scientific method, along with its panoply of terminological tools.

There is a second aspect to Rahner's works—the one which the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung, in awarding him the prize, must mainly have had in mind. Rahner's work has deep roots in the literary world, where the living word, oral-acoustical, the interpersonal, the synthetic, and the rhetorical are predominant. In fact, the citation makes explicit reference to this: Rahner has won a new *hearing* for the word of religion. After all, the word *Sprache*, in the name of the Academy that

awarded the prize, conveys a concern not only with "language" and "usage," but also with "speech" — not only with *langue/langage*, but also with *parole*, in F. de Saussure's classical distinction. Rahner has indeed greatly enriched the German language and the usage of theology viewed as the stable, available linguistic equipment scholarly theology needs; in this way, he has succeeded in making large new areas of cultural and religious experience habitually amenable to theological expression and discussion. But this success is rooted in a more fundamental achievement in the area of live speech: once touched by Rahner, the German language and the language of theology have *sounded* differently. Many of Rahner's formulas have rung a new note; a new excitement and a new eloquence have been brought to the international theological conversation.

This second, literary aspect of Rahner's work is most prominent in some of his more "popular" writings in the areas of pastoral practice and spirituality, and in his many interviews, recently published—all of them models of liveliness and depth. Still, it is by no means absent from the "heavier" writings, which is consistent with the fact that a large portion of Rahner's works, especially his essays in the many volumes of the *Theological Investigations*, were not *written* by him at all, but, of all things, *dictated*—periodic sentences and second-order abstractions and all. What we read, in other words, is very often live speech edited for the purposes of publication. Augustine preaching and Thomas Aquinas dictating come to mind, both of them with their scribes scribbling. Hans Urs von Balthasar, who has tended to claim the great aesthetic traditions of the Christian West as the principal source of his theology, once conceded in an interview that Rahner has been "the strongest theological power of our day"; but he then proceeded to characterize the distinctive difference between himself and Rahner as follows: ". . . our points of departure were always different, really. There is a book by Simmel, entitled *Kant und Goethe*. Rahner opted for Kant, or Fichte, if you wish—the transcendental starting-point. And like the *Germanist* I am, I opted for Goethe" (*Herder-Korrespondenz* 1976:75-76). Let the last sentence of this confession pass; the one before that, in its baldness, does Rahner, a life-long reader of poetry, and his written work, with its strong undertow of literary and theological passion, a serious injustice. "Much of what Rahner wrote may be stiff reading. But that is no reason to deny he had the gift of literary

language-use" (Weger 1984:8).

Noticing the coexistence of these two, the periodic sentence and the accoutrements of second-order abstraction, is a good way to approach the literary complexity of Rahner's work. For all its high literacy, the periodic sentence hails from the world of rhetoric, with its cultivation of conviction, persuasion, and loyalty; it is a product of the tradition that has Cicero and Quintilian for its masters. The other ingredient, the abstractions, along with their daunting array of terminology, hail from the dispassionate world of methodical intellectual operations, aware—with a clarity that certainly goes back to the *Aufklärung*, but beyond that to scholasticism—of their uses, but also of their limitations. Walter Ong has explained that thought in a "preliterate," that is to say, a rhetorical culture is bound up not with dispassionate observation, but with the dynamic world of interpersonal communication; once the world has been made "objective," set off from the personal world as essentially neuter—in the best Kantian fashion—thought is exercised no longer as a response to the world but as an operation upon it (Ong 1970:22ff.). One of the attractive features of Rahner's work is precisely the harmonious, yet tensile, co-existence of two styles of thought, along with their corresponding linguistic styles. On the one hand, we have faith seeking to address Church and World, as well as trying to respond to them, both with a passion; on the other hand, we have the same faith dispassionately seeking for its own foundation, and probing Church and World to find the core of their integrity: the periodic sentence and the terminological tool.

"Sprachregelung"

No wonder that Rahner, so eloquent and at the same time so formal a writer, came to take a strong interest in the status of theological language. More particularly, he came to take a strong interest in what he called *Sprachregelung*, "linguistic ruling" (Rahner 1966:54ff.): the communal, i.e., ecclesiastical, fixation of doctrine in *terminological* form. The word first occurs in an essay entitled "What is a Dogmatic Statement?", first published, in German, in 1961. Over the next ten years, Rahner regularly returned to the subject, as appears from the lists of citations in the *Schriften zur Theologie*, which give the original dates and occasions of the individual essays.[1]

It appears that Rahner saw the need for a treatment of the

meaning of terminological doctrine mainly in three related areas of theological inquiry, namely, (1) the relationship between kerygma and dogma, (2) ecumenical relations, and (3) the obligations imposed by magisterial definitions.

