



The Living Word and Its Death Threats

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Abstract

The expression ‘the living word’ has wide application, often in preference to an alternative use of language that is likely to threaten it. An enquiry is proposed into the potential utility of the expression for theorizing newer threats such as the use of Large Language Models. The main influence on the enquiry is the theory of dialogism, developed from work by Bakhtin and his colleagues, but other perspectives are included. The paper examines the relationships between the expression and four of its threats: technologization, monologues, static and normative approaches to meaning-making, and monolingualism. The living word appears to survive all such threats, though human thinking, communication, and meaning-making are all transformed in the process, while the perceived threat is assimilated or resisted but does not disappear. There are several contradictions in usage of the term and some resistance to the metaphor of life and death in the context of language. Faith in the living word is likely to depend on careful modulation of its meanings for a specific context through dialogue. The paper concludes that ‘the living word’ might act as a placeholder for our responses to new threats, bearing in mind that we have been continually participating in productive dialogues even when surrounded by static, monologic, and monolingual linguistic practices.

Keywords Meaning-making · Dialogic · Addressivity · Meaning modulation · Dynamism · Language revitalization

Introduction: More Than Words

Many years ago, as a young philosophy student, I was intrigued by Socrates’ rejection of the practice of writing (Plato 2006). It seemed ironic that we only know about this because Plato wrote about it, a reaction also noted by others (e.g., Wegerif 2013). When introduced later to Bakhtin’s work, I became aware that Bakhtin shared with Socrates and Plato the notion of ‘the living word’ and

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its dialogic nature (Bakhtin 1981). Whether translated from Ancient Greek or 1930s Russian—or indeed many other languages—the idea of the living word has stayed with me. It resonates with my continued thinking about language use and development, including manifestations in postdigital meaning-making. Recently, I have been wondering whether the concept of the living word might have utility for theorizing our responses to Artificial Intelligence (AI), especially Large Language Model applications such as ChatGPT.

Further online searches for the term have resulted in an overwhelming number of theological references: discovered on the Internet, in linguistic corpora, and in a brief exchange with ChatGPT. At first, I resisted this theme: I saw my inquiries as secular, with a focus on thinking, communicating, and meaning-making in educational contexts. Gradually, however, I began to recognize that the people referring to the living word attend not only to words and interactions, but also to *how* the words mediate and are themselves mediated, including aspects that are abstract and even ineffable. These relationships are worth exploring, especially at a time of heightened fear that a newer technology (artificial intelligence) may be threatening our languages, ways of living, or even life itself.

The expression ‘the living word’ is used by people who characterize language as a living entity hosted biologically, and sometimes spiritually, through human interaction. Whether the term is regarded as literal or metaphorical, a key feature of language being ‘alive’ is that it will die without its hosts, even if it leaves traces of its existence. This paper analyzes claims made for the living word through a few different proponents of the notion and includes some observations by people who challenge it. It is influenced by the ideas of ‘more-than...’ theories in applied linguistics (Bhatt 2023) where new digital approaches take their place in already complex ecologies, transforming rather than superseding them. The expression ‘more-than...’ has also been proposed by Gourlay (2023) as a potential meaning of the prefix ‘post’ in postdigital, a position again considered in this paper. The main aim is to review historical and continuing debates about the living word to prepare the ground for reflection on the nature and extent of the perceived existential threat from Large Language Models such as ChatGPT and its future developments.

The paper considers four potential ‘death threats’ to the living word:

- The technologized word as initially perceived by Socrates (Plato 2006).
- Monologic authoritative language use as perceived by Bakhtin (1981).
- Static and normative approaches to meaning-making as perceived by Ludlow (2014).
- A move towards monolingualism as perceived by Crystal (2014).

The analyses of these threats are then followed by a discussion on faith (both religious and secular) in the living word and what risks there might be to losing that faith. It considers the extent to which accommodation of and resistance to death threats could inform our future responses to not-yet-known threats. Finally, I make some speculative comments on the utility and limitations of the expression ‘the living word’ for facing these threats. Should we even be talking in these terms?

The Technologized Word

Spoken words are always modifications of a total situation which is more than verbal (Ong 2012: 99)

Walter Ong's seminal book on the transitions between orality and literacy, originally written in 1982, has *The Technologizing of the Word* as its subtitle. Ong highlights that the spoken utterance is about more than words and their individual meanings; its communication is also dependent on relationships between the speaker(s), the listener(s), and their time and place. In a fully oral/aural culture, the sounded words, their intonation, the context, and the interlocutors and listeners are always synchronous—'a part of a real, existential present' (Ong 2012: 99). When words are 'technologized' through writing, they are removed from that immediate context. The sound of the words has gone, although in some sense it is still present for many readers, as internalized speech. The intended meaning has been removed from the immediacy of time and place, though the reader still extracts meaning—and an imaginative reader may even experience a sense of time-travel. The 'speaker(s)' and addressee(s) are more ambiguous but still somehow present. Thus, the 'more than words' aspect of the encounter must be conveyed by the writer and understood by the reader along with the content and its intentions. The literate person's word is very different to the one only experienced through oral/aural means, and that is down to the changes brought into effect through the technology of writing.

This scenario is captured in a famous exchange in Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus* from nearly two and a half millennia ago, where resistance to a new approach—written oratory—arises from a concern about its potentially damaging effects on memory, learning, and philosophical thought. Socrates and his friend Phaedrus share a view that the written word lacks the intelligence and the here-and-now significance of the words of human interlocutors:

Socrates: I mean an intelligent word graven in the soul of the learner, which can defend itself, and knows when to speak and when to be silent.

Phaedrus: You mean the living word of knowledge which has a soul, and of which the written word is properly no more than an image? (Plato 2006: 56¹)

By this stage in the dialogue, Phaedrus has been persuaded of the misjudgment of his admiration for a speech written by the orator Lysias. He has presented this speech on the topic of love, by reading it to Socrates, who has responded with his own version. Socrates has then realized, via a voice in his mind (a *daimon* or guiding spirit), that both speeches are bad and show a lack of respect for love (Eros)—a divinity. He atones with a third speech, which sets the scene for further dialogue, and covers several topics in addition to love, including the nature of the soul and divine inspiration, as well as a mythical account of the invention of writing in Egypt, where it was recognized to have a deleterious effect on human memory, thinking, and

¹ The *Phaedrus* is freely available at <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1636/pg1636-images.html>. Accessed 22 April 2024.

dialogue. The resistance to writing thus comes at the end of a lengthy and, to some, a ‘misshapen jumble’ of a dialogue (Moss 2012: 1). Moss, however, finds a unifying theme through tracing Socrates’ attempts to lead Phaedrus away from his love of contemporary rhetoric, exploiting that love to try to persuade Phaedrus towards a love of philosophy. This is a practice that Plato calls ‘soul-leading’ (*psychagōgia*) which means ‘persuasion, with some implication of deception or enchantment’ (Moss 2012: 3), and which Socrates himself discusses during the dialogue.

