Language and mediality: On the medial status of 'everyday language'

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Abstract

The medium of (oral) language is mostly disregarded (or overlooked) in contemporary media theories. This 'ignoring of language' in media studies is often accompanied by an inadequate transport model of communication, and it converges with an 'ignoring of mediality' in mentalistic theories of language. In the present article it will be argued that this misleading *opposition* of language and media can only be overcome if one already regards oral language, not just written language, as a medium of the human mind. In my argumentation I fall back on Wittgenstein's conception of language games to try to show how Wittgenstein's ideas can help us to clear up the problem of the mediality of language and also to show to what extent the mentalistic conception of Chomskyan provenance cannot be adequate to the phenomenon of language.

1. Introduction

Not least through the development and the distribution of the so-called New Media, the topic of *mediality* has become a vital issue in cultural studies and humanities. In the context of current discourses concerning the concept of medium one can observe that the expression 'medium' is often used to refer equally to such different objects of reference as the internet, television, print-media, the computer, writing, script, pictures, waves of

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sound, etc. – often without any regard to the categorial differences between them. One can also observe that the medium of oral language is mostly disregarded (or overlooked) in this context. What are the reasons for this phenomenon?

One plausible answer to this question has been formulated by the German linguist Ludwig Jäger in his paper *Die Sprachvergessenheit der Medientheorie*:[1] many theories of media are still based on a transport model, a sender–receiver model of communication. One is oriented towards the paradigm of *technical* media and expands this one-sided concept of media to the area of non-technical communication. This way one comes to a general concept of communication media that ignores the medial aspect of oral language and regards it as the function of media to transfer 'pre-medial thoughts' from one person to another (Jäger, 2000, p. 15).[2] This ignoring of the mediality of language finally leads to an improper conceptual *opposition* of language and media.

The point of Jäger's argumentation is that he connects this *Sprachvergessenheit* within media discourse to a *Medialitätsvergessenheit*[3] of those language theories that are oriented towards the linguistic mentalism of Chomskyan provenance. In a word, the thesis is: the ignoring of language in media theories converges with an ignoring of mediality in mentalistic theories of language. Through the fixation on the mental, the 'materiality'[4] of language signs gets completely out of focus: writing and other media appear as mere means of transport, transferring 'media-neutral' thoughts from a sender to a receiver (Jäger, 2000, pp. 26–28). This thesis is developed in Jäger's paper; furthermore, he shows that the misleading, artificial opposition of language and media can only be overcome if one already regards oral language, not only written language, as an essential medium of the human mind. Of course, we can only succeed in doing this if we try to develop – as an alternative to the transport model – a concept of media which takes into account the specific mediality, that is, the specific medial qualities, of the medium of language.

The present article takes up these ideas; here I fall back on Wittgenstein's conception of language games to try to show how Wittgenstein's ideas about the knowledge-constitutive status of 'everyday language' can help us to clear up the problem of the mediality of language and also to show to what extent the mentalistic conception cannot be adequate to the phenomenon of language. Then, at the very end of the article I refer to a field work project of the Belgian sociolinguist Jan Blommaert whose analyses uncover and illustrate the (negative) *practical* implications of Chomsky's theory of competence. It will be explained in what way Blommaert's empirical results are in agreement with my concept

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[1] The expression 'Sprachvergessenheit der Medientheorie' is difficult to translate into English. It refers to the forgetting and ignoring of language in many theories of media.

[2] As an extreme example of such a concept of media see K. Boeckmanns theory of communication media, where it is written: 'Ein Kommunikationsmedium ist alles, was den Bezug zwischen den Gedanken des Senders und den Gedanken des Empfängers ermöglicht' (Boeckmann, 1994, p. 34). In a very interesting work the primatologist King has clarified that the orientation towards the transport model or the 'conduit metaphor' has also been playing a central (and confusing) role in the research on the communication of apes (King, 2004, especially Chapter 2). On the implications of the 'conduit metaphor' see also Reddy, 1993.