Sensitivity to the tension between the ("kerygmatic") language of faith and the formal language of dogma, as well as their relative autonomy, became a fundamental feature of Rahner's thought. His main emphasis came to be on the fact that the latter is an intellectual specialization, and hence a limitation, of the former, and one dependent on historical circumstances (esp. Rahner 1966:54-58).

In treating ecumenical matters, Rahner came to apply this specialization-concept. It allowed him to explore the implications of pluralism, and thus to show the significance of dialogue—dialogue among Catholics and with other Christians, but also with non-Christians. This dialogue, Rahner argued, was not only possible as a matter of principle, given the partiality of divergent dogmatic expressions. It was also a downright requisite for the deeper understanding of one's own faith-commitment; ultimately, it would remind all participants of the basic function of all theological and religious language—the *reductio in mysterium* (Rahner 1969:85-87; 1974b:40-42; 1974d:251-52).

The authority of terminological dogma is not Rahner's most fundamental theme, yet it appears to be the one he treats with the highest sense of urgency. It is never far to seek, not even when the first two areas are the principal subject of discussion. It was this issue which brought Rahner face to face with the issue of the unity of the Catholic Church in believing, and, in connection with this, with the functions of the *magisterium*. What is the obligatory force of terminological dogma, and how is its interpretation to be regulated (Rahner 1974a:14-17; 1974c:112-13; 1974e:21ff.; 1974f:131-32)? The controversy surrounding Hans Küng's *Infallible*? occasioned much pointed discussion along these lines (Rahner 1976a:62-65; 1976b:78-83). Still, we should not forget that the question had already come up much earlier, and in a far quieter, more speculative context, when Rahner was pleading for an alternative terminology in trinitarian theology (Rahner 1970:108— "regulation of language").

Terminological Dogma: From Meaning to Function

Now what is interesting—certainly from an "Ongian" point of

view—is that Rahner, in treating the problems connected with terminological dogma, refers only to the problem of *meaning* involved. His theme is, invariably, that the meaning of these dogmatic expressions, is *relative*: relative, that is, to the original kerygmatic expressions, to other approaches to the same mystery, to the ecclesiological issue of unity in believing, and ultimately to the mystery involved in and behind the proposition.

Rahner is not by any means alone in treating the issue in this way. In fact, while his distinctive contribution lies in his particular conception of the "relativity" of doctrine, and in his reasons for it, he scarcely differs with any other theologian on the basic question as to what the issue is, namely, one of *meaning*: the interpretation of terminological doctrines is a *cognitive* matter. It is both interesting and a bit surprising to watch such a sensitive and eloquent stylist as Rahner agreeing with most of his colleagues, and even with the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, on this basic point.

The observation just made is important. It involves the realization that terminological dogma is widely regarded, among theologians, as regulated *language*. Hence the standard practice of interpretation: one concentrates on a *fixed dogmatic text* (preferably set in its historical, and especially its literary, context) in order to establish what this particular doctrine means.

This essay is written to suggest that this concentration on the *cognitive* (in Ongian terms, the predominantly *visual*) function of doctrine is incomplete. Dogmatic propositions, even the most terminological ones, can, and often do, also function in *affective* (that is to say, predominantly *oral-acoustical*) ways. We will argue, therefore, that terminological dogma often involves the regulation of *speech*. To make this case, some preliminary observations of a general linguistic nature are in order.

Connotation in Natural Language

The distinction most frequently used to deal with the way words function is that between *denotation* and *connotation*: words "say" more than that which is amenable to our cognitive constructs. Words *connote*. That is part of their attractiveness: they are not only precise; they are also eloquent. This applies not only to individual words, but also, and even more, to word-complexes: they say more than they say. This means, very concretely, that they betray, even in written or printed form, that

they "address," not only issues, but also *people in situations*: they create an audience in the very act of conveying thought. Much of the time, such situations and audiences are incidental: many utterances are *ad hoc*, fleeting, and impermanent; most language is the verbal accompaniment of the ways in which we do this, that, and the other thing with Tom, Dick, and Harry.