This complex translated word ‘soul’ recurs frequently with respect to Plato’s account of the living word. There are two slightly different applications of the word in the extract from the *Phaedrus* above—the soul of the learner and the soul of the living word. Plato’s own misgivings about writing—beyond what he attributes to Socrates—are also present in the *Seventh Letter* where he claims never to have written about his own philosophical ideas: they emerge instead through intellectual companionship and ‘a spark that is generated in the soul’ (Plato 1961: 341b-d). Though it is not universally agreed that Plato really is the author of the *Seventh Letter*, he is certainly strongly associated with the view that writing cannot replace something that can only belong to the mind or soul. The written word is a manufactured product that cannot reproduce the genuine spark of philosophical understanding that can occur in a dialogue. Yet some of those who engage with his ideas centuries later say that a technology such as writing can actually ‘enlarge the human spirit, intensify its interior life’ (Ong 2012: 82). Plato’s ‘spark’ metaphor continues to resonate with writers concerned with meaning-making (for example, Voloshinov 1973; Wegerif 2013) as I show later in this paper, indicating that the metaphor still works in literate and postdigital times.

Walter Ong (2012) compares Plato’s position with those held at the time of his own writing (the year 1982) about the likelihood that pocket calculators and computers would encourage laziness and ignorance, noting also that the same kinds of objections were previously made about printing. Ong points out that these are all ways of technologizing our practices and that when the word has been technologized, there is no way back...

...there is no effective way to criticize what technology has done with it without the aid of the highest technology available. Moreover, the new technology is not merely used to convey the critique: in fact, it brought the critique into existence. (Ong 2012: 79)

If this is true of all technologizations of the word—and we might have Large Language Models in mind nowadays—it is profoundly true of the shift from orality to literacy. Ong suggests that it was only possible for Plato to think the way he did because he had interiorized the changes that writing had made to his mental processes by allowing him to separate ‘the word’ from the living present in order to make a study of it. The same kinds of objections and similar major transformations happened with print; however, writing is the most transformative of all. The uttered word is no longer transient or ‘ephemeral’ (Gourlay 2023) when it moves from sound to vision. The written word is still available externally and can be interiorized. ‘Texts assimilate utterance to the human body.’ (Ong 2012: 99) This, paradoxically,

occurs despite the ‘deadness of the text’. Indeed, text’s ‘resurrection into limitless living contexts’ is only possible *because of* ‘its rigid visual fixity’ (Ong 2012: 80).

Moreover, Ong devotes a whole chapter of his book to explaining how ‘writing restructures consciousness’ (Ong 2012: Chap. 4). This is a contested claim as Hartley illustrates and concurs in his essay ‘After Ongism’ at the end of the 30th anniversary edition of Ong’s book. Hartley regrets that ‘silly statements’ about consciousness may distract from Ong’s major contributions to awareness of ‘the history of learning systems’ and ‘*cultural evolution*’ (Hartley 2012: 216–217). However, other writers have also made claims about changes to consciousness in relation to these themes, notably Wegerif (2013).

For me, a distinctive aspect of that history and evolution is the attention Ong draws to context-free or ‘autonomous’ discourse practices not only introduced through writing but also present in oral cultures. I noted it initially because I struggled with understanding the meaning of ‘autonomous’ in this context. It is the *discourse* that has autonomy, as opposed to the speaker, because it has been detached from its originator. For oral cultures, autonomous discourse practices refer to established rituals and formulae passed down through generations and also to vatic or oracular utterances where the speaker ‘is considered only the channel, not the source’ (Ong 2012: 77). We see this in the *Phaedrus* with Socrates’ saying ‘I thought I heard a voice saying in my ear that I had been guilty of impiety’ (Plato 2006: 33). Ong recognizes that the written text is acting like an oracle—a portal to a voice that cannot be challenged. To an addressee, then, a book is akin to the daimon whispering in Socrates’ mind. We might speculate that this could contribute to a sense that writing is blasphemous; this would be in keeping with subsequent analyses of the impact of writing on religion:

Writing, then, is magic:—one method of gaining power over the living word.

The tradition of the sacred word is originally oral; it lives in being recited, and only later did oral tradition give place to graphic... (Van de Leeuw 1986: 435)

Socrates certainly believes that the human word should be open to challenge and that this is missing from writing. The changes wrought through writing, however, do suggest a major adjustment to cognitive processes that some later writers seem happy to attribute to a restructured consciousness. We shall see examples of these throughout this paper. It is important to bear in mind, though, that there are several different contexts and often elusive meanings attributed to the word ‘consciousness’.

There is no shortage of illustrations that might support the implications Ong has derived from acknowledging and challenging Socrates’ views on the living word. Instances can be found in academic analyses, parodies, speculative fiction, and many other genres. For example, in the time-travel novel *The Plot to Save Socrates*, Paul Levinson can suggest, convincingly to my mind, that Socrates himself could not resist writing, much as he disliked it. And that it does not matter to Socrates who is credited with the writing; he feels that the ideas were already there to be discovered and did not emerge directly from him. The fictional character Sierra Waters in the year 2042 is surprised at this confession from a future version of Socrates, and tells him: ‘In my world, the pre-existence of ideas is a theory attributed to Plato.’ (Levinson 2012: 499) Socrates’ rejoinder is that he has taught Plato well. Whether

the reader accepts the theory or not, Sierra, through Levinson's writing, is keeping the conversation about Plato's theories alive while re-presenting some of his important questions about the origins, ownership, and the commodification of ideas that are still relevant today.