[3] In analogy to 'Sprachvergessenheit' the expression 'Medialitätsvergessenheit' refers to the ignoring of mediality.

[4] The term 'materiality' is meant here to bring into prominence the fact that there is nothing like a pure, 'pre-medial' thought. Every thought, every idea, every message needs something like a physical substratum, in which it can manifest itself: sound, ink on paper, pigments on a canvas, etc. – On the idea of the 'materiality' of communication see also: Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer (Eds.), 1988.

of mediality and the critique of mentalism. But first it is necessary to give a heuristic definition of 'medium'.

2. On the term 'medium'

To find such a definition it is useful first to separate the term 'medium' from terms like 'tool' and 'instrument'. A tool is something we use for a certain purpose; and – as Sybille Krämer has pointed out – it 'remains external' to the object it deals with. To a certain extent it can be 'removed' from the object. A message on the other hand is always given *in* a medium it cannot be separated from. What is mediated cannot exist outside the medium (Krämer, 1998a,b, p. 83).

Krämer's distinction between medium and instrument or tool touches on a crucial point by focussing on the externality of a tool compared with a medium. But in another sense it is a bit misleading in my opinion, because the terms 'instrument' and 'tool' emphasize the object's substance- or thing-like character (*Dinglichkeit*). Because of this I prefer the distinction between medium and *means*. In a philosophical sense a means is not a thing but a process, an action for a certain purpose (see Stetter, 2002, p. 4). It is not the hammer that is the means but the action of hitting the nail into the wall. Viewed phenomenologically, the relation between means and end can be characterized as a temporal sequence: *after* I have hit the nail into the wall I can hang up the picture; after I have cooked I can eat (Stetter, 2002, p. 4). Viewed logically, the means is a sufficient but not a necessary condition of attaining the purpose: I could also bore a hole and turn a hook into the wall; I could also go to a restaurant and order something to eat.

In the case of the medium it is totally different. Here, we have a 'simultaneity of means and purpose', and so the distinction between means and purpose actually loses its sense here. The particular performance is intrinsically bound to a certain medium, which gives it its specific form and from which it cannot be separated, because then it would be just another performance. For instance I can only dance by the medium of body movement, I can only speak by the medium of language.[5] Here, I can follow Krämer again:

> An ein Medium [...] ist man gebunden, in ihm bewegt man sich; und was in einem Medium vorliegt, kann [...] nicht [...] gänzlich ohne Medium gegeben sein. So gibt es keine Sprache jenseits der Rede, der Schrift oder der gestischen Artikulation. Alle Theorien, welche Medien als äußerliche Vehikel und Träger ihrer Botschaften begreifen, verfehlen gerade diese ihre nicht-instrumentelle Dimension: Sie behandeln Medien so, als ob sie Instrumente seien (Krämer, 1998a,b, pp. 83–84).[6]

Thus, in the preliminary definition that I wish to propose we have two main qualities which characterize media:

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[5] Here, I am not only talking about oral language but also about sign language. Using sign language is also a kind of speaking.

[6] Translation: 'One is bound to a medium, one moves in it, and what is present in a medium cannot exist without any medium. Thus there is no language behind speech, writing and gestic articulation. All theories that conceptualize media as external vehicles and carriers of their messages miss this non-instrumental dimension: They treat media as if they were instruments' (my translation).

(1) In contrast to a means a medium is characterized by a 'simultaneity of means and purpose'.
(2) In contrast to an instrument, a medium (and also a means) *is* not a thing or a substance but a phenomenon of performance.

What does this mean more precisely? – Of course, it does *not* mean that media have nothing to do with 'substances' or with materiality. At the outset of this article it has already been mentioned that it is one of the main characteristics of media that they always have a material 'component': every thought, every idea, every message needs something like a physical substratum, in which it can manifest itself: ink on paper, pigments on a canvas, waves of sound, etc. *But mediality is more than materiality*: the medium is neither ink nor letters, but rather writing; not pigments but painting, not sound but oral language. This is what I mean by saying that a medium is a phenomenon of performance. One could also say: a medium is a symbolic[7] process in some sort of material 'substratum'.

