

The Meaning of Language

Acts 2:1-21

I have always been fascinated by the meaning of words and how they change throughout the centuries. I'm not a linguist or etymologist, mind you, but I did take a course on Linguistics in college, as well as the mandatory one on Greek and Latin roots at my high school, which I hated at the time, but launched me on a lifelong appreciation of language, semantics, and wordsmithing.

One of my many discoveries is that some of the vocabulary we commonly employ today has evolved quite a bit from its original use and meaning. For example, the word, "artificial," instead of noting something fake or counterfeit, once-upon-a-time meant the opposite, i.e., something that displayed artistic or technical skill. How it evolved I cannot say, however I am pretty certain that if you suggested to an artist today that his or her work seemed remarkably artificial, it wouldn't be received as a compliment.

Another word that's migrated from its original meaning is, "awful." Originally, it referred to being, "full of awe, or inspiring," which, again, would be misunderstood by the artist who just heard from you that their work is not only artificial, but in fact is outright *awful!*

Equally misunderstood is the word, "fantastic," which in the 14th century actually meant, "existing only in one's imagination, or not real." Again, this could create an awkward moment if you responded to your spouse's or significant other's query: "Honey, how do I look in this outfit?" "You look fantastic—really!"

Along those same lines, in the 16th century to refer to someone as a “bully” was to express a term of endearment, roughly equivalent to calling someone “sweetheart” or “darling” (i.e., your love interest would be a “bully”). Of course, this was also during the same period when chastity belts were considered a sign of marital trust.

The word “guess” is another interesting term that’s evolved. It used to mean “to take aim, as with a weapon”—which probably indicates why it wasn’t wise to enter a house announcing yourself, “Guess who?” At least it explains how “hospitality” is the root word for “hospital!”

If you were “naughty” centuries ago, that meant you had naught or nothing. A “naughty person” meant they were poor and needy. Nowadays, at least in my experience, it works in reverse: I usually find I *get* nothing when I am naughty!

Naughty or nice, all sorts of words have twisted their meanings inside out. “Nice” used to mean, “silly, foolish, and simpleminded.” Anyone who referred to you as a “nice” person wasn’t being very nice.

Speaking of lacking niceties, the word “defecate” originally meant “to purify” something, which explains the mystery for why old Noankers thought they were having a spiritual experience when they hit the outhouse! Believe me, a lot of religion left town when the sewers came in!

Another semantic oddity out of the Middle Ages: “silly” once referred to something or someone who was “lucky, prosperous, and blessed.” So, you see, it would be perfectly appropriate to say, “You silly Republicans,” as opposed to “You naughty Democrats!”

Religious nomenclature has also evolved. The word, “bless,” centuries ago meant “to cover with blood” (as in a sacrifice)—which really makes you wonder where the common adage, “God bless you,” came from! It also provides a new insight to Jesus’ admonition: “Bless those who curse you!”

Finally, the word “clergy” used to mean “learning or scholarship”—you notice I said, it *used* to mean that! Clearly, back then, there was a built-in ecclesiastical bias because the term, “idiot,” originally was in reference to those sitting in the pews! I kid you not! So technically, that would mean I’m preaching to a room full of idiots! How many live here in the village of Noank? That makes you the village idiots!

Obviously, over time words change, meanings evolve, and language is modified by cultural changes and social discourse. As we see language develop, so does our human ability to perceive things differently. If you have been exposed to or studied other languages, or if English is a second language for you, you already sense the intellectual and emotional limitations imposed upon those who only speak one language.

For instance, though the English vocabulary is vast, it is still insufficient to grasp every human experience, or express every emotion, or relay every event. What you can express in one language, you might not be able to in another. What is discovered is that there is no single and universal way for the human mind to be wired into a uniform pattern of thinking or form of communication.

In fact, several studies in cognitive psychology and linguistics have explored how the languages and dialects people speak impact

their perceptions of the world in differing ways.¹ Studies have shown that eyewitness accounts of certain events differ when more than one language is being employed. Descriptive elements depend on whether the particular language used is constructed passively or actively, whether or not the subject, object, or action is emphasized or indicated, or even in conveying the sense of time or direction.

For example, I didn't realize until recently that some languages do not contain a sense of "left" or "right," but instead refer to the position of something relative to another on the basis of compass points at the given time (e.g., this is my arm to the east of me and this is my western arm; if I turn, this becomes my south-eastern hand or my northwestern hand). This can be quite confusing and enlightening when trying to explain how things are perceived.

As complicated as this might be, the differences in language, meaning, and dialect help us to be aware of how ignorant we are of the way communication occurs around the world, or even within our own society. In an increasingly interconnected global economy and social network, it underscores the justification for including as many voices as possible in any decision that affects people large scale. A dominant perspective and language is too limiting and excludes far too many legitimate insights, ideas, and points of views.

This isn't just in relation to international diplomacy or commerce. It also holds true with recognizing the vast differences between cultures and language groups within our own society. Wrong assumptions and misperceptions occur all the time because people communicate through the worldviews shaped by the languages

¹ Lera Boroditsky, "How Language Shapes Thought," *Scientific American*, February 2011, pp. 62-65.

they speak. Being limited to a single language (even if it's a dominant one like English) or taking in only the views of a few, handicaps communication and mutual understanding. That's why diversity on governing boards is critically important. If we want people to effectively engage the world with as few limitations as possible, then like many other around this planet, we should aim for multilingual abilities so we can more fully grasp human reality and experience, rather than conform everyone to a single language.