Another example of writing that preserves Plato's (or Socrates') words and adds a postdigital development to them is in Goldstein's (2014) novel *Plato at the Googleplex* where Plato is imagined to be visiting Google's headquarters in the company of Cheryl, a 'media escort', and Marcus, a software engineer, with whom he engages in dialogue about crowd-sourcing of data from Google searches and about slavery, among other issues. This Plato can still use ideas and arguments from his own written dialogues to question underlying assumptions (meticulously referenced by Goldstein). Plato is also able to accept that there has been an increase in knowledge since his time and that he can learn from this and update his thinking. One incident might support Ong's contention that writing and subsequent technologization of the living word restructure consciousness. Impressed by Cheryl's observations and arguments that slavery is wrong—'a person is a person'—future Plato observes:

There is so much you take for granted now, far more than is stored, I begin to suspect, in the information clouds of Google. There are treasures of hard-earned knowledge stored right there in your view of the world. (Goldstein 2014: 92)

There may well be arguments about whether Goldstein is entitled to assume such a line of reasoning in her imagined update of Plato's attitude to slavery, but her mediation through fiction of his message about how knowledge is earned through human interaction, including writing, certainly supports the idea of the survival of the living word, along with an explanation of 'why philosophy won't go away' (which is the subtitle of her book). Philosophy, in the form of the living word, has apparently survived the death threat presented by writing. However... philosophy, the living word, and the nature of orality have all been transformed by the technology of writing as, perhaps, has human consciousness. And writing can still be dangerous.

The Monologic Word

But no living word relates to its object in a *singular* way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that is often difficult to penetrate. (Bakhtin 1981: 276)

The philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) is probably the most influential academic writer on the living word. He characterizes the living word as internally persuasive and dialogical as opposed to monological and authoritative (Bakhtin 1981). There is an important relationship between the external use of the word and the internal understanding of it. The word lives through its attention to addressivity—the quality of being directed to someone (Bakhtin 1986) and through

embracing difference in the meeting of two (or more) minds. The living word is always seeking a response and is unfinalizable.

Bakhtin was an admirer of Socrates, although in some ways his view of the living word seems different, especially with respect to writing. While Socrates regrets about words that ‘when they have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them...’ (Plato 2006: 56), Bakhtin recognizes that such ‘tumbling about’ is part of what makes the word a living entity. It was from the study of the literary written word, especially within Dostoevsky’s novels, that Bakhtin formulated his theory that became known as dialogism. This followed up earlier ideas developed with Voloshinov, who published a work on linguistics for a ‘living language’ in 1929: *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Voloshinov 1973). It should be noted that, as with Plato and Socrates, it can be difficult to attribute ideas fully to Bakhtin, who worked very closely with Medvedev and Voloshinov. This is arguably in keeping with the notion of the ‘living word’: it does not just ‘belong’ to a single author or speaker. Indeed, it has again been observed that precise attribution of the author does not matter; on the relationship between Bakhtin and Voloshinov, Renfrew notes:

...these works represent the creatively and immensely productive encounter of two distinct consciousnesses—and are therefore fitting embodiments of the dialogic theoretical position they express. (Renfrew 2015: 60)

Bakhtin’s acceptance of the written word does not annihilate Socrates’ point about the written word being a mere image of a living idea. Bakhtin’s statement, at the start of this section, about the living word’s relation to its object comes as a contrast to his thoughts on traditional stylistics in the Russian Formalist approach to analysis of literary texts. Bakhtin sees this approach as attempting to relate a word to its object in a singular way—to present each word or phrase as a neutral expression with potential for meaning, as happens in other monologic texts, such as dictionaries and grammar books. Bakhtin and Voloshinov consider that studies in linguistics and related disciplines in their time tended to ignore what happens in dialogue preferring instead to privilege the ‘monologic utterance’ (Voloshinov 1973), which enables scholars to code and categorize a section of speech or writing. This results in scholars of linguistics, stylistics, or the philosophy of language systematizing where they can: for example, using what can be read on ancient monuments and texts, or a work of literature as a ‘self-sufficient and closed authorial monologue’ (Bakhtin 1981: 274). In this sense, monologic writing might be regarded as an image of a once living idea and thus in keeping with Socrates’ concerns.

Bakhtin’s ‘living language’ alternative to traditional linguistics deprivileges the monological utterance and sees meaning-making as always the result of social interaction, the acceptance of diverse voices, and a positive attitude towards difference. Unlike in monological texts, there is no attempt in dialogic approaches to finalize a meaning for all time. Unity emerges from tolerance of difference, not from trying to reconcile differences—dialogic is not the same as dialectic (Wegerif 2008). Dialectics is the result if we ‘carve out abstract concepts and judgments from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness’ (Bakhtin 1986: 147). The word ‘dialogic’ used in educational circles may not always capture this

nuance about difference. Many so-called dialogues (including some Socratic ones) are designed to lead a student into providing the ‘correct’ answer already known by the teacher—a use of language that Bakhtin would regard as ‘authoritative’.

Bakhtin does recognize some forms of classification in his work on genre with Medvedev (Bakhtin et al. 1978). However, this is very different from other treatments in linguistics and especially the foundational work of Saussure, who was influential in Russia at the time. Renfrew (2015: 62) draws attention to Saussure’s sense that it was more important to study *langue* (a system of norms) than *parole* (speech), whereas Bakhtin and Voloshinov see this view as an abstraction: ‘...subjective consciousness of the speaking person does not in any sense work with language as a system of normatively identical forms’ (Voloshinov 1973: 281). Bakhtin says that such reification of language is suitable only for subjects such as grammar ‘where it is precisely the dead, thinglike shell of the word that interests us’ (Bakhtin 1981: 355).

Monologic forms of language may then seem to have no life about them, especially if the living word is about a meeting of minds. That does not make them useless. Many monologues have been preserved for authoritative reference, through written and, especially, printed media. This preservation is notably important for education and research, including linguistic research, and is also necessary for trade, law, religion, politics, and many other practices that we take for granted today. Examples of monologic forms are not hard to find; they serve useful purposes for studying as records, reminders, and above all as bureaucratic and authoritative discourses that are necessary (but not sufficient) for contemporary life. But Bakhtin believes that if we are interested in how language works, we should be studying the utterance as opposed to the sentence. Bakhtin contrasts monologic discourse with that which is ‘internally persuasive’:

Internally persuasive discourse—as opposed to one that is externally authoritative—is, as it is affirmed through assimilation, tightly interwoven with ‘one’s own word’. In the everyday rounds of our consciousness, the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else’s. ... The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is *not finite*, it is *open*; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever newer *ways to mean*. (Bakhtin 1981: 345)

It would appear, then, that monological authoritative language poses a potential death threat to ‘the living word.’ However, Bakhtin does not actually make this claim. Confusingly, and perhaps even contradicting himself (Morson 2006), Bakhtin suggests that there is no such thing as the pure monologue. The open and unbounded nature of all human communication means that even the monologic is full of ‘dialogic overtones’:

However monological the utterance may be (for example, a scientific or philosophical treatise), however much it may concentrate on its own object, it cannot but be, in some measure, a response to what has already been said about the given topic, on the given issue, even though this responsiveness may not have assumed a clear-cut external expression. (Bakhtin 1986: 92)

In other words, language is never totally monologic, even though monologues have become increasingly pervasive, especially during the era of print. Language stays alive by challenging the ‘centripetal’ forces that create standardized and static forms: ‘Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work’ (Bakhtin 1981: 272). These two forces intersect in the utterance.