Of course, conceptions and definitions like this always depend on certain purposes, and the present article has arisen from a *linguistic* context; accordingly, the concept of media is oriented towards the idea of *language* being a medium. At the beginning I have already explained why I think that – in linguistics and media theory – it is adequate to regard language as a medium. In the following I will fall back on Wittgenstein's conception of language games to make the specifics of *linguistic* mediality clearer.

3. Ludwig Wittgenstein and the constitutive status of 'everyday language'

It is really not a coincidence that Wittgenstein comes into play here, for he is not only one of the most influential philosophers of language of the last century, he is also one of the most prominent opponents of the transport model. In the *Philosophical Investigations* (in the following: PI) Wittgenstein (2001) shows that certain misleading concepts of language can only be overcome if we 'make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts' (Wittgenstein, 2001, PI 304, p. 87). In Wittgenstein's opinion this mentalistic picture of language is based on the traditional theory of representation, which regards language as a mere means for representing the world which is separated from it and ontologically pre-existent. Following this theory the only purpose of the use of words is to function as external signs, as 'labels' ('Namenstäfelchen')[8] of objects which exist independently from language. Accordingly, sentences appear as 'combinations of such names' (Wittgenstein, 2001, PI 1, p. 2). As an alternative to this traditional model Wittgenstein develops his conception of diverse social language games, all of them following different rules and purposes.

> But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command? – There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call 'symbols', 'words', sentences. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten [...]

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[7] The term 'symbolic' is used here in a very broad, quite unterminological sense. For example, I do not make a terminological distinction between symbols and signs in this article.

[8] Vgl. Wittgenstein (2001, PI 15, p. 6).

Here the term 'language-*game*' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a life-form (Wittgenstein, 2001, PI 23, p. 10).

In my opinion this game metaphor is still very striking and suggestive. As in many games, verbal and non-verbal activities are very closely interwoven in language games (for instance: I go to the baker, I ask for a loaf of rye bread, he gives it to me, I pay for it, and so on). In language games we act and orient ourselves towards multiple and diverse objects. Language and world are not seen as being separated from each other in this conception. From this conception it also follows that language games are *in principle* open and diverse: there is no access to the world totally independent of language, and therefore there is not *one* function of language, which is to represent an ontologically pre-structured reality. The traditional conception of language as a 'mirror of nature' (see Rorty, 1980) is misleading at decisive points.

The logical reasons for this are given by Wittgenstein in his argumentations concerning rules and private language.[9] There the analogy between speaking and playing is also very relevant. Someone who takes part in language games is also following certain rules, but without – this is a big contrast to a calculus – having to think about these rules when following them; in many cases even without having to know them explicitly (Wittgenstein, 1965, Blue Book, p. 25). In addition, a language game leaves room for our phantasy – in contrast to a calculus it is not totally determined by rules, but only as far as required by the particular purpose.[10] In his discussion of the concept of rule Wittgenstein's position is consistently pragmatic: the misleading 'metaphysical' question 'How can a rule determine an action?' is substituted by the question 'What does it mean to *follow* a rule?'. By this change of perspective Wittgenstein emphasizes that following a rule is a social practice. It is not possible to follow a rule privately, because then there would be no criteria to distinguish between 'following the rule' and '*thinking* that one was following the rule'.[11] In other words: there would be no criterion independent of the speaker's perspective that could help us to decide whether one has followed the rule *correctly* or not. Here, Wittgenstein is talking about the *normative* aspect, the aspect of acceptance and correction by *others*.[12]

In the context of the so-called private language argumentation Wittgenstein illustrates this fundamental fact by sketching the following scenario:

> Let us imagine the following case. I want to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign 'S' and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation. – I first want to remark that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated. – But still I can give myself a kind of ostensive definition. – How? Can I point to the sensation? Not in the ordinary sense. But I speak, or write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate my attention on the sensation – and so, as it were, point to it inwardly. – But what is this ceremony for? for that is all it seems to be! A definition surely serves to establish the meaning of

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[9] On the following see also Schneider, 2002, Chapter 2.4.

