

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jtvi-01.php

JOURNAL OF
THE TRANSACTIONS
OF
The Victoria Institute
OR
Philosophical Society of Great Britain

VOL. LXXXVI

1954



LONDON:

PUBLISHED BY
THE INSTITUTE, 22 DINGWALL ROAD, CROYDON, SURREY

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

921ST ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING

OF THE

VICTORIA INSTITUTE

AT

THE CAXTON HALL

WESTMINSTER, S.W. 1

ON

MONDAY, 15th MARCH, 1954

D. J. Wiseman, O.B.E., M.A., in the Chair

**THE BIBLE AND CURRENT THEORIES
ABOUT LANGUAGE**

By

PROFESSOR MALCOLM GUTHRIE, Ph.D., B.Sc., A.R.S.M.

THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE
22 DINGWALL ROAD, CROYDON, SURREY

THE BIBLE AND CURRENT THEORIES ABOUT LANGUAGE

By PROFESSOR MALCOLM GUTHRIE, Ph.D., B.Sc., A.R.S.M.

SYNOPSIS

Many widely-held views on the Bible involve an approach to linguistic study that is no longer acceptable. This paper examines the bearing of certain new facts and inferences on Biblical questions. In respect to the origins of language, the evidence now available does not support the hypothesis that as man developed from earlier stages so his language has evolved from simpler to more complex types. Similarly it is not possible to explain the many varieties of language types now known to exist on the basis of a supposed ancestor language. The Biblical teaching on both of these points is therefore not inconsistent with the facts. Advances in the technique of linguistic study show that former ideas of correctness in grammar and of the simple nature of written records are untenable, in consequence of which some views about the substance of the Bible may also be untenable. Similarly a better understanding of what is involved in determining the meaning of a given utterance and the relation of this to the intention of the speaker or writer throws light on some questions connected with the translation of the Bible. The principal purpose of language appears to be self-expression rather than merely communication or thought, and this provides a significant link between man and God.

There can be few subjects receiving scholarly attention today that have more direct relevance to questions connected with the Bible than the study of language. Nevertheless there do not seem to have been many attempts to examine the results of recent developments in this linguistic field which may bear on this Book that claims to be the Word of God expressed in the language of men. It is my intention in the course of this paper to outline a few of the ways in which the advance in the study of language in the past few years might be of interest to those who approach the Bible thoughtfully.

Although for the sake of brevity I have used the term "theories" in the title, I should perhaps make it clear at the outset that what I am mainly concerned with are certain facts that have emerged from recent investigations, together with some fresh inferences about a number of aspects of language that have now gained acceptance. One reason that gives a measure of justification to my intention is that many of the advances in this realm we are considering are not widely known, one reason

for this being that much of the progress is directly due to investigations into some of the less well known language fields, such as the one in which I am myself engaged.

One of the first difficulties encountered in any study that sets out to show how language impinges on other subjects, is that since everyone speaks at least one language, namely his mother tongue, most people are inclined to take for granted that they are aware of the basic characteristics of language. In fact however, the discipline of language study is becoming more and more specialized, and it will be increasingly difficult for those who have no intimate experience in this field to handle borderline subjects that involve the application of linguistic principles.

That there is a close relationship between language and certain other subjects, such as philosophy and psychology, has long been recognized, and indeed many who are very competent in these disciplines find it necessary to deal at length with things that fall properly within the field of language study. In the realm of theology and Biblical investigation however, there is probably less awareness of the importance of linguistic studies of a more general kind, as distinct from literary investigation using traditional grammatical methods. Nevertheless, as I shall endeavour to show, there is probably no realm where any change in our knowledge of linguistic matters could be more significant.

It frequently may not be realized that behind much of the orthodox approach to the Bible are linguistic theories that are ultimately based on what might be termed Aristotelian views of language, although it has been held by some scholars that the traditional basis of language study was founded on a misapplication of Aristotle's teachings. Nevertheless, with the more recent insistence on an empirical method in linguistic investigation, not a few new facts, together with a number of interesting theories, have introduced important modifications into the earlier assumptions, and some of these are relevant to our attitude to the Bible. We shall therefore need to ask whether new knowledge of this kind necessitates any radical change in our ideas about the nature of the Bible, or makes it difficult for thinking people to believe in the Book. On the other hand we shall have to inquire whether the developments to which I have referred may not actually help us to understand the Bible better, and in certain cases throw light on difficulties.

The types of question I propose to deal with in this paper fall into three main groups, which I shall term, (1) the origins of language, (2) the nature of language, (3) the function of language.

