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Theories of Grammar, Thoughts of God

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The nature and power of language

There is an intimate connection between language and religion. The religious impulse of humankind expresses itself in manifold ways: sacred meals, visual arts, instrumental music, construction of holy spaces, offering of incense, ritual dance, ascetic postures and control of the breath, to name just a few. We tend, however, to identify the core expressions of faith with the operation of our linguistic faculty: prayer, hymnody, writing and reading of sacred texts, and the articulation of creeds. Indeed, our nonlinguistic expressions of faith often require the consecration of sacred words in order to qualify as holy. Islamic decorative art, for example, escapes from the prohibition against graven images simply because it developed from the exquisite stylization of the letters of the Qur’an.

The Christian tradition, in particular, exhibits an insistent orality in all of its forms of piety. Ritual acts, which might be performed wordlessly in other faiths, are always accompanied by language in Christianity. Incense is never offered without psalms and prayers; ancient and medieval Christian music made no use of instruments except as an accompaniment for the human voice. Unlike the silent Japanese tea ceremony, the Christian Eucharistic meal cannot be accomplished without the spoken words of consecration. Eastern Orthodox piety considers an icon to be uncanonical unless it bears a superscription with the name of the saint or feast depicted. Even the Christian form of “yoga,” of meditative prayer and breath-control, is effected only in conjunction with the repetition of the Jesus prayer. The logocentric impulses of the Christian tradition are even more distilled in Reformational theology, which tends to favor verbal expressions of faith to the exclusion of all others, especially the visual arts.

This insistent orality of Christianity should probably come as no surprise, since we find that already in the earliest decades the Church’s theologians were willing to elevate the very noun λόγος; “word,” to the status of a divine name. One might even argue that Christianity inherited this close connection between language and God as a legacy from Judaism, whose God revealed the inner life of the divine Self in the words of the Torah, and whose prophets were moved by God’s Spirit to monumental poetic feats. The Biblical God also creates the world—not by laying a cosmic egg, nor by dividing up the corpse of the vanquished enemy—but by speaking: “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, And all the host of them by the breath of God’s mouth” (Psalm 33:6).

Being fashioned in the divine image, all human enterprises show a spark of this creative fire of God, but it is in the realm of language that humanity realizes its greatest similitude to the Creator. Humankind effects all other achievements in the arts and sciences through the refining, reworking, and reordering of existing materials: rocks, trees, oil, water, and plants become by our hands buildings, baseball bats, books, bread, and bassoons. But in no enterprise do we make something out of nothing, except in
our use of language. All humans who have the faculty of speech are capable in theory of uttering (or signing) an infinite number of sentences that have never been uttered before, of inventing new words, of telling new stories, of making a verbal thing that never existed before.

The philosopher J. L. Austin was the first to give a name to a particular feature of human linguistic creativity, the performative speech act. A performative speech act is an utterance that accomplishes something in the

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physical world merely by its vocalization. For example, a promise, an oath, and an apology are all created by the utterance of the following sentences:

I promise that I will wash the car tomorrow.
I swear that I never saw him before.
I apologize for being so tardy.

Sometimes in order for a speech act to have performative force, certain contextual conditions must be met: the sentence,

I christen thee the 'Santa Maria.'

actually names a boat, just in case the speaker is breaking a bottle of champagne across the bow of a sailing vessel. Contextual conditions for other performatives, such as,

I now pronounce you man and wife.
or,
I bet you five dollars and a beer.

are well defined by societal conventions. In any case, through the utterance of these speech acts a human being has actually created a thing—an abstract and intangible thing, to be sure, but a thing nonetheless, one that never existed before the moment of its utterance. Indeed, through a performative speech act one may create something that never existed before in the

study of language may allow privileged insights into the Divine reality, that is, into the actions and energies of God. For example, if a chest of clothing from some unknown civilization were to wash up on the beach, we could garner many significant insights about the culture of that alien people simply from an examination of their garments: what their average height and weight are, the climate of their land, their level of technological achievement, and perhaps even what they eat (judging from stains on their apparel). Indeed, from the range of hues in which their garments were dyed we may even have a guess at their skin color, and from their choice to expose certain parts of the body and to cover others we may even have a glimpse into their notions of the erotic. Likewise, by examining human language as the clothing of God, we may derive some insights into the workings of the Divine nature.

Some elements of grammatical theory

Linguistics over the last century has come to a consensus that it is less appropriate to speak of human grammars than to speak of human grammar. The singular noun better conveys the linguistic notion that human beings have, by an innate
endowment, a common language faculty that operates within certain prescribed parameters. This single abstract grammar is worked out in different ways by different languages; but in a very real sense, all languages share a common set of principles according to which some constructions are grammatical and others are ungrammatical in every language.

One example of a deep grammatical principle can be found in English contraction “rules.” Sentence (1) has two meanings:

(1) Which relatives do you want to visit?
In the first reading we understand the question to ask which relatives the interrogatee would like to entertain as guests, and in the second reading we understand the question to ask which relatives the interrogatee would like to go and see. These meanings correspond to the following underlying structures, respectively:

(2a) You want [which relatives to visit]?
(2b) You want [to visit which relatives]?
Sentence (1), however, can be pronounced with a contracted verb form, so that “want to” comes out as “wanna,” as in (3). (The merits or demerits of such contractions are outside of the scope of this essay.)