But there are situations that are more permanent, and they are characterized by stable patterns of connotative language-use, especially if those situations are "natural": the family, the village, the tribe, even the school. These permanent human configurations are characterized, as Walter Ong has not tired of pointing out, by language-use that is strongly *formulary*: myths, epics, sagas, legends, proverbs, tribal histories, family stories, playground cant, and what have you. Notice that the term "connotation" is really too weak to convey all that is involved here; it is better to resort to a term like "function" to approach the issue. The formulary usages of more or less permanent natural human configurations function as the bearers of the group's identity, and those who speak and listen in these situations react, not so much to *what* is said or heard, as to the way the words are *used appropriately*, i.e., as a function of the understanding and the loyalty that hold the group together. In joining such a group, *we learn the usage before we get the understanding*.

Meaning and Use of Terms

In what we have said so far, we have been dealing with the formulary use of natural language, whose constitutive elements are what we know as *words*—"regular" words. But our language, even our everyday language, employs not only words, but also *terms*: special words, usually (though by no means always) derived from foreign roots; words which you have to know how to pronounce and use right, because they tend to have very precise, usually abstract meanings laid down by definition. In other words, *terms are maximally denotative*, at least in intention; in fact, one definition of "term" is: a word without connotations, to be used exclusively in the service of rational discourse about objective realities. Yet at the same time, terms look and sound, certainly to the non-initiated, a lot like *formulas*, and so the question arises: do terms also function as bearers of community loyalty?

The answer is obvious: yes. But we must be careful here. In natural language, there is a close, spontaneous connection

between the *meaning* of a word and its *appropriate use*, between its cognitive meaning and its rhetorical impact. In the case of terms, no such close connection prevails. Terms mean what they are defined to mean, and hence, the rules for their appropriate use are rather more *extrinsic* to their meaning (Verhaar 1963:133-34). Armed with this knowledge, we can easily see how terms function as bearers of community loyalty: terms bestow "membership in the profession," *but only on those who both understand what they mean and have learned to use them appropriately*.

"Displacement" of Terms

Now it is one of the characteristics of our technological, highly literate age that "sounding educated" often means "using technical terminology"; we associate knowledge with expertise, with a panoply of technical terms—that is to say, with cognitive meaning as it is shared among professionals. But this also means that we live in an age in which many terms are liable to revert, as it were, to the realm of natural language. Terms are born at one or more removes from natural language; then, on account of the spread of education, the popularization of professional knowledge, and the authority of such knowledge, hundreds of terms find their way back into natural language. This chain of events creates a very real problem, which is connected with the relatively loose link between the meaning of a term and its appropriate use. When a term is used *outside the sphere of rational discourse*, some of the normal ambiguity and vagueness of natural language comes back to it, but in an uncontrolled way, "through the back door, dragging along a number of implicit assumptions not always easily detected" (Verhaar 1969:22).

There is nothing necessarily sinister in this, though it is true that advertisers, mellowspeakers, and ideologues abuse precisely this quality of terms in the interest of "hidden persuasion": lots of prejudice and unexamined loyalty is expressed and promoted by means of computerese, sociologese, journalese, economese, nationalese, theologese. The problem is not that the quasi-natural-language use of terms conveys and creates non-professional loyalties, but that these loyalties are *hard to examine*. That is why operators, fast talkers, rhetoricians, and sophists—the well-intentioned as well as the unscrupulous, and also the merely mindless—love to use terms: there's no loyalty like unexamined loyalty.

Terminological Dogma and the Profession of Loyalty

Abusus non tollit usum is one of the many maxims once taught in seminaries: the fact that something is abused is no reason for its abolition. While it is right to conclude from the foregoing that terminological doctrine is likely to be *correctly understood and used* only by a small minority of professionals, it is wrong to conclude that only professionals *may* use it. The Christian tradition has, at any rate, encouraged the opposite. Terminology has become part of the ordinary, that is to say, the live, oral-acoustical profession of faith.[2]   What we should also conclude, however, is that the non-professional use of doctrinal terminology can be expected to involve not so much *meaning* or *precise understanding* as *profession of loyalty*, and that this will show in a certain lack of proportion between the term's (rhetorical) *significance* and its (cognitive) *meaning*.

This essay will test this hypothesis in the case of three terminological doctrinal definitions, viz. Jesus Christ's *consubstantiality* with the Father in Godhead; the change, by *transubstantiation*, of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ; and the *infallibility* of the ecclesiastical magisterium in matters of faith and morals.

Homoousios

Christ's "consubstantiality with the Father" occurs in the Creed promulgated at Nicaea in 325 A.D. It found its way into the so-called Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed: "And [we believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ, [. . . .] of one substance [*homoousion*] with the Father." It is part of the tradition of the undivided Church. The term has a very precise meaning: every predicate attributable to the Father must also be attributed to Christ, except "Father"; Christ is the Son. However, several observations are in order.

