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The Gift of Language

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Abstract

What is the significance of language? As language teachers, we use it as a medium of communication and as the basis for every lesson we prepare. Could it be more than just a tool of communication or a target for students to strive for? Language actually serves as primary evidence of God’s creation of humankind in His image. Even secular thinkers marvel at the “language instinct” of human beings and regard it as the distinguishing mark of humanity, setting us apart from all other creatures. Considering the amazing wonder of language, any explanation of its origin requires a step of faith. For the theist, the most reasonable explanation for language is divine creation. From the first chapter of Genesis, language plays a pivotal role in revealing God’s character. The God who spoke the universe into existence created humankind in His image, and human language ability reflects God’s personality and reveals His Trinitarian nature. Our gift of *communication* shows our intense longing for *communion* with God and with other image-bearers. As language teachers, carefully stewarding this precious treasure, we follow His pattern of “speaking beauty into the chaos” of this world.

Key words: origin of language, divine creation, evolutionary theories, language instinct, image of God, revelation, communication, communion, language teaching

Introduction

It goes without saying that language teachers are enamored with language. That is why we do what we do. We typically love the intricacies of grammar and syntax (at least, most of us do), and the beauty (and frustration) of communication regularly captures our imagination. Christian teachers have even more reason to celebrate the beauty of language: It is a gift from our Creator. Language is more than a medium of communication, or the target that language learners are striving to achieve. Language is a treasure that we have been entrusted with. It serves as one of the greatest evidences for God’s creation (Holloway, 2020; Johnson & Potter, 2005; Oller & Omdahl, 1994). In fact, the *communication* ability of human beings confirms our identity as creatures made in the image of a Triune God with whom we may have *communion* (Hibbs, 2015; Webber, 1980). Language teaching is a stewardship: We are merely “creatures handling a Creator’s gift” (Hibbs, 2015, p. 38). This precious gift represents God’s creation and communicates His character to people made in His image. When we see language through a

biblical lens, we gain an enhanced appreciation for the sacred task we are engaged in as ESL teachers.

The Wonder of Communication

Language teachers in general do not always agree about everything in their craft. They have differing views on the role of grammar, how to give feedback, learning strategies, and the best way to build community in the classroom. One thing we all agree on, however, is that language is a marvelous tool of communication. And we sometimes marvel that anyone can possibly learn it. Dewey (1929) once remarked, “Of all affairs, communication is the most wonderful” (p. 166). And what is the basis for human communication? Language. Ironically, most people conduct their daily affairs not consciously aware of this wonderful gift, although they use it constantly. Like the proverbial fish which is unaware of the water that serves as the medium for its existence, many human beings go through life utilizing language as a tool of communication (and even teaching it!) without reflecting on what an amazing gift it is. In fact, even more ironic for language teachers, we cannot even define language without using language. Language is so integral to our existence that we have to use it to understand it (Hibbs, 2018, p. 3). Those of us who have lived in a foreign country where we were illiterate and ignorant with respect to the local language have come face to face with our own dependency on communication to express our ideas and meet our daily needs. But what is the significance of this thing called *language* that makes *Homo sapiens* uniquely human? Where did it come from? And what is its ultimate purpose? Only a biblical worldview provides a satisfactory framework to address these questions.

The Distinguishing Mark of Humanity

Language has long been recognized as the distinguishing mark that sets humankind apart from the animals. The assertion that language is unique to human beings has widespread support (Adler, 1967; Anderson, 2004; Chomsky, 2006; Fitch, 2010; Harrub, Thompson, & Miller, 2003; Hurford, 2014; Pinker, 1994). Even Aristotle recognized that “Man is the only animal whom [nature] has endowed with the gift of speech” (Adler, 1967, p. 114). Pinker (1994) considers language “a magnificent ability unique to *Homo sapiens* among living species” (p. 5), which is “as different from other animals’ communication systems as the elephant’s trunk is different

from other animals' nostrils" (p. 342). Chomsky (2006) goes so far as to call language "the human essence," recognizing the creative use of language as "one fundamental factor that distinguishes human language from any known system of animal communication" (p. 88). Adler (1967) provides numerous examples to show that human communication ability differs from that of animals not just in degree, but in kind. His bold pronouncement from decades ago has endured the test of time: "Let me repeat: among scientists who consider the matter, there is unanimous agreement that man and man alone uses verbal symbols and has a propositional language and syntactically structured speech" (Adler, 1967, p. 112). The obvious verdict is in: Only human beings communicate through language.