I. THE ORIGINS OF LANGUAGE

Under this heading there are two main topics that have always aroused interest. On the one hand we are confronted with the fact that the faculty of speech is found among all peoples, and that it is confined to the

human race. On the other there is the extraordinary diversity of languages through which the faculty of speech is exercised. On this latter point we have much more information than was available formerly. As an illustration I might refer to the fact that over 700 different languages belonging to many apparently distinct families are known to be spoken in Africa alone.

Now on each of these two points the Bible either states or suggests an explanation, since it seems to be implied that man was created with the power of speech, while it is definitely recorded that some at least of the diversity of languages was originally due to the direct intervention of God. We must therefore examine what is known or can reasonably be inferred about these two questions.

(1) *The Origin of the Faculty of Speech*

Until recently most theories about the way man acquired the power of speech were based in a special theory relating to the characteristics of what are termed "primitive" peoples. Briefly the argument runs something like this: the simpler the way of life of a people the simpler their language; if therefore the history of man is traced back far enough, life is found to become more and more crude, and in the same way language becomes simpler and simpler until it is ultimately a series of grunts. In reverse this theory has been integrated into the hypothesis of the organic evolution of the human race, and it has been supposed that as man evolved from some earlier phase of development, so at some point he gradually acquired the power of speech, and that his language, at first formless, slowly became more and more complicated until it reached the majesty of the classical languages.

Since this theory was formulated, much more attention has been given to the study of the languages of peoples with a relatively simple way of life. As a result we now know that the basic hypothesis is specious, since in very many cases their languages are richer and more complex than those of the so-called civilized races. Moreover, the whole idea of primitiveness in language arises from a failure to recognize that there are many different ways in which the relative simplicity of languages can be assessed. It might be with respect to pronunciation, to grammar, to vocabulary or to ease of expression. It is significant in any case that all the evidence points to the operation of a principle of periodic entropy in most aspects of the developments of languages. In other words there is at any given point a tendency to the levelling out of distinction; nevertheless, owing to the facility with which linguistic units fuse together, new and more complicated units seem continually to arise out of the debris of earlier ones. As however this important fact is one that can be illustrated only

by a large number of detailed examples, I propose rather to consider the different ways in which the supposed simplicity of languages can be detected.

When the pronunciation of languages is investigated, the facts show that relative simplicity is not a useful device for comparing them. As an example we may take first some of the varieties of present-day English and then refer to some of the languages spoken in the African bush. It will presumably be conceded that English should not be regarded as a "primitive" language, yet in the pronunciation of standard English there are few sounds that are not simple. Nevertheless in current speech there are groups of sounds so complex that few foreigners are able to master them, as for example in the usual pronunciation of "Marylebone", which consists of a vowel preceded by one consonant and followed by four others, r, l, b, and n in a tight cluster. In the field of African languages there is a comparable situation, and side by side may be found some languages with an extremely simple range of sounds and others where the pronunciation is so complex that a dozen or more extra letters may be required to write them. On this level then there is no evidence of any connection between the degree of development in the way of life of a people and the complication of the pronunciation of their language.

With respect to grammatical structure also, languages with what might be termed a simple system are by no means confined to any one type. Among those with relatively simple grammatical processes are to be found English, Chinese and some of the languages of West Africa, while in Central Africa are many whose grammar is extremely complex. In fact the majority of the languages spoken by people with simple ways of life appear to display an unusual degree of complexity in their structure. It is therefore impossible to base any arguments on the supposed simplicity of the languages of primitive peoples, since the facts are that many of these languages are grammatically anything but simple.

In referring to the size of vocabularies also many false assumptions have been made. It is now known that on the average the vocabularies of pre-literate peoples are much larger than those found for example in most European languages. Indeed one of the difficulties encountered in the study of most African languages is the vastness of their vocabularies and the extreme precision with which most of the words are used.

The three aspects of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary are the only ones where it is proper to attempt to assess the relative simplicity of languages, but reference must be made in passing to ease of expression. It is probably in respect to this feature of the use of language that many of the ideas about simplicity and complexity have arisen. Naturally it is impossible to express in the language of pre-literates facts such as those dealt with in much scientific description, but then it is also extremely difficult to do so in a highly literate language like Arabic. Similarly a

discussion of some abstruse point of contemporary philosophy would be impracticable in the language of most of the peoples of Africa, but then, strange though it may appear, it is scarcely less so in modern Chinese. What is in question here is not the nature of the language being considered, but rather its use in expressing the thoughts of the people, so it is inevitable that only where there are large areas of thought commonly involved in the thinking of the speakers of a given language are adequate means of expressing them developed. The presence or absence of such means is therefore no measure of the complexity of the language as such.