First, this clarity is the product of hindsight. Anyone familiar with the Arian controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries knows how long it took before this precise focus was a matter of consensus. That Arius was wrong was, perhaps, not too hard to establish, but many found the mandatory use of a suspect technical term—*homoousios*—by way of remedy worse than the disease; while it took care of Arianism, it seemed to introduce new, equally undesirable errors. It took the best part of the fourth

century to discover, in the course of much confusing debate, just how restricted—if crucial—the area of affirmation covered by *homoousios* really was. And this lack of precision has continued. I have even met theologians who were less than entirely clear on the point.

Secondly, this lack of precision in the fourth and fifth centuries did not prevent the term from being abundantly used—mainly as an ecclesiastical loyalty-flag. But since the fourth century also witnessed the gradual establishment of orthodox Christianity as the sole religion (Theodosius, *Cunctos populos*, 380), the emperors, both of the West and of the East, developed a taste for using *homoousios* as a civil loyalty test, too. Similarly, on the other side, we have the professed Arianism of the Ostrogoths under Theodoric and his successors in the late fifth and early sixth centuries, over against the orthodoxy of the old Roman establishment, over which they held military sway. There is every reason to doubt the *strictly theological* significance of both.

This enormous *disproportion* between the (mainly oral) use of *homoousios* as a loyalty-marker and its (literate) use to express orthodoxy is paralleled by the use of *transubstantiation*, albeit with a difference.

Transubstantiation

Transubstantiation defines the change of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist. The dogma was first laid down by the fourth Lateran Council of 1215. More than three centuries later, in 1551, the Council of Trent picks up the terminology, states that the substances of bread and wine are entirely changed into the substances of the Body and Blood of Christ, and adds that this change has been aptly and properly been called transubstantiation. Now the question is: What is the reason for the aptness and propriety of the term? What, in other words, is the target of the affirmation? The question is of great ecumenical significance, for acceptance of transubstantiation separates the Catholic Church from the Reformation.

It turns out that the *meaning* of "transubstantiation" is surprisingly restricted. Around the time of the fourth Lateran Council, "transubstantiation" and the affirmation of the real presence were simply "two sides of a single coin" (McCue 1967:92), with no affirmations implied about *the way in which* the real presence was thought to come about. In fact, authorities like

Peter of Capua and Lothar of Segni, who as Pope Innocent III was to preside over Lateran IV, considered the three prevalent theories about the coming about of the real presence ("consubstantiation," "annihilation," and "transubstantiation"[3]) a matter of theological opinion, even though they themselves favored the third explanation. "Transubstantiation," therefore, at this point, had two meanings. In the *definition of Lateran IV*, it simply affirms the real presence, whereas as a *concept among theologians* it defined one way in which the real presence was responsibly thought to come about. It was only a generation later that Aquinas argued that annihilation and consubstantiation were both illogical and heretical, and only transubstantiation orthodox, but interestingly, *he did not quote Lateran IV in support of his position*. Fifty years later, Scotus and Ockam disagreed: they found consubstantiation intellectually more attractive than transubstantiation, but since Lateran IV had made the latter an article of faith, they viewed *"transubstantiation" as simply a matter of authoritative doctrine, not of conceptual understanding*. This, of course, goes a long way towards explaining why the only claim Trent made in regard to the *term* "transubstantiation" was that the real change of the eucharistic elements is "aptly and properly so named" (McCue 1967).

Transubstantiation is an intriguing term, a fact which helps to explain why it has functioned so prominently in theological debate and controversy, even down to our own day. At the same time, the *doctrine* of transubstantiation is *conceptually* feeble: while affirming the real presence, it does not provide insight into its structure. This, however, has not prevented it from being vigorously alleged as a mark of *loyalty*. In this regard, it both resembles *homoousios*, and differs from it: like *homoousios*, *transubstantiation* has functioned as a loyalty-badge, but whereas the former can be shown to have a very precise logic, the latter is little more than an authoritative term of considerable oral-acoustical weight to convey and commend the realism of the Catholic eucharistic tradition.

Infallible Magisterium

Infallibility expresses the freedom from error in teaching faith and morals enjoyed by the Church's teaching office, whether papal or collegial-episcopal, under certain conditions. The exercise of infallible papal magisterium was defined at the first Vatican Council in 1870; episcopal-collegial infallibility, while made much of

at Vatican II, has never been formally defined.