(3) Which relative do you wanna visit?
Curiously, though, sentence (3) has only the meaning of (2b); it cannot have the meaning of (2a), in which the interrogatee would act as the host of visiting relatives. Perhaps this is because in such a case the contraction would have to take place across the syntactic gap left by the preposed noun phrase:

(4a) Which relatives do you want [____ to visit].
For the meaning conveyed by (2b), however, “want” and “to” are not separated in the underlying form by the movable noun phrase, and so the contraction rule finds no gap to jump over:

(4b) Which relatives do you want [to visit ____].
Speakers of English are quite unanimous in their judgments of the different potential meanings of sentences (1) and (3), though quite at a loss to explain why there is a difference or when they learned this fact about the contraction of “want to” to “wanna.” In a roomful of Anglophones of different ages, from different parts of the country, and of different backgrounds, one might find no other point of universal agreement than this fact, that sentence (1) has two possible meanings and sentence (3) has only one. Linguists have learned, moreover, that gaps left by transposed words or phrases affect meanings in many languages.

An example of a universal grammatical proscription can be found in the following sentences:

(5a) Most drivers who own their own truck like to wash it once a week.
(5b) Most self-employed truckdrivers like to wash it once a week.
(5c) Most self-employed truckers like to wash it once a week.

In (5a), the pronoun “it” may have the preceding word “truck” as its antecedent (or it may refer to another noun in an earlier sentence not recorded here, such as “laundry”). In sentence (5b) and (5c), however, the pronoun it cannot be construed as having as its antecedent the word truck in the morphologically complex nouns “truckdrivers” or “truckers”; the pronoun must find its antecedent in some preceding sentence. (Or, if there is no salient noun in the preceding discourse, the word it in English may often be construed as referring to some taboo entity.) There seems to be a rule that says that a pronoun cannot look inside of a compound noun or a derived form in order to find its antecedent.

Again, these judgments of possible and impossible meanings are held unanimously by all native speakers of English and are matched by similar grammatical judgments of like constructions by native speakers of other languages. This is true, despite the fact that none of us had a lecture in seventh-grade English (or Dutch or Swahili) class on the impossibility of nouns within compounds to act as antecedents for a pronoun or on the semantic possibilities of sentences with verbal contractions, for that matter. This bedrock of common knowledge about
our own languages is unconscious and untaught but very deeply known in the sense that we never break these rules through carelessness or ignorance, not even as children at an imperfect stage of learning our native languages. The parameters of possible meaning for contractions and pronouns seem somehow to be part of our basic linguistic endowment, part of the "universal grammar" of human speech.

In discovering that certain aspects of language are innate and, therefore, a matter of biological endowment, we discover that human language has certain limits of expression. Where there are parameters, there are necessarily boundaries. As we find the core principles of possible human grammars, we discover also that certain conceivable constructions are impossible for humans beings to learn as their native language. For example, there are languages with accentuation systems in which stress falls on the first or last syllable (Finnish and French, respectively, on the penultimate syllable (Polish), and on the antepenultimate syllable (Macedonian), but none with stress on the fourth-to-last syllable. It seems that human grammar just cannot count that high. Furthermore, in the Australian language Yidin', the stress falls on all odd-numbered syllables (first, third, fifth) except when one of the even-numbered syllables has a long vowel, in which case stress falls on the even-numbered syllables. Such a stress system is very complicated: it would be far less complicated to have a stress rule that says, "Stress the last syllable if there is an odd number of syllables in a word, and the first syllable if there is an even number." No language, however, has a rule like this. Core human grammar, it seems, can count in some ways but not in others. Language is both infinite in its power to express new ideas and yet finite in its function, like all other human faculties.

**Theological inferences**

Some reflections arise from this brief study of grammatical theory. First, although linguistics has made the case that certain deep principles govern the grammar of all human languages, we must not lose sight of the fact that, in many ways, our languages vary considerably: we may use different sounds or different orderings of verb and direct object, or different classifications of grammatical gender for nouns, and so on. That is to say, despite our common linguistic endowment, we still have managed in our various cultures to devise wildly divergent systems of communications. We could all have the same syntax or phonology, but we do not. Such is not the case with animal communications systems: dogs have basically the same set of barks and cats the same set of meows and hisses, whether they live in Mexico or Malawi or Massachusetts. So while there is a certain core consistency to human language, there is also a certain innate possibility for great diversity. The task of discerning what is a core principle of language and what is a culture-specific feature of a given language is often difficult; the distinction between core and periphery in grammar emerges only through the study of many languages. This means that in order to discover our core human grammar, we cannot limit our investigations to our native language alone.

Second, linguists have noted that, despite the fact that humans have strong and consistent judgments about the grammaticality of certain constructions in their native language, they almost never have such clear intuitions about similar constructions in a language that is not their mother tongue. When we learn a second language after a certain age (generally considered to be around the onset of
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refined to a very high degree. And yet this is precisely what we have found in our study of Divine clothing. The God who created language, and who through language reveals the ways of Divinity, and who in acts of religious language meets humanity, has forced humankind, in its investigations of language, to face one another, to form a community, to look for ourselves in the other, and to find our unity in our diversity.

In other words, we have in the linguistic enterprise an icon of the doctrine of the Trinity. Unity in diversity, diversity in unity, a mutual interpenetration of essence and a mutual self-discovery in community--this is classic Christian triadology. The Divine nature that clothes itself in language is making a point for us about the makeup of the Divine life, and even more, invites us through linguistic study to participate vicariously in the Divine communal mode of existence.

Finally, the combination of infinite expressive power in a finite faculty reminds us that the infinite God, through condescension, is clothed in the finite workings of human speech. This observation holds, regardless of one’s faith tradition: all who cherish a sacred text must admit that the God of eternity has accepted a sort of circumcision in choosing to be revealed in a limited set of words composed in a limited human grammar. In this sense, the inscripturation of Divine revelation stands as a type of the Christian belief in the Incarnation, the consummate Divine act of conde-
through the study of grammar we might learn more about this God of community and condescension Who meets us in our prayers.

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