What the monologue has often lost is the sense that at least two minds must be involved in meaning-making. With the living word, there are echoes of Plato’s reference to a spark in the soul (Plato 1961) in Voloshinov’s contention that ‘meaning is like an electric spark that occurs only when two different terminals are hooked together’ (Voloshinov 1973: 102–103). This later context of Voloshinov’s analogy, though, shows that a spark is not necessarily dependent on a face-to-face encounter, and this allows us to recognize the potential of digital technology for a wider scope for dialogic education than the monologic dependence on print (Wegerif 2013).

Bakhtin’s work came late to the west, but in good time to have an impact on theorizing about the Internet age. I have selected two examples from several years ago which each associate Bakhtin’s ideas with the Internet, including potential dialogic opportunities from its relatively recent technologization of language. Taken together, they have drawn my attention to an important but complex aspect of Bakhtin’s view of the living word: how it relates to the many voices it encounters. Utterances are always addressed to someone, and there is an elusive ‘third party’ present at the same time (Bakhtin 1986).

My first example comes from the year 2000, when Fred Evans cites Bakhtin to support his use of the Internet as an *epoché*—a word from phenomenology to mean a bracketing off of standard beliefs about the world (Evans 2000). From this Evans concludes that through its ‘virtual’ status, the Internet reveals that we are all participants in a dialogue. This is true of both the Internet and the real world. Society is a ‘multivoiced body’, metamorphosing through society’s creativity and shared meaning-making, with consequent imperatives for democracy. But there is a ‘dark side’ as well. Evans explores the distinction between monologic and dialogic, and Bakhtin’s associated notions of monoglossia (standardized language) and heteroglossia (coexistence of varieties of language in a single language). Evans sees a tension between the domination by a single monoglossic voice that permits no alternative (which Evans calls an ‘oracle’) and the interplay of voices in the multivoiced body. Eight years later, this paper was extended into a book (Evans 2008) which, among other things, resists the rise of oracles that attempt to quash the dynamic and contested different voices that Bakhtin sees as fundamental to our ability to make meaning together. Oracles (as we saw earlier) are portals to the word that cannot be challenged; this word might come from a universalizing doctrine, ideology, or supreme being. The oracle is the equivalent of Bakhtin’s authoritative word and is a version of Ong’s ‘autonomous discourse’.

For Rupert Wegerif (2013), in my second example of Bakhtin’s influence on thinking in relation to the Internet, the theory of dialogism provides both the support and the need to create an ‘education for the Internet age’. Wegerif has a long history of involvement in working with children on ‘Thinking Together’ through dialogue and in association with technology (see, for example, Wegerif et al. 1998),

which undoubtedly has positioned him to recognize and to theorize the potential affordances of the Internet for teaching *for* dialogue. He contrasts this with the way schools have relied on the monologic affordances of print; the Internet has a different logic, which is dialogic. He acknowledges the concerns expressed at the time (the year 2013) that the Internet might have on our brains and thinking, but points to Socrates in the *Phaedrus*: ‘The logic of the Internet Age returns us to Socrates’ original insight that intelligence lies in dialogues and not in books.’ (Wegerif 2013: 10) Like Evans, Wegerif sees the Internet as affording a global dialogue with multiple voices. Unlike Evans, however, Wegerif specifically refers to the notion of ‘the living word’ in both Plato and Bakhtin; indeed, I believe his book stimulated (or ‘sparked’) my own interest in the theme over a decade ago.

Wegerif uses his previous experience through dialogic teaching working with young children to illuminate our understanding of a complex idea in Bakhtin’s work: that of the superaddressee. This is the recognition that in any dialogic encounter between two people, there is a presupposition of a ‘third’ person: one who would fully understand the meaning being expressed (Bakhtin 1986). This ‘third’ can feel present at the moment of understanding, perhaps when a ‘spark’ occurs. Wegerif writes:

...I often see children changing their minds in the face of questioning by other children not in fact because they tried to see the issue or problem from the point of view of the specific questioner but simply because they looked at it again as if afresh from the outside and realized that they had got it wrong. (Wegerif 2013: 48)

Looking at it afresh from the outside does invoke the idea of the third (ineffable) person in the dialogue, something I also recognize in my own thinking and through dialogues with students. Wegerif chooses to think of the superaddressee as ‘a cognitive version of the Infinite Other’, following a reading of the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (Wegerif 2013: 49). This is because trying to engage in dialogue with this already abstract notion of a superaddressee simply generates another superaddressee position. For Fred Evans, on the other hand, the superaddressee is best regarded as ‘the multivoiced body’ itself (Evans 2000). Otherwise, there could be a danger of the superaddressee taking on the role of an ‘oracle’ which is a position that Evans strongly resists for the multivoiced society.

Bakhtin himself acknowledges that the superaddressee might present in different ways depending on the era and worldview of the interlocutors, suggesting it might be ‘God, absolute truth, the court of dispassionate human conscience, the people, the court of history, science, and so forth’ (Bakhtin 1986: 126), a list that accommodates both Wegerif’s and Evans’ perspectives. Whether the abstract idea of the third participant in a dialogue is seen as the Infinite Other, an oracle, the multivoiced body, or something else, these understandings are themselves part of the dialogic argument I want to take forward in this paper. For now, the simple conclusion is that monologue need not necessarily stifle the living word, but we should recognize that monologue is insufficient for human life. We need to be able to address our thoughts to other minds and we share a sense that there is a potential but abstract arbiter of the meanings produced from such communication.

