The Far-Reaching Fallout of Babel
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The following is essentially the presentation that I give to my students at the Guarani-Jopara Institute for Missionaries in Escobar, Paraguay, at the beginning of each nine-month course. It helps set the theological and philosophical foundation for our time together as language and culture learners.

Why do missionaries learn language? The question may seem like it has an obvious answer, but the obvious answer may obscure a deeper and altogether more significant one. Many missionaries, and indeed many mission organizations, approach language learning from a very utilitarian direction. The missionaries, they reason, need the local language in order to buy groceries, deal with government officials, talk to the neighbors, and, of course, to share the Gospel. This latter item may be envisioned in terms of the propositional content of the Gospel that is to be shared, or in terms of leading Bible studies, preaching, and other “ministry” kinds of activities.

When it is cast in these terms, language learning for cross-cultural workers can easily become a task that has to be ticked off the list so that the worker can get to the real work of missions. In that sense, it’s a bit like support-raising.

I believe that when we understand at a deep level what motivates and inspires missionary language learning in a Biblical and historical sense, we can access a powerful well of encouragement that has the potential to inform the missionary’s language learning through the period of formal study and then on into his or her ministry in an ongoing and transformative way.

The Word Became Flesh

The first chapter of the book of John contains the apostle’s statement of the doctrine of the incarnation. The word, he says, became flesh, and made his dwelling among us, and we have seen his glory; the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

These words were first written in Koiné Greek. The oldest versions we have of all of our New Testament books are in Greek. In the first-century Palestine of John, and of Jesus, there were at least four levels of language in operation at all times.

The historical language of the Jewish people was, of course, Hebrew. It was the language of their sacred texts, and it was the language that they used in worship. But in 722 B.C., the Assyrian Empire conquered the northern kingdom of Samaria and its residents were carried off into captivity. In 586 B.C., a similar thing happened to Judah, as the Babylonians took its inhabitants captive. At that time, a linguistic shift began to take place among the Jews, who stopped using Hebrew as their home language and adopted the Aramaic language, which had become the lingua franca of both the Assyrian and the Babylonian empires.

So when the Jewish people return to Palestine at the end of their time of captivity, they no longer speak Hebrew as their first language. In fact, many Jews appear to have had only a
limited understanding of it. Aramaic had become the first language of the Jewish people, though Hebrew remained the religious language.

In 331 B.C., another conqueror swept through the ancient world named Alexander. He was a Greek and the son of Philip of Macedon. Alexander imposed his language on the empire he created and Greek became the language of wider communication for a vast swathe of the ancient world.

Yet another conquest, in 63 B.C., under the proconsul Pompey the Great, brought Palestine under the control of the Roman empire. Latin began to be used as the language of government and of the military.

So by the birth of Jesus, these four layers of language coexisted in Palestine. Hebrew was still the language of religion; Greek was the language of commerce and wider communication and anyone who was educated would speak it; Latin was the language of political and military power; and Aramaic was the language of the common people and of daily life. In order to live and function appropriately in that society, most people would have at least known some of each of those languages and had the sociolinguistic knowledge to choose the appropriate language for each situation.

So isn’t it interesting that when the Father determines where and how the Son is to become incarnate, doesn’t send Jesus to be born into a household that speaks Latin, or one that speaks Greek, or even one that speaks Hebrew. Instead of sending his son to grow up among the powerful or among the educated and wealthy, or even among the religious, he sends him to a family where he will learn as his first language the least prestigious language of the society, the one that doesn’t offer him any particular advantages except for that of identification with the common and the everyday.

We know that Aramaic was Jesus’s language because the Gospels quote him speaking it several times. Remember when he reaches out to the little girl and says, *Talitha cumi?* That’s Aramaic. And the special nickname that he gives one of his closest friends, Simon. He says, I’m going to call you Kepha. We get it as Cephas in the Hellenized form, and then Petros in Greek—the rock. And then there’s that moment when he’s hanging on the cross and he cries out in anguish to his father. He quotes a Psalm—the 22nd—but he doesn’t quote it in Hebrew. He quotes it in Aramaic! “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?” *Eli, Eli! Lama sabachthani?*

**Sacred Language**

So it’s worth paying attention to what Jesus says at the very end of his ministry, as he was about to ascend into Heaven. Or rather, I’m struck by what he doesn’t say. He gives his disciples their marching orders. Matthew’s version says, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20) And, apparently, that’s where he stops. It would have been quite natural for him to continue, “And as you do it, make sure you do it in Aramaic. Because our low-status language is going to become the sacred language of our movement, and it’s going to become respected and valued and venerated forever.”