[10] See for instance Wittgenstein (2001, PI 83–85, pp. 33–34).

[11] See Wittgenstein (2001, PI 202). Anscombe's English translation of 'der Regel folgen' is 'obeying a rule'. I prefer the term 'following a rule', because Wittgenstein does not say: 'die Regel *be*folgen'. In contrast to 'die Regel befolgen' the expression 'der Regel folgen' does not entail that this is a *conscious* process.

[12] On the normative aspect of rule-following see also Lähteenmäki, 2003.

a sign. – Well, that is done precisely by the concentrating of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connection between the sign and the sensation. – But 'I impress it on myself' can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connection *right* in the future. But in the present case I have *no criterion of correctness*. One would like to say: *whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'right'* (Wittgenstein, 2001, PI 258, p. 78, my italics).

One reason why this scenario is so fascinating is that here Wittgenstein is abstracting from almost everything that characterizes language. The thought experiment is guided by the following question: what would someone have to do to fix a 'meaning' by using a private ostensive definition – 'private' in the sense that this 'definition' should be completely independent of any language community. By this 'ceremony' a sign should be constituted, which, by definition, can only be understood by the speaker himself.[13] Of course, ostensive definitions are also part of our language. For example, we often learn words referring to colours through such definitions:[14] in such cases, somebody points to an object and refers to it with the corresponding word. But these ostensive definitions are not private but public. They could always be misunderstood, and so there must be a social context in which it is possible to clear up such misunderstandings. Then we always have the possibility of new misunderstandings, which again have to be cleared up and so on. If the learner wants to have the possibility of dispelling such misunderstandings at all, he has to know roughly, which overall role the particular word plays in language (Wittgenstein, 2001, PI 30, p. 12). This certainly does not mean that the learner must be able to formulate or explicate the rules; he must only have the practical competence to take part in the social language game. This competence can only be trained and developed if there is a social context in which the learner has the opportunity to be corrected by others.

In Wittgenstein's thought experiment things are very different: the supposed private ostensive definition should be entirely independent of a publicly 'sanctioned' language use. And so it is not possible for others to check if the 'speaker' of the private language uses his signs *right*. But – and this is the surprising twist of the diary scenario – the 'speaker' *himself* is also not able to do so. He cannot 'establish the meaning'[15] of any sign, because there is no criterion independent of the speaker's perspective. By writing the sign no meaning is constituted at all; the written 'S' is only a symptom or an indication that the author of the diary *thought* to have the certain sensation. How should he *know* when repeating the writing of 'S' if he is referring always to the same or to something different when using this sign? On the one hand: if he wants to know what the sign means he has to elicit the *right* memory of the sensation meant. On the other hand: to be able to elicit the right memory he must already know what the sign means.[16] This circle is absolutely unavoidable in the case of the private ostensive definition.

If we want to create, for example, a new name for a special kind of pain, this could only be possible because we have already been trained in our *public* language as to what the word 'pain' means or how the word 'pain' is used in our language:

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[13] See also Wittgenstein (2001, PI 243, p. 75).
[14] See also Wittgenstein (2001, PI 30, p. 13).
[15] See quotation above.
[16] This crucial point was formulated first by Anthony Kenny, see Kenny, 1974, p. 27.

But what does it mean to say that he has 'named his pain'? [...] When one says 'He gave a name to his sensation' one forgets that a great deal of stage-setting in the language is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense. And when we speak of someone's having given a name to pain, what is presupposed is the existence of the grammar of the word 'pain'; it shews the post where the new word is stationed (Wittgenstein, 2001, PI 257, p. 78).

