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## Language: A Sign of Divine Design

By Billy Haselton

Being somewhat of a newcomer to the ongoing scientific discussion in this newsletter, and coming from a nonscientific perspective, I feel a bit like a junior soccer player competing in the World Cup—definitely out of my league. Still, my experience as an ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher has provided me a unique vantage point from which to observe one of the greatest evidences for God's creation: *Language*. I am convinced that the language ability of human beings confirms our identity as creatures made in the image of God. In this article, I would like to share a portion of a paper written for a theology class at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. Obviously, this approach will be more theological than scientific, but it still may yield insights that will serve as an apologetic for divine creation.

John Dewey, well-known humanist philosopher, once remarked, "Of all affairs, communication is the most wonderful."<sup>1</sup> Mathematician Norbert Wiener commented, "Whatever else we may say of human communication, one thing is true, 'Speech is the greatest interest and most distinctive achievement of man.'"<sup>2</sup> 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. (Even more ironically, atheists use language to craft their arguments, although language itself is one of the greatest arguments for theism.) Like the proverbial fish which is unaware of the water which serves as the medium for its existence, many human beings go through life utilizing language as a tool of communication and not reflecting on what an amazing sign of humanity it is. Only when people spend time in a foreign country where they do not speak the language can they fully appreciate the value and necessity of communication to take care of daily

needs. In that context, where one is illiterate and ignorant with respect to the local language, a person comes face to face with his own dependency on some medium of communication to express his ideas and meet his daily needs. What is the significance of this thing called language that makes *Homo sapiens* uniquely human? What is the origin of language? Is it the product of natural selection, or is it evidence of mankind's being fashioned in the image of God? How can we explain the incredible multiplicity of languages in the world? What is the ultimate purpose of language? Nothing in mankind's existence has greater significance than the language that makes him uniquely human.

### ***The Distinguishing Mark of Humanity***

The gift of language is the distinguishing mark that sets mankind apart from the animals. Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker explains that "language is obviously as different from other animals' communication systems as the elephant's trunk is different from other animals' nostrils."<sup>3</sup> Pinker notes that "human language has a very different design" from that of "other" animals.<sup>3</sup> Although numerous attempts have been made to "decode" the mysteries of animal communication, none have successfully assigned to them the status of a true language. Communication systems in the animal kingdom are generally of three types of designs: "a finite repertory of calls...a continuous analog signal that registers the magnitude of some state...or a series of random variations on a theme."<sup>3</sup> Human language stands in stark contrast:

The discrete combinatorial system called "grammar" makes human language infinite (there is no limit to the number of complex words or sentences in a language), digital (this infinity is achieved by rearranging discrete elements in particular orders and combinations, not by varying some signal along a continuum like the mercury in a thermometer), and compositional (each of the infinite combinations has a different meaning predictable from the meanings of its parts and the rules and principles arranging them).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dewey J (1929) *Experience and Nature*, 2nd Ed., Open Court Publishing Company, New York:), 166; quoted in Robert S. Fortner (2007) *Communication, Media, and Identity: A Christian Theory of Communication*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, MD, 61

<sup>2</sup> Wiener N (1956) *The Human Use of Human Beings*, Doubleday Anchor Books Garden City, NY, 85; quoted in Eugene Nida (1960) *Message and Mission*, William Carey Library, Pasadena, CA, 4

<sup>3</sup> Pinker S (1994) *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*, Harper Collins, New York, 342

Scientists have tried to teach chimpanzees and apes to communicate with human language—including American Sign Language—but these animals have not achieved even the simplest level of spontaneous language. Communicating through words appears to be a skill reserved for mankind, and it is one of the most basic elements of human life. In fact, “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.”<sup>4</sup>

### **The Language Instinct**

Pinker’s basic argument is that language is not just something that human beings learn; it is an instinct. He contends that “language is no more a cultural invention than is upright posture.”<sup>5</sup> That is, the ability (and the drive) to learn language is innate, and every person with normal intelligence will naturally gravitate toward language acquisition.