Static and Normative Approaches to Meaning-Making

Every written document—indeed every utterance—is a living organism. (Ludlow 2014: 66)

While Bakhtin's dialogic theory is the main focus of my paper, it is in keeping with his approach to explore associated ideas that cover similar ground but using different words. In his book *Living Words: Meaning Underdetermination and the Dynamic Lexicon*, Peter Ludlow (2014) does not refer to monologic practices nor to super-addressees—indeed, he does not mention Bakhtin at all. But the quotation above is very relevant to the discussions so far, as well as being a strong claim in the light of them. The statement comes at the conclusion of an argument in Ludlow's second chapter, 'Norms of word meaning litigation', where he examines debates that modulate the meanings of the words 'planet', 'rape', and 'person'. These examples illustrate his contention that words have underdetermined meanings and that when conflicts arise because of this, we have first to recognize and engage with the different meanings and then have a reasoned discussion to 'sharpen', narrow, expand, or otherwise modulate the meaning for the purposes of the immediate context—for example, to determine whether or not Pluto should be recognized as a planet. Ludlow's exploration shows the complexity of this process which is a normative approach that sometimes works well and sometimes 'misfires.' His analysis also suggests the importance of addressivity, though again this is not a term that Ludlow uses.

Like Bakhtin, Ludlow privileges the notion of 'utterance', referring to its interlocutors and addressees as 'dynamic communicative partnerships' (Ludlow 2014: 72). He sees the negotiations towards meaning modulation as *microlanguages*, where human language is built up through fleeting encounters on a conversation-by-conversation basis. Bakhtin and Ludlow might then concur that human languages are built on conversation and that a dynamic view of language overcomes some of the problems presented by the static 'standard view'. Ludlow has strong reasons for wanting to do this:

The standard view ... has led to wooden approaches to language instruction on the one hand and to failed attempts at human/machine communication on the other. (Ludlow 2014 : Abstract)

We shall return to 'wooden approaches to language learning' towards the end of the paper.

Ludlow has had direct experience of those failed attempts at human/machine communication when working at Honeywell Corporation in 1985. He discovered then that trying to set up verbal communication with a computer was extremely difficult, because of 'our very shifty and dynamic vocabularies' (Ludlow 2014: 74). But at the time it was clearly assumed that language was a relatively static object and that it would be possible to produce algorithms to translate verbal text into computer language or into natural language for users. The recognition that language is dynamic rather than (or as well as) static has led Ludlow to conclude that all language is underdetermined and depends on microlanguages to clarify the meaning in

particular contexts, which is especially obvious where differences of perspective and meaning are already evident. If humans have to go through this process with each other, it is unlikely that a human and computer are going to understand each other straight away.² Successful technologizing of the word does depend on an understanding of what the word is actually doing. In Bakhtin's terminology, it will be a complex operation for a computer to capture the convergence of 'centripetal and centrifugal forces' on language use (even though it might manage the former quite well). This will be an important issue for our subsequent thinking on AI.

The reason that Ludlow is claiming that every utterance is 'alive' is because of its dynamism. This has implications for real world practices, which is what has led to his claim that every utterance is a living organism. He admits that this usage is metaphorical, but devotes a chapter of his book to suggest that metaphor may be 'a particularly aggressive modulation' of meaning providing continuity with literal speech (Ludlow 2014: 158). Extending the metaphor of the living word to the written document (which would presumably have been anathema to Socrates) is important for Ludlow to make his case about the use of the word 'person' in a constitutional document that no longer fits our understanding of the world. The meaning of 'person' is highly sensitive and contested, as we saw earlier with the fictional Plato at the Googleplex who had to revise his understanding of slavery in relation to personhood. Ludlow uses his exploration of the use of the word 'person' in relation to the US Constitution to illustrate the dynamic nature of its meaning since that constitution was written. Yet a US Supreme Court Justice, Scalia, has claimed that the Constitution is not a living document and must be interpreted according to its original intentions, despite the real-world changes to our understanding that could not have been anticipated at the time of writing, for example, with respect to fetuses, brain-dead humans, or 'intelligent' robots (Ludlow 2014: 65). Scalia is not unique in making a denial that words are 'living', as will be shown later in this paper.

I am not here making either a validation or a critique of Ludlow's theory of the need for a dynamic lexicon. There are others who have done that both from an academic perspective (e.g., Sennet and Fisher 2018) and in response to an earlier working of the ideas in a newspaper article that attracted 112 comments (Ludlow 2012). Both sets of commentaries on the argument simultaneously illustrate the existence and development of the living word through dialogue and modulation, if not the litigation over meaning that Ludlow feels is necessary when a legal principle is at stake. What Ludlow offers to our current analysis of the uses of 'the living word' are insights about what can go awry when we make the false assumption that language is inherently stable—demonstrating impacts on technology development, law, and politics. But because the assumption of language stability must break down under certain conditions, the 'living word' will be implicated in ways to move forward and thereby avoid any death threat that might have been implied.

² Of course, things have moved on since 1985, and Peter Ludlow is nowadays engaging in conversations with ChatGPT. See <https://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2023/09/peter-ludlow-asked-chatgpt-to-rank-philosophers-and-departments.html>, accessed 14 March 2024.

Monolingualism

Languages need communities in order to live. So, only a community can save an endangered language. (Crystal 2014: 205)

It may seem so far that my fear of a death threat to the living word is an exaggeration or even a fallacy. The living word has shown itself to be remarkably resilient in the face of standardization, technologization, and to being treated as though language is a closed and finalizable system. Yet the analysis has also shown that all of these ‘threats’ have had an impact on human communication and meaning-making and can offer explanations for how things are and how they might be otherwise. Recognition of the ‘living word’ may be a useful way of resisting totalitarianism or colonialism, for instance. However, we do commonly talk about ‘dead’ languages such as Latin or Ancient Greek, and language death is a major concern for linguistics, providing the title of Crystal’s book from which the quotation above is taken. It is worth considering the threats to language at a larger scale.