From the various facts just referred to it is clear that there is no evidence pointing to the supposed evolution of language from some original collection of noises. Put quite simply, there is nothing in the known facts about the probable origins of language to show that man was not created with the faculty of speech.

(2) *The Diversity of Language*

The other main line of investigation starts from the fact that there are many different language groups and families in the world, and some explanation is needed to account for this diversity. Here also earlier theories, some of which are still widely held, are based on premisses that are now known not to be fully valid. It has frequently been assumed that by searching through enough languages, some idea may be gained of certain aspects of the original human speech, and that it is then possible to trace the development of these down through the ages. One example of this is the conclusion that has been drawn from the fact that the word for "mother" in many very different types of language is something like "ma". It is therefore asserted that this proves that the word for "mother" in the first human language must have been "ma", and that the corresponding word in most languages is descended from it. This is however almost certainly a specious argument, since infants of each generation produce the so-called word ready-made as one of their earliest articulations, and consequently it is impossible to show that this similarity is any indication of a common origin. Nevertheless, certain facts are known about the probable derivation of some of the language families found to exist, and these are relevant to our present purpose.

When any particular group of languages that shows signs of some kind of relationship in prehistory is investigated, two things usually emerge. On the one hand it is rarely, if ever, possible to infer that any of the large groups had its origin in a single ancestor language. On the contrary the evidence in most cases points to a complicated ancestry. On the other hand, even if one takes the whole of the probable sources that have to be postulated to account for the group, there is usually a large residuum

throughout the group for which it is not possible to postulate any origin at all. The net result of this is that, even in a relatively restricted language field, the genealogical concept, however attractive it may be in principle, is not completely applicable.

When all the main types of language are taken into account, the situation is naturally more complicated. In reality, however, it is not possible to achieve even the smallest degree of integration; thus, for example, there is no indication of any relationship whatever between the languages of Western Europe and Chinese on the one hand and the Bantu languages on the other. We are left then with a number of disparate language families, most of which display among themselves a complicated state of affairs with respect to their probable ancestry.

In the light of these facts there is nothing that makes it difficult to accept the Biblical statement that at the Tower of Babel diversity was introduced into human language by the direct fiat of God.

II. THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE

There are several questions that arise in connection with the nature of language in which the traditional view has been modified in recent times. It is no longer adequate to discuss language in general, or even any language in particular, within the framework of ideas used to instruct children in school. Although this may seem a superfluous remark in a paper such as this, nevertheless it remains true that many false theories about the nature of language arise from the fact that the teacher before a class must be able to speak with finality, and therefore it is assumed that in doing so he is in fact serving as the mouthpiece of an established authority. This whole matter of precision in language is one that has begun to receive attention from scholars, and a few points have emerged that may usefully be noted here.

(1) *Correctness in Language*

It is a cardinal doctrine in most earlier views of language that for each particular utterance there is of necessity a correct way of expressing it, and that any deviation from this is an error. Put quite crudely, there is a widespread belief that it is possible to apply the standard of "good or bad" to the grammatical constructions used in any given case. Now in fact this is a purely didactic attitude, and in no sense reflects the actual state of affairs. It is now recognized that language is essentially a social activity in which personal idiosyncrasy is allowed up to a certain point. This was of course always recognized to some degree, and the difficulty was resolved by creating the special category of "style", which was outside grammar as such.

The study of languages beyond the orbit of the classics or the principal languages of Europe has revealed that this division of linguistic behaviour into grammar and style is purely artificial. The only valid criterion that may be applied to any particular specimen of a language is whether or not it is acceptable to the speakers of a language. In other words "right" and "wrong" are really inapplicable to linguistic matters, except in a strictly social sense. When therefore a text is being examined in any language, it is meaningless to describe something in it as "incorrect", unless there is clear evidence that the particular deviation from the usual form is one that no users of the language in question would tolerate.

The relevance of this to certain problems connected with the language of Biblical writers is something that I shall not pursue. It is, however, clear that unless there is some means of knowing what their contemporaries did or did not regard as acceptable, then it is not possible to invoke the principle of "correct grammar" in making inferences.