Language is not a cultural artifact that we learn the way we learn to tell time or how the federal government works. Instead, it is a distinct piece of the biological makeup of our brains. Language is a complex, specialized skill, which develops in the child spontaneously, without conscious effort or formal instruction, is deployed without awareness of its underlying logic, is qualitatively the same in every individual, and is distinct from more general abilities to process information or behave intelligently.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to behaviorists like B.F. Skinner, who viewed the human being as a *tabula rasa* and language learning as mere habit formation,<sup>7</sup> Pinker’s view lines up with cognitivists like Noam Chomsky. In Chomsky’s formulation, human beings come equipped with a “Language Acquisition Device” (LAD) which enables them to process the multiplicity of language input in developing systems of language.<sup>8</sup> Chomsky hypothesizes that “children are born with a specific innate ability to discover for themselves the underlying rules of a language system on the basis of the samples of a natural language they are exposed to.”<sup>9</sup> The one fact that everyone can agree on is that for human beings with normal intelligence, language is a ubiquitous skill.

### **The Origin of Language**

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? Evolutionists are not troubled at all by the uniqueness of human language. For them, language ability is merely a “feature” that distinguishes man from other species:

Though language is a magnificent ability unique to *Homo sapiens* among living species, it does not call for sequestering the study of humans from the domain of biology, for a magnificent ability unique to a particular living species is far from unique in the animal kingdom. Some kinds of bats home in on flying insects using Doppler sonar. Some kinds of migratory birds navigate thousands of miles by calibrating the positions of the constellations against the time of day and year. In nature’s talent show we are simply 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.”<sup>10</sup>

Pinker dismisses out of hand the suggestion that human beings’ language instinct points to divine design:

So human language differs dramatically from natural and artificial animal communication. What of it? ... [I]f human language is unique in the modern animal kingdom, as it appears to be, the implications for a Darwinian account of its evolution would be as follows: none. A language instinct unique to modern humans poses no more of a paradox than a trunk unique to modern elephants. No contradiction, no Creator, no big bang.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, philosopher Susanne Langer admits the dilemma of mankind’s unique language ability:

That man is an animal I certainly believe; and also, that he has no supernatural essence, ‘soul’ or ‘entelechy’ or ‘mind-stuff’ enclosed in his skin. He is an organism, his substance is chemical, and what he does, suffers, or knows, is just what this sort of chemical structure may do, suffer or know. When the structure goes to pieces it never does, suffers, or knows anything again. ...

Now this is a mere declaration of faith, preliminary to a confession of heresy. The heresy is this: that I believe there is a primary need in man, which other creatures probably do not have, and which actuates all his apparently unzoological aims, his wistful fancies, his consciousness of value, his utterly impractical enthusiasms, and his awareness of a ‘Beyond’ filled with holiness. ...

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 4–5

<sup>7</sup> Brown HD (2006) *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 26

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 28–29

<sup>9</sup> Lightbown PM, Spada N (2006) *How Languages Are Learned*, Oxford University Press, New York, 15

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<sup>10</sup> Pinker S (1994), 5

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 351–352

The basic need, which certainly is obvious only in man, is the need of symbolization. This symbol-making function is one of man's primary activities, like eating, looking, or moving about. It is the fundamental process of his mind, and goes on all the time.<sup>12</sup>

In light of this rational dilemma, would there not be a basis for considering the view that mankind is specially designed by God? If language distinguishes mankind from the rest of earth's creatures, could not this meaning-making skill be of greater significance than simply a "feature" of the human "animal"? Wilbur Marshal Urban contends, "The mystery, yes even the miracle of language, with the entire marvel of intelligible communication, can be understood only on the basis of transcendental presuppositions."<sup>13</sup> Moreover, "Robert E. Longacre has argued on linguistic grounds that the various languages give evidence of a common substructure and that this fact belies the idea that language is a product of evolution and not a gift of God."<sup>14</sup>

No matter which theory of language a person adopts, he must begin with certain presuppositions. That is, one must be aware of his 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.<sup>15</sup>

Considering that the evolutionary view of the origin of language requires as much faith as the biblical view (if not more so), the biblical account should not be too quickly dismissed. Actually, if evolutionists believe that the infi-

nite complexity of language arose through natural selection and random processes, their own faith surely borders on credulity.