Already at the beginning of the PI Wittgenstein had used a similar argumentation against the concept of language and language acquisition presented by Augustine, who believes the only function of language is to *name* things. Here, Wittgenstein shows by creating several language games[17] that syntactic and formal-semantic categories (for instance: 'names') can only develop in *difference* to each other and that consequently none of these could be seen as the basic or essential category of all the others:[18] so naming loses its traditional special status; it is an important but not *the* basic language game. It cannot be constitutive of speaking in general for one must already 'have' language 'in order to be capable of *asking* a thing's name'.[19] As we see here, naming is not suitable to form a connection between language and a language-independent world, for such a world is nothing but a fiction. The reason why we understand sentences is not that they refer to ontologically given objects. We understand them because we are able to use them in difference to other sentences of our language, and this is only possible, because, as Wittgenstein says, '*our language* contains the possibility of those other sentences' (see Wittgenstein, 2001, PI 20, p. 8). Every explanation takes place *in* a developed language, and therefore *ultimately* we are neither able to explain language nor language acquisition in its entirety. In this sense everyday language, 'normal' language, is constitutive. We cannot get 'behind' it, we cannot compare language and world from a language-independent point of view:

> When I talk about language (words, sentences, etc.) I must speak the language of every day. Is this language somehow too coarse and material for what we want to say? *Then how is another one to be constructed?* [...]
> In giving explanations I already have to use language full-blown (not some sort of preparatory, provisional one); this by itself shews that I can adduce only exterior facts about language (Wittgenstein, 2001, PI 120, p. 42).[20]

4. Conclusion – mediality, 'orality', 'literacy'

Now we can come back to the transport model, already discussed at the outset of this paper. If Wittgenstein's arguments on the topic of private language have shown one thing, it is this: independently of social actions we have no possibility of referring to objects, not

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[17] See Wittgenstein (2001, PI 2 and 8).

[18] See Schneider, 2002, pp. 31–45; Stetter, 1997, p. 563, pp. 546–555. On the similarities between Wittgenstein and Saussure concerning the idea of 'difference' see also Harris, 1988, pp. 42–45.

[19] Wittgenstein (2001, PI 30, p. 13), my italics; see also Wittgenstein (2001, PI 31).

[20] 'I can adduce only exterior facts about language' can be paraphrased here as 'I can only describe the use of everyday language (because there is no deeper essence behind it)'; see also for example, Wittgenstein (2001, PI 116, p. 41). Here, Wittgenstein is arguing against his own early philosophy in saying that, at the end, every formalized 'ideal language' can only be derived from the contingent grammar of a particular natural language. So everyday language becomes the basis of Wittgenstein's philosophizing.

even to mental objects – these objects would 'cancel out' like the famous beetle in the box (see Wittgenstein, 2001, PI 293, p. 85). Language is not a mere means of transferring thoughts from one person to another, but is rather a *medium*: only *in* language can thoughts take shape – always dependent on the particular medial manifestations. A thought needs a 'body', something 'material' in which it can manifest itself.[21] This fundamental media-theoretical fact, which every linguist has to take into account, has been understood by no philosopher better than by Wittgenstein: in an often-quoted section of the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein answers the question 'How am I to know what he means when I see nothing but the signs he gives?' with the counter-question 'How is *he* to know what he means, when he has nothing but the signs either' (Wittgenstein (2001, PI 504, p. 118)). Understanding is shown *only* by the way one *uses* words in 'language games'. Or, to put it more generally: as communicating beings we are always moving in different sign systems. There is no meaning and no understanding independent of symbolizing[22] and media.

The private language argument provides the logical basis of this conception of language and media. As linguistic beings we are categorially *social* beings. Thus, supporting Jäger's argumentation discussed at the beginning of this paper, oral language is entirely rehabilitated as a knowledge-constitutive medium of the human mind. Only if we reflect on its medial status do we have a chance to come to an adequate concept of media and mediality at all. In saying this, I do not of course wish to revive the Rousseauesque picture of a pure, undefiled orality. Surely it is not possible for a human being, who has grown up in a literate culture, to draw a *sharp* line between 'orality' and 'literacy'. As above all Derrida has shown us, the development of writing and script is not only a condition of the *possibility* of distinguishing between 'orality' and 'literacy', but in certain respects also a condition of its *im*possibility:[23] our oral language and also our *view* of our oral language are entirely influenced by and permeated with written language.[24] This phenomenon starts with our view of grammatically correct sentences, which is – often unconsciously – oriented towards the model of written language, and goes on, for example, to the situation of giving a lecture: one has prepared the text in writing, one quotes from books, one has got into the habit of using a language which is fairly literate, which is strongly influenced by writing and script.[25] Where is the borderline here between 'orality' and 'literacy'? Interestingly enough,