Huge numbers of the world’s languages have already died, and of the remaining 7000, about half are not expected to survive for much longer and most of these will not be ‘natural’ deaths: ‘Now, more than ever, languages are being hounded out of existence.’ (Perlin 2024: 45) Linguistic imperialism is leading to the domination of a few powerful ‘killer’ languages (46) including English. Some people would want to make one of these dominant languages the only one, especially in our highly connected postdigital world. A case for this is made, for instance, in a TED talk by evolutionary biologist Mark Pagel (2011) who, after speaking in favor of the efficiencies of standardization, concludes that ‘our destiny is to be one world with one language’. On one level, this sounds appealing at a time of existential global environmental threats, but the linguistics community cautions us against seeing monolingualism either as a norm (when it is not) or as an aspiration for the world (which they suggest would be disastrous).

Crystal (2014) begins his widely cited chapter ‘Why should we care?’ (about language death) with a critique of the view that monolingualism would bring global understanding and peace. The role of predominantly monolingual countries in major conflicts belie any claim of monolingualism as panacea. Crystal details five reasons for caring about language death, highlighting the ecology of human language use at a global scale and indeed paralleling other ecologies in the natural world:

- Because we need diversity.
- Because languages express identity.
- Because languages are repositories of history.
- Because languages contribute to the sum of human knowledge.
- Because languages are interesting in themselves. (Crystal 2014: 35–88, Chapter 2 subheadings)

These reasons seem compatible with the analysis so far of the living word, extending it to expose the dangers of the assumption of monolingualism as normative and desirable, while recognizing it as a potential and dangerous direction of travel. Critiques of rigid monolingualism have already been identified as an indication of a rupture in linguistics studies that predates our current postdigital rupture (Bhatt 2023). The postdigital continuation of these debates is having an impact on language revitalization, where linguistics specialists have recourse to technology in their supporting role in revitalization movements. For example, Low et al. (2022) make a plea for the use of AI—along with a more extensive academic literature on the topic—to limit the effects of language death: ‘Paradoxically, preserving endangered languages, often colonially eroded, currently requires Western-funded AI.’ (Low et al. 2022: 19)

But linguists cannot save a language; only the speakers of the language can keep it alive, and supporting them can be difficult, demanding, and sometimes even dangerous (Crystal 2014). For the current discussion, a particularly interesting feature of Crystal’s account of the work of language revitalization teams (which contain people with a variety of roles) is that aspects of the linguistic support such as writing and tape recording to preserve existing forms might themselves be regarded as potentially threatening the ‘life’ of the language. ‘Writing the language down maybe seen as a dilution of the “real” language, which is spoken’ (Crystal 2014: 209), echoes Socrates’ concerns at the start of this paper. Yet if records are not made, there is a danger that the language will be not just dead, but extinct and unrevivable. The dismissal of written language would contribute to the dismissal of Indigenous people’s efforts to claim their language rights (Fostar 2021: 93–94).

Language death is not simply a metaphor for Crystal: he writes of the grief and loss experienced by those who encounter it (Crystal 2014: 216). However, for Fostar, it is only a metaphor, and a dangerous one that itself is ‘killing’ languages (Fostar 2021: 98). Fostar points out that we have less violent options for labeling the problem, which could lead to more precise tools to reverse linguistic loss. He proposes *phasing*: a word that can be used to track the dynamism, adaptability, and use of language over time. With respect to the topic of the living word, he would prefer the adjectives ‘changing’ or ‘dynamic’. He describes how the English language has phased in and out of usage over time; this is a more difficult process to describe when using death as a metaphor.

For another linguist and writer, Ross Perlin, the emphasis on death is to concentrate on the wrong issue:

Unfortunately, many linguists also dwell on damaging defeatist abstractions about language ‘death,’ ‘extinction,’ and ‘endangerment,’ while Indigenous scholars state clearly that oppression is the threat, and that reclaiming Indigenous languages is about liberation and recovery from historical trauma. Linguistics, like anthropology, has skeletons in its disciplinary closet. (Perlin 2024: 52)

This is an important reminder of the nature of the real threats not only to language but to its speakers and addressees. In choosing to focus positively on ‘the living word’, I hope to avoid possible accusations of defeatism; however, the ‘close association with death’ of writing (Ong 2012: 80) and similarly of monologue (Bakhtin

1981) cannot be avoided when considering the threats to the living word. Perlin, as co-director of the Endangered Language Alliance (ELA), has to tread a similar fine line, but manages to remain upbeat. Perlin's book *Language City* (2024) is a fascinating account of the work of the ELA in New York, a city that is a center both for English language and for multilingual diversity. Perlin and his colleagues chronicle and map languages that have been maintained and extended after speakers have fled to New York from oppression, conflict, catastrophe, and other traumatic experiences. He too is in favor of multilingualism over monolingualism. In his helpful chapter, 'A Brief Guide to Radical Linguistics', he begins with an excoriating attack on the 'baseless and pernicious myth of Babel in Genesis 11' (Perlin 2024: 42). This myth characterizes humans as being punished for working together to build a tower to heaven. Our collective human punishment has been the diversity of languages, ensuring that we cannot again communicate globally to build another such edifice. Babel is itself an example of a 'living' concept as shown in its disambiguation page on Wikipedia and in the multiple links in the entry on the Tower itself. For me, it invokes Douglas Adams' Babel Fish³ and also a popular language learning app, but there are many more connections.

Multilingualism seems to be what keeps the living word alive—without, of course, killing off monolingualism, which continues to dominate in some places.

Faith in the Living Word

If there is something like a God concept in Bakhtin, it is surely the super-addressee for without faith that we will be understood somehow, sometime, by *somebody*, we would not speak at all. (Holquist's introduction to Bakhtin 1986: xviii)

Faith in the living word—whether religious or secular—would seem an appropriate topic to explore to bring these varying perspectives together. While Bakhtin himself denies that he is talking about 'any mystical or metaphysical being' (Bakhtin 1986: 126), he concedes that the superaddressee could be expressed as such. I explore below the extent to which Holquist's 'God concept' is also appropriate for secular considerations of the superaddressee.

There have already been several theological references in my exegesis of texts that discuss the 'living word'. As I indicated at the beginning of this paper, my initial inquiries resulted in an overwhelming number of references to religion. Probably because of my location and language, these results point predominantly to Christian sources, with many suggesting that the Bible is the 'living word' of God (see the screenshots of a DuckDuckGo search and a Google Scholar Search in Fig. 1). However, from only a cursory follow-up search I was able to discover that other religious texts are also associated with the expression 'the living word', including the Torah and the Qu'ran as well as Buddhist and Hindu texts and probably many others.

³ See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/cult/hitchhikers/guide/babelfish.shtml>, accessed 9 April 2024.