### **Reflecting the Image of God**

From a biblical perspective, human language clearly reflects the fact that man is created in the image of God. From the first verses in Genesis, God is revealed as a God who communicates through language. God *spoke* the heavens and the earth into existence. He said, "Let there be..." and there was. When God says in Genesis 1:26, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness..." he created a human being with the ability to communicate. If man was to reflect the image of God, he would have to communicate. Keith Whitfield explains, "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."<sup>16</sup> Thus, part of man's being the image of God necessitates that he possess the gift of language.

Genesis 1 implies that man is *like* God. He is like God in any number of respects, and the declaration in Genesis 1:26–27 about being made in the image of God invites us to find likenesses. God is personal, and man is clearly personal. As an aspect of his personal character, God is able to speak and use language. Human beings likewise are able to speak and use language. Human language and human use of language come about only because God has created human beings with certain capacities, and those capacities reflect capacities in God himself. That is, God is the 'archetype,' the original. Man is an 'ectype,' derivative, creaturely, but still imaging God.<sup>17</sup>

The use of language by God and by man is evident in the early chapters of Genesis. As previously mentioned, God uses spoken language to create the heavens and the earth and all the creatures on the earth.<sup>18</sup> God uses language to communicate His instructions to His creation.<sup>19</sup> The first man, Adam, uses language to name the animals (Gen. 2:19–20) and to describe the first woman (Gen. 2:23). Sadly, the evil of sin also comes into the world through the vehicle of language, as the serpent uses a question to conjure up doubt in the 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 wind up drawing very wrong conclusions (Gen. 3:1–7). In this way,

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<sup>12</sup> Langer SK (1948), *Philosophy in a New Key*, New American Library of World Literature, Mentor Books, New York, 44–45; quoted in David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (1978) Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 44, n. 38

<sup>13</sup> Urban WM (1951) *Language and Reality: The Philosophy of Language and the Principles of Symbolism*, G. Allen, London, 84; quoted in Hesselgrave DJ (1978), 242, n. 6

<sup>14</sup> Longacre RE (1977) *An Anatomy of Speech Notions*, Peter de Ridder Press, Lisse; quoted in Hesselgrave DJ (1978), 242, n. 7

<sup>15</sup> Fortner RS (2007) *Communication, Media, and Identity: A Christian Theory of Communication*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, MD, 27–28

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<sup>16</sup> Whitfield K (2012) "Christian Theology I" lecture notes, Unit 2A, Section 3.7, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC

<sup>17</sup> Poythress VS (2009) *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language, A God-Centered Approach*, Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 29

<sup>18</sup> Genesis 1:3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14–15, 20, 24, 26

<sup>19</sup> Genesis 1:22, 28–30; 2:16–17

the gift of language is perverted and misused to persuade mankind to rebel against God. “Rebellion against God involves the use of language, and the use of the mind, to undermine and obscure knowledge of key truths about humanity, about the world (tree), and also about God.”<sup>20</sup> Then, after the man and woman disobey God and hide from Him, God once again uses language to call out to the man, “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:9). The first dialogue between God and man amounts to a trial, with God cross-examining the man and then passing judgment on him, on the woman, and on the serpent (3:9–19). As a result of man’s fallen condition, the process of communication has been greatly complicated:

Human beings speak a mixture of truth and error. The fragments of truth mixed in with error make the error more seductive. This mixed situation makes human communication problematic. We ourselves must undertake to sort out truth and error. And the most dangerous error is not innocent error but desire for autonomy manifesting itself in distorted views of God, of humanity, and of the world. When we look at the products of counterfeiting, we simultaneously confront truth and error, truth and the antithesis of truth.<sup>21</sup>

Although the image of God was distorted in the Fall of Man, people still retain the gift of communication. “Even those who refuse to acknowledge God (or even deny him), communicate. We may even see the ability to communicate as an aspect of the ‘common grace’ afforded to all humankind—one aspect of the rain that falls on both the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt. 5:45).”<sup>22</sup> Scripture teaches that even fallen man is still “made in God’s likeness” (Jam. 3:9), with the same “function” as before the Fall. That is, God has given mankind a “cultural mandate” to “be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). Moreover, he still reflects the image of God in that he has powers of rationality and can use abstract language.<sup>23</sup> However, because fallen man goes in all the wrong directions functionally, he stands in need of redemption.<sup>24</sup> Hesselgrave crystallizes the point:

Orthodox and evangelical Christians hold to a unified universe and epistemology. The world is God’s creation and therefore reflects His Person and nature. Man is created by God and therefore is capable of knowing God. But man is also a fallen creature and therefore incapable of *fully knowing* God apart from the operation of God’s grace in revelation and regeneration. Biblical revelation is personal (i.e., God reveals *Himself*), and it is also propositional (i.e., God reveals truth *about* Himself and His world). The meaning of biblical

revelation must be apprehended objectively by reason and subjectively by faith. In other words, one must *assent* to truth and *commit* himself to truth.<sup>25</sup>

The significance of language as a part of God’s revelation can be clearly seen from scripture. It goes without saying that God’s revelation of Himself in scripture depends on human language. While general revelation can give mankind a picture of God’s “eternal power and divine nature” (Rom. 1:20), without the special revelation of God coming through human language, man would have no clear understanding of God’s plan of redemption. Thus, the doctrine of God and the doctrine of scripture are interrelated. “The biblical view of revelation is bound up with the kind of God that Scripture presents to us.”<sup>26</sup> Naturally, human language seems a poor medium to fully represent God’s nature, yet scripture teaches “that human language is capable of transmitting the propositional aspect of revelation, even revelation of an infinite God.”<sup>27</sup> In one sense, God humbled Himself to use a form of communication that human beings could grasp. “Calvin and others have described Scriptural language as graciously adapted to human limitations (God speaks “baby language” so we can understand things otherwise beyond us), but this does not invalidate revelation, though it does require a proper humility (Ps. 131).”<sup>27</sup> Carl Henry defines God’s revelation as “rational communication conveyed in intelligible ideas and meaningful words, that is, in conceptual-verbal form.”<sup>28</sup> In short, without language, there is simply no way that mankind would be able to grasp the nature of God.

## Conclusion

Believers in the biblical message of salvation through Christ are not the only ones who have marveled at the wonder of human language. Secular thinkers like Darwin, Pinker, Dewey, and Chomsky have been amazed at the language mechanism of human beings. Robert Fortner, a Christian professor of communication, remarks, “Nothing is more mysterious than the fact that people can communicate at all.”<sup>29</sup> Truly, the gift of language is a miracle that we appreciate all too seldom. “And the most mysterious part of this mystery (the enigma wrapped in the conundrum) is that God should be so concerned about his communication with, and his relationship to, what he had made.”<sup>29</sup> God has given us the gift of language as a means of declaring His glory among the nations, and so His mission clearly involves the verbal proclamation of the gospel. What we often tend to miss, however, is that language itself stands as a monument to God’s creative power. Moreover, human language reflects God’s imprint in our lives and serves as a reflection of His nature as a

<sup>20</sup> Poythress VS (2009), 104

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 114

<sup>22</sup> Fortner RS (2007), 70

<sup>23</sup> Whitfield K (2012), Unit 4A, Section 3.2.4

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., Unit 4A, Section 3.2.6

<sup>25</sup> Hesselgrave DJ (1978), 43

<sup>26</sup> Whitfield K (2012), Unit 2A, Section 3.4

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., Unit 2C, Section 5.1.3

<sup>28</sup> Whitfield K (2012), Unit 2C, Section 5.7

<sup>29</sup> Fortner RS (2007), 61

communicative and relational being. If God is so concerned with language as a means of reflecting His glory in the world, and we are committed to doing His will, the implications are obvious. ☩

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### COMING EVENTS

**Thursday, July 12, 7:00 pm, Providence Baptist Church, 6339 Glenwood Ave., Raleigh, Room 207**

Our guest speaker, Jess Hines, in information technology, will present "God Is Real—Proofs of God." Please come out and bring your children 10 and above for this faith-building talk and support Jess as a new speaker dedicated to our TASC mission!

Jess graduated from Harding University in 2007 with a bachelor's degree in information technology. For the past 15 years, he has cultivated his interest in worldview, creation science, and apologetics and has held several classes on subjects from philosophy, the Flood, and even aliens to both teens and adults at Brooks Avenue Church of Christ in Raleigh where he is a member. He has a passion for teens especially and helps them understand that Christianity is the only defensible, logical, and meaningful worldview in our increasingly relativistic society. Please come out and bring family and guests for a welcoming big crowd!