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[21] This thought has already been formulated very clearly by Humboldt (1999): 'Language is the formative organ of *thought. Intellectual activity*, entirely mental, entirely internal, and to some extent passing without trace, becomes, through sound, externalized in speech and perceptible to the senses. Thought and language are therefore one and inseparable from each other. But the former is also intrinsically bound to the necessity of entering into a *union* with the verbal sound; thought cannot otherwise achieve clarity, nor the representation become a concept (On language Section 9, p. 54). See also Volosinov (1973, Chapter 3), where Voloshinov argues that all signs, including mental signs, must have material embodiment: thoughts are manifested in inner speech which is social in its nature. On the idea of the 'materiality' of communication see also Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer (Eds.), 1988.

[22] See footnote 7.

[23] See Derrida, 1967 , see also Krämer, 2002, p. 114.

[24] See e.g. Harris, 2000, especially Chapter 8; Olson, 1993; Stetter, 1997; Günther, 1995. – On the relation between Japanese writing and spoken Japanese (in contrast to alphabetic writing) see also David Lurie's contribution in this volume; see also Lurie, 2001.

[25] One attempt to consider these 'interferences' in the debate on 'orality' and 'literacy' has been established by Koch and Oesterreicher, who distinguish between 'conceptional' orality and literacy on the one hand and 'medial' orality and literacy on the other hand. A scientific presentation is 'conceptionally literate', although it is performed in the 'phonic medium'; in contrast to this a private letter is 'conceptionally oral', although it is realized in a 'graphic medium'. See Koch and Oesterreicher, 1994, p. 587.

Wittgenstein, who philosophizes mostly in the style of an oral dialogue and who refers mainly to oral language,[26] sometimes uses examples of written language: one of these examples is the diary scenario discussed above.

Even if it is therefore not possible to draw a sharp line between 'orality' and 'literacy',[27] the fact of the mediality of oral language must be reflected in the current media discourse within cultural studies; we must ascribe medial status also to oral language and not only to writing and script. A reflection of this fact is not a sufficient but a necessary condition, if we want to overcome the transport model and to develop a conception that does justice to the particular medial manifestations of language.[28]

Now we can come back to the preliminary definition of 'medium' offered at the beginning of this paper. There are at least two important reasons why language should be regarded as a (paradigmatic) medium and why mediality should be linked to performance and symbolizing:

(1) Through subsuming of language under the category 'media' the *material* aspect of language (sound, ink on paper, etc.) is brought into prominence. Thus, we get the opportunity to compare language with other media and also to analyze the different medial manifestations of language (headword: 'orality and literacy').
(2) By linking the concept of media to performance and symbolizing, the 'dynamic' aspect of media is emphasized, and it becomes obvious that mediality cannot be *reduced* to materiality.

For instance, talking about the mediality of oral language and writing means talking about the categorial properties which define these media as such. When comparing the mediality of oral and written language we find a lot of significant differences. One of them is that in written language we can distinguish between 'text' and 'texture'.[29] The texture concerns the materiality (e.g., ink on white paper, pixels on a screen); it is fixed and persistent. In contrast to the texture, the text is what we *understand*; it must be 'produced' all over again every time the texture is read. In oral language we do not have an analog to such a fixed texture, and this is *one* point which shows that it has a different mediality. This different mediality has a fundamental impact on the use of media in social practice. The persistence of the texture makes it possible to produce sentence types very different in kind from those found in oral language, and often requiring specialized knowledge in order to be able to process them. While in an oral utterance performance and *result* of the performance build a *temporal unity* (see Auer, 2000), the texture does not show how long it took the writer to produce it. He or she always has the possibility of revising it and to make it more complex (parentheses, hypotaxes, etc.). So it is indeed a *medial* problem when a speaker *reads out* a written, syntactically complicated text and the audience does not

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[26] See also Wittgenstein (2001, PI 23): 'Here the term 'language-*game*' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* [my italics] of language is part of an activity, or of a life-form'.