Search results for "the living word" on a search engine. The results include:

- United Kingdom - Safe search: moderate - Any time -
- uncommonpursuit.net - Report Ad: **100% Free Bible Lessons Online | Free Book on Christian Growth** (AD). 12 Steps to God will nourish every Christian wanting renewal. - Alison, I've helped thousands of people know how to develop a strong faith in God. Experience God's love - Become a strong Christian.
- eden.co.uk - Report Ad: **Christian Bible Study At Eden | Free And Fast UK Delivery** (AD). Christian Bible Study - Bibles & Bible Resources Are Waiting For You. Buy From Us & We'll Donate 10% Of The Profit To Charity. Bible Study Books | Eden.co.uk Christian Shop.
- https://www.gotquestions.org - Living-Word.html: **What is the living Word? | GotQuestions.org**. 22 Jan 2024 - Answer. According to Hebrews 4:12, "the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.". The "word of God" here is the written or spoken Word. The ESV says that the Bible is "living" and active. Day of Pentecost · Parable of The Sower · Questions About The Bible
- https://thelivingword.uk: **The Living Word — Bible study on the set readings widely used by ...**. This is **The Living Word** based on the Bible readings set for for Sunday, August 20 in the interdenominational scheme. Theme: God saves when we turn to Him. Psalm 133. Genesis 45:1-15 — Joseph reveals his true identity to his brothers. Matthew 15:10-28 — Words of faith prove a Gentile woman undefiled.
- https://www.biblegateway.com - passage - ?search=1 Peter 1:22-24&version=NLV: **1 Peter 1:22-24 NLV - The Living Word - Bible Gateway**. **The Living Word** - You have made your souls pure by obeying the truth through the Holy Spirit. This has given you a true love for the Christians. Let it be a true love from the heart. You have been given a new birth. It was from a seed that cannot die. This new life is from the Word of God which lives forever. All people are like grass. Their greatness is like the flowers. The grass dries up ...

Google Scholar search results for "the living word".

Articles (About 16,700 results (8.19 sec))

- Any time**: Since 2024, Since 2023, Since 2020, Custom range...
- Sort by relevance**, **Sort by date**
- Any type**
- Review articles**: include patents, include citations
- Create alert

Article Title	Author	Year	Journal/Source	DOI
The living word	JDG Dunn	2009	philpapers.org	
The Living Word	M.Bajó - Káris	2017	Evangelical Journal of Theology	10.1177/0014180117070000
The Living Word Vocabulary, the Words We Know: A National Vocabulary Inventory	E Dale, J O'Rourke	1978	ERIC	
Revealing the anthropocentric nature of language and the theory of the living word in the interpretation of the concepts videt', 'seel', 'vediet' know/and verit' believe'in the ...	Z Kováčová, E Ciprianiová	2016	sciendo.com	10.1515/sci.2016.0001
THE LIVING WORD	EN ON'S - digitalshowcase		oru.edu	
Living Word: Sharper Than Any Two-Edged Sword	E Krentz	1986	scholar.valpo.edu	10.1177/00141801860000000000
When "living stories" encounter the living word	CLS Schweitzer	2009	springer.com	10.1007/978-1-4020-9000-0_1

Fig. 1 Searches for 'the living word'

Some Christian sources, however, use the expression differently, to refer to Christ, as incarnation of the living word of God. 'In Trinitarian theology, the Second Person of the Godhead is the Word.' (Ong 2012: 74) Ong, himself a Jesuit priest,

makes it clear that this refers not to the written word, but to the spoken word, and thus the orality/literacy distinction emerges again. The differences between the written word of the Bible and Christ as embodiment of the spoken word have at times led to tensions and dispute. Another exponent of the term ‘the living word’ serves as a useful illustration of this.

N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783–1872), a Danish advocate of the living word for educational purposes, was a pastor frequently at odds with the state church which saw the Bible as the ultimate authority (Hancks 2023). Grundtvig’s writing was highly influential in the foundation of the folk high school movement in Denmark which persists to this day.⁴ He was particularly resistant to the ruling language of the time, Latin, and to the school texts that contained it and examinations that tested it. For Grundtvig, these together resulted in ‘schools for death’, and he proposed alternative ‘schools for life’, based on fellowship and ‘living interaction’ (Lawson 1993). Lawson draws attention to this as the secular connotation of the expression ‘the living word’, which is a term that Christ used at the Last Supper. The theological connotation of the expression is associated with the sacrament of communion and the powerful shared felt presence of Christ. Translated to a secular context, Grundtvig defines our expression ‘the living word’ as:

not Biblical fundamentalism but the spiritual communication of ‘the truth’, words of power and authority evoking an active response in the listener’ (Lawson 1993: 616).

Grundtvig was unequivocal that humanity should come before Christianity (Hancks 2023; Lawson 1993), which got him into a lot of difficulties with his church, though his faith was very strong.

Faith that depends on an active response is not the blind faith that is expected to lead to trust without question or reason. The living word in a secular sense so far in the analysis seems always to be associated with an anticipated active response, engagement, and an awareness of difference. But in the face of ‘the living word’ that emanates from a supreme being or other ‘oracle’ (Evans 2008), the living word might refer only to the reception and acceptance of its meaning, without question. In that sense it would lose some of the spark that starts the process of interiorization of ideas, if it does not engage with the ideas that are already in the mind, soul, or consciousness (depending on one’s worldview). This leads to at least two different and seemingly incompatible understandings of the living word: open to question or not open to question. The continuing rejection by Grundtvig and others of the written word as ‘living’ provides another such binary: the living word as always spoken and synchronous or alternatively the living word as accessible, or available for resurrection, through writing. Can we have faith in a term that leads to such contradictory understandings? (I return to this question shortly, along with other loose ends in my conclusion.)

Other challenges to ‘faith’ in the living word as we are exposed to it in our current postdigital era have been well documented in recent years through the *Postdigital Science and Education* journal community, especially, though not exclusively, in

⁴ See <https://danishfolkhighschools.com/>, accessed 14 March 2024.

a special issue of the journal on lies, bullshit, and fake news (MacKenzie and Bhatt 2020a) and a book on forms of dupery and deceit (MacKenzie et al. 2021). Both of these documents expose many reasons for researchers and other humans not to have blind faith in the words they are encountering, and it is clear that many of the harms emerging from our discourse practices have been exacerbated by technology. But it is also clear that the researchers involved have a vital role in both informing the public about these harms and holding authoritative institutions and technologies to account (MacKenzie and Bhatt 2020b). It is worth considering the addressees and processes in such debates: perhaps an abstract notion, or Platonic form, of ‘truth’ might constitute the superaddressee being invoked for some people.