The Origin of Language: The Secular View

If language is a uniquely human trait, the question naturally arises, what is the origin of language? In contrast to other biological species, why do humans alone have the gift of language? From an evolutionary viewpoint, the language ability of *Homo sapiens* is merely a "feature" that distinguishes humans from other species (Pinker, 1994; Hurford, 2014). As Pinker (1994) puts it, bats have sonar, migratory birds navigate over incredibly long distances, and human beings are merely "a species of primate with our own act, a knack for communicating information about who did what to whom by modulating the sounds we make when we exhale" (p. 5). Taking a page from Pinker's book, Hurford (2014) rhetorically asks, "Why did very long prehensile noses only evolve in elephants? Why did very long necks only evolve in giraffes? Many species have unique traits. One of ours is language" (p. 15). Still, to use Pinker's (1994) own terminology, how can we explain the origin of this "magnificent ability unique to *Homo sapiens* among living species" (p. 5)?

The fundamental approach taken by evolutionists in discussing the origin of language seems reminiscent of Rudyard Kipling's (1902) *Just So Stories*. Since language is so complex and it happens naturally, it must have occurred through natural selection. Johnson and Potter (2005) explain that "every account offered for the adaptive mechanisms for the evolution of a 'language instinct' has a bit of the 'just so' structure" (p. 87). In other words, the evolutionary viewpoint is inherently based on a step of faith. Without a clear picture of how the complex system of language evolved, the choice is "either to speculate beyond credible empirical and

theoretical support or simply to proclaim a faith that where there is complexity and purpose, there will be natural selection at work” (Johnson & Potter, 2005, p. 87).

While accepting by faith that language arose by natural selection, evolutionists have also come up with some very creative explanations for the origin of language. Darwin suggested that language arose from imitating and modifying “various natural sounds, the voices of other animals, and man’s own instinctive cries” (Oller & Omdahl, 1994, pp. 235–236). Since Darwin’s time, numerous other evolutionary theories of the origin of language have been proposed, criticized, and even mocked (Nordquist, 2020). With names like the *Bow-Wow Theory*, the *Ding-Dong Theory*, the *La-La Theory*, the *Pooh-Pooh Theory*, and the *Yo-He-Ho Theory*, is it any wonder? Each of these theories has a major flaw, which Lévi-Strauss (1987) highlights by his observation that “language can only have arisen all at once. Things cannot have begun to signify gradually” (p. 59). In other words, there could be no such thing as a *semi-language*. If there were “intermediate stages of a universal grammar” (Johnson & Potter, 2005, p. 88), of what adaptive value would they be? Such a protolanguage would not get an emerging human being very far.

Besides the teleological arguments against the evolutionary origin of language based on the complexity of its design (Johnson & Potter, 2005), other arguments have been proposed addressing the weakness of naturalism. Holloway (2020) argues that a nativist view of language (as proposed by Chomsky) is incompatible with a naturalistic explanation of the origin of language. In other words, if the human mind is innately equipped with a Universal Grammar (Chomsky, 2006), this would lend more weight to special creation. In fact, some have accused Chomsky of holding to a creationist viewpoint (Oller & Omdahl, 1994, p. 256). Holloway contends that while naturalism is quite compatible with empiricism, based on a view of linguistic input in the environment being processed by a general learning mechanism, a nativist view of language acquisition (including a *Language Acquisition Device*) is more in alignment with theism. If Chomsky is right about language acquisition, then an evolutionary view of language origin based on naturalism falls flat.

Nevertheless, despite evolutionists’ inability to formulate a comprehensive theory of language origins, they do agree on one thing: Language had to have arisen through an evolutionary process, not through divine creation. End of discussion. In 1866 the Linguistic Society of Paris even prohibited dialogue on the subject (Dediu & de Boer, 2016, p. 1; Kenneally, 2018, p. 7). Johnson and Potter (2005) observe that a completely secular explanation

for the origin of language has been “maddeningly difficult to produce” (p. 84). Kenneally (2008) agrees: “Piecing together several million years of linguistic evolution without a single language fossil is not just a cross-discipline, multidimensional treasure hunt; it’s the hardest problem in science today” (p. 6). However, there is no shortage of researchers who are still trying to unravel this conundrum. *The Journal of Language Evolution*, founded in 2016, is one publication that is seeking to find answers to this age-old question, but no definitive conclusions have yet been forthcoming.