I realize how challenging this might be for many of us and how much pushback I'd get from those who support the campaign to promote English-only in the U.S., but a single-language society is not only a handicap for commerce and education, it's a vestige of a colonial era that, for the most part, no longer exists. Besides, multilingual abilities actually empower people to perceive a broader understanding of the world intellectually and to engage and communicate on a level that the future will demand of us—a future that could well trend toward fewer hostilities and misunderstandings, if this is fully embraced. As we're learning on many different fronts, it will be challenging for young people today to succeed in this global environment without becoming conversant in as many languages as possible.

In some respects, this discussion isn't unique to the realities of the 21st century. The reason I say this is, for all of the dramatic imagery of earth, wind, and fire in the biblical narrative of Pentecost, multilingualism actually lies at the heart of this extraordinary story. In effect, it's a transformation, if not reversal, of the Genesis myth of the Tower of Babel—a myth which depicted the antediluvian world

speaking one language until the gods thwarted human aspirations by confusing them with multiple languages.

As we might imagine, there is a great deal of symbolism presented in this story from Acts as well—namely, that Luke’s portrayal of Pentecost is more reflective than descriptive—the multiple languages expressed actually represent the success of the primitive church to move out from Jerusalem and the Palestine region through missionary activity to the ends of the known world at the time. In other words, what Luke is doing is not offering a reporter’s account of a historical event, but it is a story created to reflect what occurred for the early church in the decades following Jesus’ life. We know this because the expression of the Spirit’s presence throughout the book of Acts (i.e., speaking in other tongues) follows a strategic formula for mission expansion articulated in Jesus’ final words: “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). When each of these social thresholds were crossed (Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and into the Gentile world), that’s when Luke portrays new converts as speaking in tongues as a sign of the Spirit’s presence in those who had not experienced it before. The tongues of fire in our text today were symbolic of this in Jerusalem and of the missionary outreach into other lands and among many languages.

For this reason, I’m fascinated with the way Luke presented the story. The Gospel of Christ came to each person in their own particular tongue or dialect, which is why the symbol of tongues of fire works in this case—the Spirit (symbolized by the wind) moved in

the lives of those whose languages differed, but instead of leading to confusion as it did in Babel, it was grasped and spread like wildfire.

And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.

That list pretty much covered the territory impacted by the mission work of the Apostles.

In many ways, the message is this: the birth of Christianity was as a multilingual movement built from the grassroots—in contrast to an empire imposing its own order and singular image upon the world (in fact, quite the opposite and far more engaging). In Luke’s view, the Church quickly spread to many regions and cultures by the inspiration of God’s Spirit, far from its place of origin and rooted deeply into the experience, language, and perspective of each culture known. In Luke’s rather idealistic portrayal throughout the book of Acts, there was a freedom of expression because the Gospel became relevant to and interpreted by each specific culture and in each location, as opposed to being centered on Jerusalem and its temple as the source of faith.

Yet, as we know, this isn’t how church history eventually unfolded. In fact, much like words changing their meaning over time, so did the character of the Church. In a few centuries’ time, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire (quite the opposite of what it originally was), mission expansion became associated with imperial interests and ambitions, and the multilingual, multicultural message of the Church became largely

conformed to Latin. The meaning of language changed radically as well from its original intent. The “good news” of the Gospel became more privatized with salvation being reduced to the individual soul; the charitable and just sharing of resources in community became reinterpreted as tithes and offerings for the institutional church; the egalitarian and inclusive love of community gave way to a hierarchical structure controlled by clergy and monarchs; the diversity of expression and experience became overruled by conformity to doctrine and creed.

The imperial control of the faith through Rome resulted in a long history where the Church reflected precisely the opposite of its original nature and the message of God became communicated more through ritual and robe than by grassroots inspiration and passion. I often wonder if the early Apostles would have even recognized the Christianity they proclaimed and cultivated in the vast majority of settings since the earliest years of the Church.

For that reason, maybe we shouldn't fear what the recent Pew survey validated—that the institutional Church, as history has known it, is dying a slow death in Western civilization. Perhaps it isn't secularism gaining ground, as much as it has been ecclesiology failing to truly reflect its roots in the faith. Maybe there is some divine activity going on that hasn't been noticed until we suffer loss. Yes, church buildings may be closing, but that doesn't mean that Christianity is dying, by any means. In fact, the Pentecost-like growth of the faith is more vital today than it has been at virtually any other time. Around the world, there seems to be a groundswell of desire to

recover the church *for the people*, reflecting the authenticity of the original movement.

What's most intriguing is that mission activity is global, with the vast majority of Christians today located in the southern hemisphere in South America, Africa, and Asia. It's growing exponentially among the immigrant populations in North America and Europe. The Pentecost story of multilingualism, of dynamic freedom, of grassroots expansion, of redemptive mercy—all the things that make this story so compelling and meaningful—are being recovered today in this generation. Over the next century, the leading theologians will speak Spanish, Korean, Swahili and Arabic as their native tongue. It won't be the church we've known throughout most of its history, but I believe it will be the best thing to have happened to Christianity since its earliest days.

Like languages and meanings that evolve and change over time, so does the nature of faith. The radical call to faith in this generation is not what our forebears often perceived, it's not to save the imperial, institutional church. Instead, the call to faith is to create congregation-based communities of those who have captured the spirit of Jesus' ministry, his call to love, his message of mercy and reconciliation, of social justice and nonviolence, of redeeming lives that have been marginalized and disgraced by society and the institutional practices and interests of the Church for centuries. It will bring new meaning to the language of faith that has been a part of so many of our lives. The beauty of it is we will hear it proclaimed in remarkable ways that will inspire and renew the Church worldwide, fulfilling the ancient promise of Pentecost. May we be a part of this

movement with the language of faith that we will not only speak, but fully and meaningfully understand.

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