It sounds faintly ridiculous to suggest it, until you start thinking about the prominent role that sacred language plays in so many of the world’s religions! The science of linguistics recognizes a man by the name of Pāṇini as one of its fathers. He wrote the first grammar that we’re aware of, at about the same time as Alexander the Great was pressing eastward toward the
Indus Valley. The grammar was of Sanskrit and by the time he wrote it Sanskrit was no longer being used in daily life. It had become a liturgical language, and the grammar was intended to help the priests to handle correctly the sacred texts of Hinduism. Of course the Vedas and the Bhagavad-Gita and other texts have all been translated into many languages, but to this day, if you want to have access to the words and the deeds of the gods in a way that’s true to Hindu orthodoxy, you have to do it in Sanskrit, a language that’s been dead for more than two millennia.

A similar thing is true of Islam. The Qur’an has also been translated many times, but according to Islamic dogma the only true Qur’an is in Classical Arabic. So if you want to know what Allah has to say, you have to learn not only Arabic but Muhammad’s dialect of Arabic, which is a version spoken more than 1300 years ago. In Islam, God doesn’t speak my language. I have to learn his.

Christianity doesn’t have a doctrine of sacred language. Very early on, as the followers of Jesus began to be scattered, they took the message with them to peoples and cultures increasingly far from Palestine, and as they went, translation became a fundamental principle of the early Church. Even the fact that the New Testament was written in Greek testifies to the basic translatability of Jesus’s message. Early disciples took the Gospel to Ethiopia and the New Testament was translated into Ge’ez, and there is a special breed of Biblical scholars that traipses to monasteries in Ethiopia to read these ancient translations. The Gospel was taken northward and translated into Syriac, and some of those very ancient documents remain as well. Armenian received an early translation from Syriac, Wulfila is named as the translator of the fourth-century Gothic version, and so on throughout the world, wherever the believers went.

Of course, one of the languages that received early translations of the Bible was Latin. Various different translations were done before Jerome was commissioned to execute his masterful translation in the fourth century. Around the same period, the Roman Emperor Constantine experienced his much-publicized conversion to Christianity and something began to happen to the Church. It slowly became more and more powerful and increasingly prestigious. It also became increasingly Roman as its center of gravity moved west. As Rome’s power grew, Latin became by degrees the language of the church—at least the western part of it—and almost exclusively the language of its scriptures. The Church for a time seems to have forgotten the principle so powerfully present in the Incarnation that God takes our form, dwells among us, walks our streets, eats our food, and speaks our language.

Now, God spoke Latin. And that was almost all he spoke for centuries in the western church. The principle of translation, so native to the Church since its earliest days, was almost absent during this time. If you wanted to have access to the words of God, you had to have them mediated to you by a trained priest, and even most of them did not understand enough Latin to be able to dig deeply into Scripture.

That is why Martin Luther is such a remarkable figure. He believed strongly that the German people should have their own Bible and in the early 16th century, he got to work producing it. He wrote that to get the right language for a Bible translation, “We must ask the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, by the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly.” That was a truly revolutionary thought in a world where no Bible had sounded like anyone’s mother for hundreds of years. Luther’s work saw the principle of Bible translation, so intrinsic to the nature of Scripture and the Incarnation, rediscovered in the Church.
The idea of sacred language seems to be a human construct nearly as old as language itself, but it is not a concept that is borne out by Christian theology. And lest we as English speakers get too smug, we ought to recall that in our church one translation continued to be the gold standard long after the language in it ceased to be readily comprehensible to the majority of its readers! There is still a not-insignificant portion of the English-speaking church that holds that this is the only Bible any Christian ought to use. “Modern day language,” they assert, “cannot contain the word of God.” To make that statement is to completely fail to understand the nature of the Incarnation! For God to occupy our form and participate in our daily, dusty, messy reality does not sully God! On the contrary, it dignifies that reality and it hallows that humanity!

Language Learning as Incarnation

Paul brings it right home to us, doesn’t he, in Philippians 2:5-8 when he gives us this insider’s glimpse into the very heart of God as He is preparing for his incarnation. “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!” Just as Jesus was incarnated, so we must be also—by a willing abdication of our rights, and through humility, servanthood, obedience, and sacrifice.