(2) *Spoken and Written Language*

It is a commonplace that there are certain problems connected with the relationship between something said and the way that same thing is written. The true nature of these problems has, however, only been brought into focus as scholars have undertaken the study of pre-literate languages. Those who deal with early manuscripts in which no punctuation is used are only too conscious of the difficulty to be overcome in establishing with certainty the identity of some passages. In fact the introduction of punctuation marks was one of the earliest attempts to bridge the gap between the spoken and the written word.

For most of us spoken and written language are two distinct things, and there are phrases and constructions that we readily use in speech but would be uneasy about using when we write. This very fact has induced in many people an attitude to all written language that frequently is founded on misapprehensions. It is now recognized that it is only in those cases where there is a formalized literary convention that it is possible to handle documentary material with any certainty. If there are, as for example in English, ways of writing things that do not normally occur in current speech, this in part at least has arisen from the fact that written language is always more liable to misunderstanding than spoken language. In reality it is a small part only of the total content of an utterance that can be recorded in the normal methods of writing languages. When real precision is required, the devices used are so involved as to necessitate detailed explanation before the transcription can be read, and even then there may still be some aspects of the utterance that have been overlooked. If therefore the only record of some passage available is a written one, it is necessary to know whether it consists of a literary composition

or is a transcript of an utterance. If it is the former there is less likely to be a danger of misinterpretation, since the writer would have had at his disposal various literary devices to obviate uncertainty. If it is the latter then serious problems may arise, and we need to ask a number of questions. Did the speaker give some emphasis to any particular word? Did he speak with the normal inflection of the voice? Was there anything in his facial expression or gestures to indicate that a special significance was to be attached to some part of what he said? These are but a few of the things that remain unanswered when all that is available is a transcript.

In certain parts of the Bible it is evident that problems of this kind must arise, in particular in the teachings of Jesus, since these all consisted of spoken language in the first instance. Is it possible then to recapture something of the lost features, and to bring to life the recorded words? Regretfully it has to be admitted that this cannot be done by any known process, but that the wise student of the Gospels will have to remember continually that what he has is but a shadow of the living words the Saviour uttered.

(3) *Meaning and Language*

A very important realm in which we have come to have a new appreciation of the nature of language is that concerned with meaning. It would be impossible in a paper such as this even to outline the different theories of meaning that have been put forward in recent times. Nevertheless certain broad principles have emerged, and some of these are of interest to students of the Bible.

One of the most significant things that is now recognized is that there is no such thing as "the meaning" of any given specimen of a language, as for example a simple statement. The appropriate question when considering a particular sentence is not, "What *does* it mean?" but "What *can* it mean?" Very briefly meaning may be described as the result of the interaction between a given linguistic utterance and the situation in which it occurs. In other words, unless the full context of an utterance is known, a mere understanding of the words and the grammatical constructions it contains may be insufficient to determine its meaning. This principle has of course been implicitly recognized in much Biblical study, where endeavour is normally made to determine the circumstances in which things were said in order the better to understand the words. There is however one interesting result that follows from the application of this principle to the Scriptures as read today. If they are indeed the timeless Word of God, then it may well be that words which had one meaning in the situation where they were first spoken, may have another meaning within the different situation obtaining for those who read the words now.

There is a further complication that confronts those who are attempting to determine the meaning of a given passage in some language. This is due to the fact that one cannot safely equate the apparent meaning of an utterance or written passage with its intention. Even where the context of a statement is fully known, and its content is also adequately assessed, it by no means follows that the intention of the speaker, which we may term the import of the statement, is understood. The clearest evidence of this is seen in the occurrence of ambiguity, and in the use to which this may be put when a message is sent in such a way that it deceives those who pass it on but conveys its true import to the one who receives it. This then raises the question of the means to be used in determining the import of any passage where the person who used the words is not known personally to the one who considers them. In the case of the Scriptures this is particularly important, since the Bible claims to have a dual authorship. On the one hand there are the people who spoke the recorded words, or who composed the written passage, and on the other there is the Spirit of God who was speaking through them. In passing it is interesting to note that although we have no personal knowledge of the human speaker, we may nevertheless have of the Divine. In any case however, it by no means follows that the import of any given passage was the same for the writer as for the One who was inspiring him. In fact such a state of affairs seems to arise in many of the prophetic utterances, and it is interesting that it is linguistically unexceptionable to describe any given prophecy as having a dual import, provided that the dual nature of the origin of the words is accepted.

