

A Christian Perspective of Language and Language Learning

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Theology of Language

From a Christian point of view, language is God's perfect design, not an accidental phenomenon borne out of necessity. While Christian perspectives agree that language is a gift from God, created by God, there are differing points of view as to "whether a capacity for language arose *ex nihilo* with the creation of Adam, or whether it was archetypically present in the Trinity from eternity" (Robison, 2011, p. 3). Although I had never contemplated this question before examining Robison's (2011) arguments, I now identify language as part of God's eternal nature as a God who spoke the world into being in the Genesis account (before the creation of humankind) and who has spoken to people—his creation—throughout history.

Whether language can be viewed as one facet of the *Imago Dei*—a trait that we share with God the Creator—is also a question that does not have universal Christian consensus; however, I support the view that language has, at the very least, "a close connection to the *Imago Dei*" (Robison, 2011, p. 6). The thought that language may be one part of what defines humans as made in God's image is truly awe-inspiring and should prompt a reverent handling of language in the classroom and in life.

As followers of Christ, we are called to be imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1), reflecting God's character in our speech as well as in our actions. Ephesians 4:29 instructs, "let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear" (ESV). The power of language to either build up or destroy necessarily carries with it a great responsibility to use our words to impart grace and life. This means that we must always be mindful of how our words will "taste" to those who hear: "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person" (Colossians 4:6, ESV).

As we use God's gift of language with care and gentleness, we should also communicate to our students that "language is. . . a powerful force with moral consequence and not merely an amoral conduit" (Robison, 2011, p. 9). Whether or not our students share our Christian belief system, there is no denying that one's choice of words in a given situation can mean the difference between positive and disastrous results. Through our teaching and example, we, as Christian instructors, can demonstrate "how to wield the language in a manner that brings life" (Robison, 2011, p. 10) as part of an emphasis on pragmatic and functional competence. Showing students how to use the language in an encouraging, uplifting, and gracious manner will serve them on a much deeper level than focusing merely on transactional language functions.

Language Learners as Whole Beings

The Bible and the sciences agree that humans are multi-faceted beings, with the ability, desire, and need to operate in the realms of the physical, mental, and emotional. God's command to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5, ESV) encompasses a wide range of capabilities including cognition and emotion. As we look at language learners and second language pedagogy, it is easy to focus on learners as cognitive beings, leaving the emotional aspect of learning by the wayside. As Christian practitioners, it is essential that we recognize that the emotional aspect of learning (including the effects of past positive or negative experiences) is part of God's design and has as much of an impact on language learning as the mental processes employed.

Another aspect of second language acquisition that is often neglected is the spiritual nature of language learners. According to Smith (2009), "categories such as the spiritual and moral are consistently either ignored, marginalized, or reduced to some other category such as the affective or the political" within the context of language teaching to the point that "to

introduce, say, the language of prayer feels awkward and clumsy.” (p. 7). From a Christian worldview, students (indeed, all humans) are spiritual beings capable of spiritual growth in addition to cognitive and affective development. Any type of learning can touch the spiritual as well as the physical and mental. Rather than separating the spiritual from every other facet of life and expecting learners to abandon the spiritual part of themselves at the classroom door, faith and spiritual beliefs should be allowed to have a place in the language learning experience.

Spiritual Themes in the Language Classroom

In light of the spiritual nature of learners, teachers in the L2 classroom should consider how to weave spiritual themes such as forgiveness, suffering, death, faith beliefs, prayer, etc. into class discussions and activities. Smith (2009) suggests that using personal stories can provide a natural means for students to consider spiritual themes within the language classroom: “using real faces and concretely historical narrative makes the language of faith seem much less like an alien intrusion” (p. 9). By drawing from the lives of real people (rather than relying on the artificial world of textbook characters), we can facilitate discussions about how spiritual or moral choices played out in the life of a real historical character.

Other possible ways of including the spiritual in class activities are having students write or talk about the personal meaning of certain holidays (like Christmas or Easter), or asking them to explain the significance of an important religious holiday in their country. Students could also be asked to discuss the role of faith and spirituality in their own family or culture. By welcoming—rather than stifling—spiritual topics in the classroom, we can open a whole new realm of language use for our students and tap into a deeper level of motivation by allowing them to voice beliefs that are important to them.

References

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