The Origin of Language: A Biblical Perspective

As we have seen, the evolutionary view of the origin of language requires as much faith as the biblical view. Any explanation of the infinite complexity of language (which ironically requires the use of language), involves a certain amount of faith in one’s presuppositions. From a biblical perspective, the origin of language is intrinsically connected with the origin of everything: God. In dealing with the question of the origin of language, theists postulate that “both a uniquely human ability to acquire and use a natural language as well as mental syntax that structures human thought in a quasi-linguistic manner (a language of thought) are the products of an infinitely wise and beneficent creator” (Johnson & Potter, 2005, p. 84). Moreover, the secular view and the biblical view stand in opposition to each other by their very nature. Van Til (1954) summarizes this impasse well:

In every discussion about every fact, therefore, it is the two principles, that of the believer in Scripture and that of the non-Christian that stand over against one another. Both principles are totalitarian. Both claim all the facts. It is in the light of this point that the relation of the Bible as the infallible Word of God to the “facts” of science and history must finally be understood. (p. 22)

No matter which theory of language origins people adopt, they must begin with certain presuppositions. The claim that one may find “certain knowledge” by being totally objective and free from what Polanyi calls *personal knowledge* is a fallacy (Newbigin, 1995). One must be aware of one’s starting point when it comes to addressing the origin of language.

Since all theories begin with a set of assumptions—unproven claims—the assumptions or starting point for explaining the phenomenon of communication would necessarily differ in these two instances, one assuming communication is merely the result of evolutionary or naturalistic development and the other that communication is the result of God’s design. . . . Theory informed by Christianity would begin with the assumption that God provided the ability to communicate to humankind in the act of creation; theory otherwise

informed would ignore or deny this possibility. Every theory of communication is thus a theology of communication since every theory either starts with God or leaves him out of the equation. (Fortner, 2007, pp. 27–28)

As Christian ESL teachers, we are very much aware of our starting point. We believe that the origin of language can most reasonably be explained with reference to God. From a theistic perspective, then, here is the key question: How can we be good stewards of this gift of language? How can we fully appreciate this treasure that God has entrusted to us?

Reflecting the Image of God

Human language clearly reflects the fact that humankind is created in the image of God. From the first verses in Genesis, God is revealed as a God who communicates through language. God *speaks* the heavens and the earth into existence. God says, “Let there be . . .,” and all creation comes into existence (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14–15, 20, 24, 26). When God says in Genesis 1:26, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,” He then creates human beings with the ability to communicate. K. Whitfield comments, “Speech (‘word’) is an attribute of God. God is a speaking God, by his very nature, as over against all of the ‘dumb idols.’ . . . It is necessary to God’s being that He communicate. Without His speech, He would not be God” (personal communication, September 4, 2012). Thus, for human beings to be created in the image of God, they would need to possess the gift of language.

In contrast to all of the other creatures, human beings are those with whom God interacts verbally. God does command other living creatures to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:22), but with human beings, who are created in His image, God communicates more deeply. With them, He speaks “not only words of blessing and fruitfulness but also of instruction, permission and prohibition, followed later by questions, judgments, and promises. The human is the creature who is aware of God through rational communication and address” (Wright, 2006, p. 422). The capacity to communicate is integral to our nature as human beings. Wright (2006) adds, “To be human is to be addressable by one’s Creator” (p. 422).

But in what sense is our language ability connected with the *imago dei*? In what way does our language ability make us like God? Poythress (2009) explains that as God is *personal*, we are *personal*. Our language ability is an expression of personality. Our ability to use language points to God’s own ability to communicate. “God is the ‘archetype,’ the original. Man is an ‘ectype,’ derivative, creaturely, but still imaging God” (Poythress, 2009, p. 29). Another aspect of

language that reflects God is in its *exercise of authority*. Not only does God create by speaking, but He uses language to name things (day and night, 1:5; heaven, 1:8; earth and seas, 1:10). Likewise, when Adam names the animals (Gen. 2:20), he is following God's instructions to rule over the earth (Silva, 1990). Thus, Adam's naming of the animals is an expression of his role as image-bearer and a reflection of God's own use of language as an exercise of authority. "The point is that Adam cannot rule the earth unless he understands it, that his understanding is bound to the need for ordering what he sees, and that such ordering takes place through language" (Silva, 1990, pp. 25–26). As language teachers, our teaching and research (and even grading assignments) are part of the way we fulfill God's mandate to rule over the world through language.