In our world, there may be no better way of doing that than through language learning. In some ways, Jesus’s Palestine was very like a lot of our modern world. Today in much of Africa and Asia, and even parts of Europe and the Americas, people live among multiple languages and learn very early in life which ones to speak with what people and at what times, in what contexts, and concerning what subjects. There are places where people must be reasonably proficient in multiple languages in order to navigate daily life. In parts of Indonesia, for example, speakers automatically choose among as many as five languages on a regular basis depending on multiple variables.

In Paraguay, we have it relatively simple, because we only have to pick from two. Yet people make this choice so instinctively many times throughout the day or even within a conversation or sentence, that it can leave outsiders bewildered.

Five hundred years ago, when Spaniards began to arrive in the middle of the continent of South America, often coming up the Paraná River, they found dozens of different communities each with its own language. To the north and east of the confluence of the Paraguay and Paraná rivers, they found a loose confederation of related groups of semi-nomadic people that came to be known as the Guarani. The Spaniards at that time were looking for wealth which the Guarani clearly didn’t have, and since the empire to the north and west did reportedly have fabulous riches, and since the Guarani groups had been in conflict in the past with this empire as it expanded eastward, an alliance was born between the European warriors and those from the forests of central South America.

Early on, the Spaniards—almost exclusively men had come—began taking Guarani women as wives. The children of these marriages grew up speaking Guarani, and then as they got older their fathers would introduce them into the commercial or military society that was developing, and they would begin to learn Spanish. Eventually a diglossic society developed where Guarani was the language of home, of friendship and social interaction, and of leisure, and Spanish was the language of formal activities like commerce, government, education, and similar domains. This sociolinguistic reality has continued to the present day.
Paraguayans love Guarani. They feel justly proud of it—of its poetry and expressiveness, of its history, and of the fact that it’s especially theirs. They powerfully identify with it and love to talk about how it’s unique and that no other country in Latin America has an indigenous language as its national language.

On the other hand, indigenous languages in Latin America have a fraught history. Ever since the conquest, many have had the sense that indigenous languages weren’t quite up to Spanish or Portuguese; that they didn’t really have a grammar, for example, or that speaking them betrayed you as an uneducated, unsophisticated person. Coupled with the fact that rural people in Paraguay tend to speak Spanish less proficiently or not at all, this leaves many Paraguayans with the uneasy sense that maybe this Guarani that they love is not quite as impressive as Spanish, and that speaking it means they aren’t either.

This feeling, unfortunately, tends to be reinforced by their neighbors to the south and east, who often express contempt for Paraguayans and use language that betrays their disrespect for Guarani and its speakers. It’s common to hear Paraguayans talking about how much better things are in other countries.

For all of these reasons, when outsiders arrive, particularly those from the far north, Paraguayans are prepared to be defensive. They expect to be looked down on—for their lack of infrastructure, for the corruption that they know permeates their government, and for their language. Though Paraguayans are congenitally hospitable and warm to outsiders, they are alert to any suggestion of that contempt that long experience has taught them to expect.

They also assume that we, being from powerful and wealthy countries, have arrived to share with them our technical expertise, our knowledge, and our resources. That assumption naturally presumes that the relationship that we will have with them will be that of a superior to an inferior—one who knows to one who doesn’t.

How delightful and unexpected it is to them, then, when we, as outsiders, far from looking down on them, instead move into their communities and beg them for help to learn this language that they consider to be uniquely theirs. What a surprise when instead of entering as a superior, we enter humbly, needly, vulnerably, and seek their blessing and teaching. We ask them to disciple us into their reality, and request access into Guarani, the language by which they define and describe and understand everything in their world. Our unexpected humility opens a door into this world, and they gladly take on the task of forming us—foreigners who can’t even speak—into appropriately communicative humans.

The Fallout of Babel

The story of Babel has always been a troubling one for me. It bothered me that the multiplicity of languages in our world, something that has always seemed so beautiful to me, should have developed as a result of humanity’s disobedience. The story highlights the hubris and pride of those who wanted to build a great tower, and then the confusion of language that God imposed and the resulting humiliation and failure. Greg T helped me get some beautiful insight into the heart of God at a previous ICLL. God, looking far ahead in history, understood that as a result of what happened at Babel, some day, when His messengers would go cross culturally to take His message of redemption and new birth and a restoration of what was broken, these messengers would be forced to do it humbly. How kind God is, that even when He corrects us, He creates beauty.