On a more day-to-day basis, having faith in the living word suggests trusting the immediate and ephemeral connection between minds that are clearly engaged in a form of dialogue (or even monologue) towards this end. I was prompted to think about this by my final example of the use of the expression, which is described in a paper about university student responses to the switch from campus to distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic (Stevanović et al. 2021). The study with 832 student participants across a range of years was designed to look at motivation and opinions on distance learning resulting from the sudden switch in teaching during lockdown. The study found that first year students were far less motivated than older students and found distance learning less valuable. The predominant negative response referring to ‘the living word’ is completely counter to my own (pre-pandemic) experiences of being a distance (digital) education student and teacher, which has provoked some further reflection on the use of the expression:

- I missed the ‘living word’.

This was a statement selected by 43% of students from a list of six positive and ten negative statements about distance learning in a study during the Covid-19 pandemic (Stevanović et al. 2021: 1589). Even though the students did not utter or write the statement themselves, it clearly resonated with them more than any of the other statements. It implies that the ‘living word’ refers only to synchronous face-to-face spoken language in lectures and tutorials. Given the complexity of associations with the expression that I have uncovered in my enquiry, I would love to know more about the students’ and the authors’ understanding of ‘living word’ in this context.

Some insights on the pandemic response to distance learning and teaching in universities can be found in the many studies made at the time (see, for example, Jandrić et al. 2021). A key issue highlighted by many writers was the difference between digital education and ‘emergency remote teaching’ (Hodges et al. 2020) and the inequalities that were exposed by the latter (Czerniewicz et al. 2020). In this volatile environment, speeding up previous changes brought about by increasing use of technology in education, changes in perception were happening rapidly. Gourlay (2023) writes of the erosion of the status of face-to-face teaching following the pandemic, with an associated loss of some of the remaining transient or ephemeral practices of the live lecture. She also points to the erosion of students’ ability to find ‘seclusion’ because of constant digital surveillance and the change to the default position of ‘co-presence’ in university classrooms.

These changes have resulted in some ‘fugitive’ practices to resist the constant connection and ‘public performativity in academic work’ (Gourlay 2023: 63) that arise from an overemphasis on the ‘network’ or connectivity. The preference for the ‘living word’ over such conditions might simply be a plea for a more recognizably ‘human’ encounter with other minds that students can put their faith in.

I returned to Gourlay’s chapter to consider again her proposal that ‘more-than’ should replace the prefix ‘post’ in postdigital, as ‘more-than’ seems to tie in with reflections on linguistics, technology, and ‘the living word’. Now, having made an association of her thinking with the idea of (secular) faith in the living word, I not only agree with the suggestion about the prefix, I also want to take it further. It seems that my own understanding of the living word is that it ‘belongs’ in the postulated ‘boltholes and breathing spaces’ (Gourlay 2023: 63–64) from our overly constrained, technologized, and monitored practices in universities. The provenance of this expression is itself an example of the living word as I understand it: Gourlay (2023: 64) cites Zaslove (2007: 98) in Webb (2018: 102), with each bringing valuable and different perspectives to our meaning-making and understanding of the expression.

Faith in the living word may well be challenged by the new rounds of technologization of the word signaled by AI. In academia, it is not just the risks of plagiarism and fake knowledge that are causing concern. Handing over to AI the professional discourse practices of any academic discipline exacerbates a reduction in student–teacher dialogues already identifiable from attempts to standardize and rationalize higher education teaching. This loss is arguably particularly significant in language teaching where student–teacher dialogues frame the specific practices being taught. Earlier we saw Ludlow’s concern that a static view of language had led to ‘wooden approaches to language learning’ (Ludlow 2014: Abstract) and this is certainly something to be discouraged, as has been reiterated throughout this paper.

A reviewer of an early draft of this paper expressed concerns of the threat to language if second language (L2) academics resort to AI tools, risking loss of ‘nuance, variety, complexity and humour’ in a homogenized approach to L2 language teaching. The same reviewer notes that language learning apps such as Babel and Duolingo provide a popular defense against language death, sustaining once threatened languages such as Scottish Gaelic. Thus, AI—like writing, printing, broadcasting, and the Internet in previous technologizations of language—will pose both threats and opportunities for our living word. It is important to keep engaging in dialogues about AI and academics are certainly doing that. Bakhtin’s centrifugal linguistic forces are still in evidence.

Conclusion

In my exploration of ‘the living word’, I have attempted not to aim for a dialectic approach to converge on a final definition of what it is—that would be against the spirit of it. I have exposed several contradictions in its use: especially with spoken versus written language, whether it can refer only to synchronous or can include

asynchronous utterances, religious and secular applications, its affordances, limitations, and dangers as a metaphor. It is a tricky term that probably needs to be modulated (Ludlow 2014) in fleeting, transient, or ephemeral dialogues before it can be successfully applied to a particular context. I suggest that the expression might be generally regarded as a placeholder for exploration of our responses to new forms of language use, especially from increased technologization.

Despite the contradictions and tensions exposed, the common features in the exploration of the living word are as follows:

- It comes from the lived experience of its interlocutors.
- It is addressed to at least one other mind, with faith that someone could understand it even if the immediate interlocutor does not.
- It is regarded as a dynamic use of language.
- It anticipates a response, even if it is not actually forthcoming.
- It depends on difference in perspectives to create meaning.
- It is never concluded, but is taken forward to other dialogues.
- It tends to be invoked in opposition to language practices that are more restrictive or threatening in some way.
- It evolves in response to such threats and does not eliminate them.
- The idea of the living word has survived all threats to date.

As a placeholder, the idea of the living word may be useful in addressing our responses to technologization that may appear to be posing an existential threat. We can use this thinking together to explore new threats, through the forms of communication available to us, adapting it as those forms change to bring new perspectives. It is the living word itself that has enabled us to assimilate changes that have arisen from forms of technologization and their effects and to resist those that are not conducive to our survival. Throughout major epochs in language use, the human race has continually participated in productive dialogues, resisting centripetal forces when they are not useful. The living word will prevail, but it may work better if we share our views on it.

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