Revealing the Triune Nature of God

Having established that human beings are made in the image of God, we must now recognize that they are made in the image of a *triune* God, whose very nature is communicative. Language is shared within the Trinity as part of God's eternal existence. "The eternal inter-Trinitarian communication is necessary to the divine being, as are all other aspects of the ontological inter-Trinitarian life" (K. Whitfield, personal communication, September 4, 2012). This eternal communication within the nature of God is the basis for all language. In fact, the very idea of communication is inherently limited unless one considers the triune God.

Not only is God a member of a language community that includes human beings, but the persons of the Trinity function as members of a language community among themselves. Language does not have as its sole purpose human-human communication, or even divine-human communication, but also divine-divine communication. Approaches that conceive of language *only* with reference to human beings are accordingly reductionistic. (Poythress, 2009, p. 18)

The biblical view of humans is essentially theocentric, with an emphasis on God's triune nature. Without this understanding, humanity's place in the biblical record is incomprehensible.

The question "Why does man communicate?" cannot be answered apart from a recognition of man's theocentric character. God communicates love within Himself among His three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. His creatures are not an extension of Himself, but they bear His stamp. They reflect the personality of the Creator. (Webber, 1980, p. 112)

Hibbs (2015) argues that the very act of speech is an evidence for the triune God. Because we are creatures who are inherently finite and separated from God, we would have no knowledge of

God unless He revealed Himself to us. The method by which He has revealed Himself to us is through speech (and the written word).

A triune being who has spoken with himself for eternity past and will do so for eternity future would naturally use language to reveal himself; and creatures whose first behavior was to listen (Gen 1:28) to their Creator would naturally need spoken and (given the fall) written revelation. (Hibbs, 2015, pp. 36–37)

Since speech is part of God’s divine nature, our speech is an analog of His. Here is an even simpler, yet equally profound, formulation: “Language is a product of thought, and thought is a product of being” (Hibbs, 2015, p. 37). God has revealed His triune nature through language, and every time we speak, we are a reflection of the Trinity. In what sense? By the very nature of communication. “God the Father is speaker, God the Son is the speech, and God the Spirit is the breath carrying the speech to its destination” (Poythress, 2009, p. 21). Thus, if we are creatures made in God’s image, it should be no wonder that our very language bears the imprint of the Trinity. “Language is not just something we use; it is an essential part of who we are as creatures crafted by the speech of the tri-personal God” (Hibbs, 2018, p. 6). Once again we return to a common theme: As speakers (and teachers) of language, we are creatures handling a Creator’s gift. This linguistic package is carefully wrapped and marked “Handle with Care.” Since language is imprinted with the very triune nature of God, teaching language is an expression of our worship.

Communication: Communion Behavior

Language is obviously a tool of *communication*, but communication is essentially a longing for *communion* (Hibbs, 2015). We naturally seek out others to connect with. Even secularists like Pinker (1994) express this sentiment: “Language is so tightly woven into human experience that it is scarcely possible to imagine life without it. Chances are that if you find two or more people together anywhere on earth, they will soon be exchanging words” (p. 3). Sometimes we forget how much language implies relationship. We often get caught up in the “transactional use of words” (Hibbs, 2019, para. 7) and neglect the communal aspect. Here is a helpful reminder:

Language is the key that unlocks the doors of our minds so that we can relate to other beings. It is not, first and foremost, a tool for information acquisition. It is not a self-serving social faculty. It is a behavior that allows interaction, which of course then leads

to other uses such as the gathering of information and caring for one's physical and social needs. (Hibbs, 2015, p. 38)

The "key" metaphor is just one of the images that allow us to reflect on the communal aspect of language. We could view language as a bridge that connects people, or as a barrier that divides people: If you don't know my language, or if I don't know your language, then there's a barrier between us. But if you learn my language, or if I learn your language, then there is a bridge that allows us to connect. (Of course, even with people who speak the same language, there can be barriers that divide them for other reasons.) Each of these metaphors points to the concept of language as "communion behavior," which implies that the purpose of communication is to grow closer to God and to others, and not just "completing an information transaction" (Hibbs, 2019, para. 2). Viewing language through a biblical lens, we can see that communion is what we are made for. Thus, language plays a very significant role in God's eternal plan:

From the Word came a worded world and word-giving creatures. Through the Word, also, comes a *new* world in which we shepherd our words to commune with persons (both divine and human). This is what we'll be doing for all of eternity. That's why language is everything. (Hibbs, 2019, para. 10)

Language is so much more than just a transfer of information or a communication of ideas. Language has a very spiritual dimension. At every moment, as we use language (and teach it), we are making a choice that has eternal implications. "When we use language for God's glory, we are a breath-taking light to the world; when we use it for self-serving purposes, we descend into the darkness of depravity" (Hibbs, 2018, p. xvii). From another angle, language is also covenantal, in that every linguistic interaction occurs in a sacred context of the covenant between God and humans, making us accountable for our use of language (Hibbs, 2018, p. xvii). As ESL teachers, if we only view language in transactional terms, we may miss the beauty of communion that God intends for us to have with our students and with Him as we serve them. We may also fail to recognize the privilege we have of bearing witness to the Word through our use of words. As we help students master *communication* skills, we should adopt strategies that strengthen our *communion* with students and build *community* in the classroom.

Speaking Beauty into Chaos

From a biblical vantage point, language is part of God's plan of redemption. God's revelation of Himself in Scripture depends on human language. The Bible is not just a record of

God's redemptive acts; the Bible itself—as revelation from God in human language—is a redemptive act (K. Whitfield, personal communication, September 4, 2012). In the Bible we see the significance of language starting on page 1. In the story of scripture, language first appears as a creative force. When God uses spoken words to create the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1), the divine language is the means for bringing everything into existence. His method of creating is by “speaking beauty into the chaos” (Pasquale & Bierma, 2011, p. 1). God uses spoken language to create the heavens and the earth and all the creatures on the earth, to name them, and to bless them (Gen. 1:3, 5–6, 8–11, 14–15, 20, 22, 24, 26). God uses language to communicate His instructions to His image-bearers (Gen. 1:22, 28–30; 2:16–17), and apparently, they have the language proficiency to understand Him. Adam's first official task is to follow God's pattern of “speaking beauty into the chaos” by naming the animals, and God accepted the names that Adam devised. “And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name” (Gen. 2:19–20). Sadly, the evil of sin also comes into the world through the vehicle of language, with the serpent “speaking chaos into the beauty” (Pasquale & Bierma, 2011, p. 4) by using a question to conjure up doubt in mind of the woman regarding God's goodness (Gen. 3:1). In the first dialogue in scripture, the serpent and the woman discuss theology, and the result is a perversion of language that persuades God's image-bearers to rebel against Him (Gen. 3:1–7). The echoes of this perversion still resonate to the present day. “With our ability to use language, we have great capacity to speak beauty into the chaos. But because of the effects of sin, we often do just the opposite; we speak chaos into the beauty” (Pasquale & Bierma, 2011, p. 4).

Of course, God always has the final Word (pun intended), and He would eventually “speak beauty again into the chaos” (Pasquale & Bierma, 2011, p. 6) through the incarnation of the *Logos*, the Word made flesh. His work of redemption through the death and resurrection of Christ represents the ultimate turnaround: While the cross appears to represent chaos triumphing over beauty, in the resurrection the beautiful Word is spoken back into the chaos of this world, providing an eternal hope for all who listen. “And beauty becomes the language that will never be silenced” (Pasquale & Bierma, 2011, p. 7). As imagers of God, we follow God's pattern of speaking beauty back into the chaos of this world. Through this gift of language, we are fulfilling God's promise to bring blessing to all peoples on earth (Gen. 12:1–3). One day, a multilingual multitude “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev. 7:9) will bring glory to God in Heaven by worshiping the Lamb of God, the Incarnate Word. Thus, in language

teaching every lesson plan is an act of “speaking beauty into chaos,” helping our students overcome communication barriers and gain an increasing sense of order in their understanding of language. By helping them master the target language, we are a source of God’s blessing.

Conclusion: Life in the Language Classroom

Being an ESL teacher is not the most glamorous job in the world—until we realize the priceless commodity we handle on a daily basis. Every time we teach an English lesson (in fact, every time we open our mouths to communicate anything), we are reflecting the reality that we are made in the image of God. The language that we share with our students points to the triune God revealed in scripture. The use of language is “communion behavior,” and the entire purpose for which we teach language is relationship—to strengthen our students’ relationship with others, and ultimately, with God. Finally, as we teach, we follow God’s pattern of speaking beauty into the chaos of this world. We should never minimize the significance of our role as creatures handling a Creator’s gift.

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