No one ever ought to feel sorry for missionaries learning language. Sure, it’s difficult. I heard someone say once that language learning for most missionaries is the most intellectually,
emotionally, and socially challenging task that they ever perform as cross-cultural workers. But it is a vitally important part of the process of becoming that God has them on, forming them into the image of His son.

Yes, it’s incredibly humbling. I have a student right now who is a trained medical doctor. Her closest neighbor, from whom she and her family are renting their house, is a rural believer who didn’t finish primary school. This neighbor recently asked my student if she knew what fasting was. Because she didn’t understand the Spanish word used, my student said no. So the neighbor began to explain the word to her, somewhat like you would to a child. My student quickly figured out what was meant, but the neighbor continued to explain, adding that you really ought to do it once a week, as her church teaches. My student pushed back that it wasn’t necessary to be too rigid about it. But the neighbor insisted, and, after all, she would know better, because not five minutes previously this foreigner hadn’t even known what fasting was. She has returned to press the point a number of times over the past few weeks, and my student has had to patiently and humbly accept the role of a learner and submit to her neighbor’s admonishing.

I regularly encourage my students as they feel foolish, ignorant, having lost status and identity, routinely laughed at by small children, not even able to speak! The teaching of I Corinthians chapters one and two is so key. In chapter one, Paul talks about the cross. The Jews, he says, looking for a powerful Messiah, scorn the cross as a manifestation of weakness. Meanwhile, the Greeks, honoring wisdom, revile the cross as evidence of foolishness. All this time, however, Christ’s crucifixion is in fact the power and the wisdom of God revealed. Not only that, “But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.” (1:27) Where I used to try to comfort my students when their language insufficiency made them feel embarrassed and ignorant, I now urge them to embrace this process and follow the example of Paul, who tells the Corinthians in chapter 2:2-3, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling.” The time will come to share what they know and to use the skills they’ve learned. Now is the time to know nothing except what the cross models: vulnerability, sacrifice, humility, love, patience, and service.

I spoke with a missiology professor at Asbury Seminary who told me of a conversation with a mission executive. His mission had a policy of sending new missionaries destined for Spain to Costa Rica to study language. The professor asked why. Weren’t there many good language schools in Spain? Yes, replied the executive, but we don’t want them to come to Spain, where they are going to be ministering, and look foolish. In my opinion, this is a missed opportunity to enter humbly.

I often challenge groups in the United States to make an effort to learn and speak a few words of the languages of the immigrants in their area. Go to a Mexican restaurant and make a humble effort to say a few words to the server in Spanish. They often reply that they can’t, because they don’t do it very well. My answer is, great! Do it anyway. Think about it: when your server speaks to you in English, which you undoubtedly speak better, who has the power in that moment? It’s you, comfortably at home in your own language. When you, stumbling about, make an awkward effort in their language and get it all wrong, at least for those few moments, you have abdicated your power role to them.

Am I advocating not speaking well? Of course not. I make my students work hard to learn good Guarani. But from the very beginning I insist that they speak and embrace the one million mistakes that Dwight Gradin says they have to make. And even in their mistakes, Christ is
present. Are people getting saved? Are they leading folks to Christ in their broken, awkward language? Perhaps not, but are they living out Kingdom values by expressing honor for their neighbors and ascribing dignity to them? They certainly are.

By the same token, for those working in contexts where they can “get by with English,” I encourage them to take language learning much more seriously as well. Even if they do the majority of their work in English, their genuine, focused effort to learn local languages and interact with those in their community in those languages will go far to demonstrate the Gospel. It happens less than it ought to simply because it is not a priority for people, but if we truly desire to live incarnationally, we must not forget that we have no access to the great majority of our neighbors’ experience unless we are able to do it through the medium of their languages. And some is far better than none, because the effort we make is a reflection of the value that we place on their reality.

The same is true for the missionaries studying Guarani with me, who can either choose to speak Spanish or Guarani in a given interaction. Their choice, without ever actually saying the words, can affirm the value of their neighbor’s Paraguayanness and be an expression of respect and honor for their culture, even if they don’t do it very well!

Do you think Paraguayans get this message? They absolutely do! I have witnessed the powerful, enduring friendships that have been forged on the basis of this humble learner’s attitude, through which Christ has clearly been evident. Is language learning a distasteful task that must be endured in order to get to the real work of being a missionary? Absolutely not! It’s a sacred task, in which Jesus is powerfully present, flowing through the life of the vulnerable missionary.