In one further respect the relationship between meaning and import is of importance for the Bible. Few people have access to the Scriptures without the intervention of some kind of translation. What then happens when a translation of part of the Bible is made? Do the words of the version reproduce the meaning of the original? If so, how can this be done seeing that the situation within which the words were spoken or written has little or no counterpart today? Moreover it has become clear to those engaged in the study of languages of different types from the European that the whole concept of literal translation is a figment. It is of course possible to produce something that might be regarded as a faithful translation, but then it cannot possibly be within the pattern of the accepted forms of the language in question, and in addition is almost certain not to be capable of conveying adequately either the meaning or the import of the original. In other words there is an unresolvable dilemma which is amply illustrated in the two main kinds of English translation available today. In the one, regard is had to the words of the original language, and every endeavour is made to follow them, as for example by rendering as far as possible various turns of phrase by an identical one in English. In the other, there is no attempt at "literalness", but especial

care is taken to reproduce meticulously as much of the import of the original as can be ascertained. To the former category belong the Authorized Version and others based on it, while for the New Testament a good example of the second type is Weymouth's translation. From what has been said it will be evident that there can be no question of comparing the relative merits of the two kinds of version, since they are not alternatives but rather complementary to one another.

III. THE FUNCTION OF LANGUAGE

Since language is the principle vehicle for the impartation of divine revelation in the Bible, there are one or two points of interest to students of the Bible under this heading. When the purpose of language is being considered, it is clear that it is put to many uses about which it would be unsafe to assume that they fall strictly within its true function. For example, most false statements are made in linguistic form, but this does not justify the inference that the telling of lies is one of the purposes of language. What then have recent studies to tell us about this question? For our present purpose it is probably of the greatest value to inquire whether there is anything that can be achieved exclusively by means of language, and that therefore merits the title of its primary function. This is not to suggest that other secondary purposes may not also exist, but if there is some function that belongs to language alone, then that will in a special sense call for our attention.

For many people the main function of language is regarded as being that of communication. This however can scarcely be the primary purpose of the faculty of speech, since in fact communication without language is a universal characteristic of human relationships. It would be possible to say of course that language makes possible a greater diversity of communication than any other means readily available to men, but even then the most that can be claimed is that it provides an increased facility for the transfer of information.

Another important use to which language is put is in the framing of thoughts, and indeed it has sometimes been inferred that we think because we can speak. Nevertheless it would be equally reasonable to reverse the proposition and say that we speak because we can think. It is possible to have thought without words, and indeed many problems can be solved by reflections that consist almost exclusively of mental images. On the other hand while it is patently true that we can speak without thinking, it is equally true that we cannot speak unless we have the power of thought. In other words, something that sounds like speech is not acknowledged as having linguistic value unless there is responsible for it a person who is capable of thought. Here too therefore while it may be

admitted that a very important use to which the faculty of speech is put is in the framing of thoughts, this is not something that is exclusively the function of language.

There is however one thing that cannot be achieved, as far as we know, without the use of language, and that is self-expression. As evidence for this reference may be made to the tremendous handicap from which all those suffer who have had the misfortune to be deprived of the power to use language. It is indeed arguable that without the faculty of speech there would be nothing detectable to distinguish man from some of the higher animals. There may of course be possibilities of a different kind of self-expression without the use of language, but we have to confess that we cannot conceive of any other means by which personality can be expressed except by using the faculty of language.

The Bible presents the facts about man's creation in such a way that it is clear that language was one of the faculties that was provided from the outset. In His first recorded contact with man God spoke to him, and one of the initial activities of the newly-created man was to use his faculty of speech to give names to the animals and birds. Here then is one thing that man has in common with God, the faculty of expressing himself and of receiving the self-expression of another through the medium of language. Is this in part at least what was involved in the fact that God created man in His own image? Clearly it is the one thing that plainly marks the human race as distinct from all lower orders of creation. The fact that the distortion of the human personality by its rebellion against God has entailed a prostitution of the faculty of self-expression in no way renders it unlikely that this very faculty may be included in the stamp of the divine in human nature. On the contrary it is clear that the redeemed personality expressed in the use of language whose potentialities have been enriched by the idioms of eternity is one of the most potent evidences of the image of God in man re-created. Moreover in the imagery of the Bible, when glimpses are given of the activity characteristic of the Eternal Presence, it is significant that the use of language finds an important place, and that it is speech rather than silence that figures among the ways in which those who see Him face to face present their adorations.

CONCLUSIONS

From whatever angle recent developments in the study of language are regarded they produce nothing that presents any difficulty for those who accept the Bible as the very Word of God. On the contrary, contemporary linguistic knowledge serves to throw some light on a number of aspects of Biblical study.