[27] On the fundamental conceptional problems concerning the distinction between 'orality' and 'literacy' see also the contributions of Malcolm Hyman and David Lurie in this volume; see also Harris, 2000, pp. 229–237.

[28] To achieve this the concept of media must be elaborated in the direction of a general theory of different symbol systems. In my opinion a very fruitful basis of this has been formulated by Nelson Goodman in his book *Languages of Art*, where he distinguishes between analog and digital symbol schemata. See Goodman, 1968, Chapter IV; see also Goodman and Elgin, 1988, Chapter VIII.

[29] On the distinction between 'text' and 'texture' see Stetter (1997, Chapter 7).

understand him. In cases like this, 'media competence' would especially consist in adapting the text for the particular medial situation and audience.

In my opinion this concept of mediality and of language being a medium, which has only been outlined in the present paper, can be fruitful not only for media theory but especially for post-Chomskyan (and post-structuralist) linguistics. Linguistic theory of Chomskyan provenance has led to an impasse, because it has concentrated only on the mental aspect and thus ignored both the different medial manifestations of language and its performative aspect.

Especially in *sociolinguistic* research we have various examples that clarify the negative *practical* implications of Chomskyan mentalism and his *Medialitätsvergessenheit*. One very striking example is presented and analyzed by Jan Blommaert in his field work project about Belgium asylum procedures (Blommaert, 2001; Blommaert and Maryns, 2001). During these procedures the asylum seekers are interviewed about their home country to make sure that they really come from where they claim to. Apart from these interviews there are hardly any occasions in which the asylum seekers are asked to speak. The bulk of the 'communication' in the particular case consists of written texts by other persons: lawyers, welfare workers, etc. Through this series of written texts the 'original narrative' of the asylum seeker is 'remoulded', 'remodelled' and 're-narrated' time and time again, and so it becomes a *'text trajectory* with various phases and instances of transformation' (Blommaert, 2001, p. 438). The 'original narrative' is the input for a long series of 'replications'; and, remarkably enough, it is assumed that the difference between the narrative and its transcriptions can be neglected. As Blommaert points out, this whole story of transcriptions and commentaries is treated by the officials as a *'singular* text' and the responsibility for the whole text is attributed to the asylum seeker himself. He is constructed as the 'responsible author for the whole intertextuality complex, despite the enormous differences in text-structure and text-modality, the genre and the code, the social spaces in which versions are being produced and used, and the power and authority attributed to different versions of the text' (Blommaert, 2001, p. 438).

One might argue that this is not mainly a linguistic issue but a political one. Although at one level this is obviously true, the procedure also shows the implications of the Chomskyan paradigm: it is a perfect example of the *ignoring of mediality*. When analyzing procedures like this we 'enter' – as Blommaert puts it – 'worlds in which talk and written text are seen as replicas of one another' (Blommaert, 2001, p. 446). The whole procedure is implicitly guided by a vulgar version of Chomsky's mentalistic theory of competence;[30] and to a certain extent it really can appeal to this theory: to the idea of a pure, fixed, monolingual competence which is autonomous and almost independent of social factors. What we need is a new definition of the relation between performance and competence on the basis of a precise description of linguistic performances – whether oral or written.[31]

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[30] Of course, this does not mean that Chomsky would endorse such test methods; probably he would protest against the whole procedure. But mainly for *political* reasons. In my opinion his *linguistic* theory provides no argument against such methods and is more or less in agreement with them.

[31] One step into this direction is the anthology *Gibt es eine Sprache hinter dem Sprechen?* (ed. by Krämer and König (2002)), where the topic 'performance and competence' is discussed from various philosophical and linguistic perspectives. See also the programmatic articles in Harris and Wolf (Eds.), 1998.

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