In a recent book, the nature of magisterial authority, both of the "non-definitive" and the "definitive" (infallible) kind, has been explained with exquisite clarity (Sullivan 1983). What is striking in the book, from a literary point of view, is the care with which its author argues the *limitations* of infallible magisterium—something which may worry some readers. What is especially striking is the way in which the author argues the limits of the *object* of infallibility. Thus, for instance, he denies that matters of natural law can ever be the object of infallible teaching by the ordinary universal magisterium—a position highly relevant to the interpretation of *Humanae vitae* (Sullivan 1983:119-52). Yet while stressing the limits of infallibility, the book clearly shows a high esteem for the teaching office, and it does everything to commend a responsible, mature attitude of respect and obedience, on the part of the faithful, towards all authentic teaching in the Church, whether non-definitive or definitive.

The reason behind this apparently negative tendency in the book is not far to seek: while the target area of infallibility as a defined doctrine is very narrow—and relatively few theologians and bishops are so keenly aware of this as Father Francis Sullivan—its non-professional use *as a loyalty-marker* is extremely broad. The latter use really bears out the characteristic Catholic faith-attitude. This attitude is not so much concerned with the precise definition of the pope's infallibility, as with a particular practice of universal papal *jurisdiction* and episcopal governing authority, which is vastly more influential in everyday life in the Church than the infallibility-dogma. Again, as in the case of *homoousios* and *transubstantiation*, the term *infallibility* shows a big gap between its professional, literate use as a cognitive counter, and its natural-language, oral-acoustical use as a loyalty-marker.

Three Conclusions

This essay has been written to illustrate how Catholic theology has gained enormously from the two influences at work in Karl Rahner's theological achievement: the formal-literate and the rhetorical-literary. It has also been written to say that *in the latter area* theology stands to gain even more from the insights of scholars like Walter Ong if it wants to overcome its onesidedly cognitive biases, which are noticeable even in so literary a theologian as Karl Rahner. Hence, three conclusions to wind up.

First, dogma is a determination, or normative regulation, not only of *language*, in the form of canonized pronouncements authoritatively taught, but also of *speech*, in the form of formulary professsions of faith and loyalty couched in "displaced" terminological language. The two must be carefully distinguished, so that both may be truly appreciated.

Secondly, there tends to be a notable gap between the *meaning* of terminological dogmatic language and its *use* in the ordinary profession of faith. This realization should influence the practice of theological hermeneutics: theologians should ask not just what certain dogmatic formulas mean, or meant, *in cognitive terms*, to theological professionals, but also *in the interest of what affective concerns* they are, or were, regularly used.

Thirdly, loyalty is fine, but the formulas that carry it are often the carriers of prejudice, too. This has special relevance to ecumenical theology. It is easier to change minds than habits of speech; different *ideas* can co-exist, side by side, in the same space, while different *voices* are harmonious only if they are "in synch." In many areas of the faith, it is not *doctrine* that separates us, but *formulas*. They need not do so, provided the different formulas are given equal time, so that all involved can attune the ears of faith to them.

Loyola University of Chicago

Notes

[1]The *idea of Sprachregelung* is found even earlier, in an essay on *Mystici Corporis*, where the expression "determined terminology," in a footnote, translates the German expression *terminologische Festlegung* (Rahner 1963:66, n. 83). Vols. I-X of the *Schriften zur Theologie* are covered by the *Rahner-Register*, a birthday present on the occasion of Rahner's 70th (*Register* 1974). Vols. XI-XVI have (not quite complete) indexes; *Sprachregelung* does not occur in them. However, in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 18 (the translation of most of *Schriften* XIII), the mistranslation "linguistic usage" reflects German *Sprachregelung* (Rahner 1984:25-28, 51, 110; Galvin 1984:367).

[2]This live profession has taken two characteristically *oral-acoustical* shapes. The first is liturgy; the Creed, including its technical terms, is recited and even sung at Sunday Eucharist. The second is catechesis (Gk. *katechesis*, meaning "instruction," etymologically connected with "echo"), which reflects ancient question-and-answer teaching habits to cultivate loyalty as much as orthodoxy; cf. Lk 2, 46 and John 16, 30, where "questioning" means "teaching."

[3]"Consubstantiation" explains the real presence by holding that, after the consecration, the substances both of the Body and Blood of Christ and of the bread and wine co-exist in union with each other. "Annihilation" explains it by positing a replacement of the substances of bread and wine—which are annihilated—by the substances of the Body and Blood of Christ. "Transubstantiation" explains it by stating that the substances of bread and wine are changed into the substances of Christ's Body and Blood.

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