Linguistics and the Bible

Marla Perkins Bevin

Whenever one takes up the study of something, there should be good reasons for doing so. There are good reasons for studying linguistics, which is the analysis of language as such, as opposed to the study of a particular language or languages, although studying particular languages can contribute to linguistics. One good reason for studying language is that God uses language, both spoken and written. God used spoken language to create (*Genesis* 1). A few months ago I heard special music in church that mentioned God's "flinging the stars into space." That is not what happened. Creation was mainly linguistic. Except for the sculpting of Adam's body and the surgical procedure to create Eve's, God created everything by means of language. God also uses written language; the Scriptures were given in written form (not in a jazz trio, for example), and God directly wrote the originals of the laws given at Sinai (*Exodus* 31:18).

Another reason to study language follows from the previous point: The inspired information about God is in written form, and in order to get the most out of that, human beings need to know not only what information the language is conveying but also how language conveys that information.

A third reason to study language is that it could be fatal not to. In *Judges* 12:5-6, 42,000 Ephraimites were killed by the Gileadites because of a variation in pronunciation. Had there been a competent linguist on hand, the variation could have been easily addressed, and thousands of lives might have been saved.

Fourth, some critiques of Christianity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (textual criticism, for example) are language-based. Effectively refuting these critiques requires knowing what God reveals can and should be done with language.

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The Beginning

The Bible begins with the account of creation. Information about language starts as soon as the words do, and the first information we get about language is about discourse structure, which, in linguistic jargon, means language about events. Typically, although there is sometimes minor variation when meaning is introduced, the study of linguistics is introduced starting with sounds (phonetics), then sound structure (phonology), then units of meaning (morphology, then semantics), then units of grammar (syntax), then language in communication (socio-linguistics), then whole chunks of language, such as paragraphs or books (discourse analysis). This order is used largely because of an evolutionary approach: Animals make sounds, but people use everything up to and including discourse; and the assumption is that we started out as animals. However, that is not how God created the universe. In creating, God used "sound" – speech is spoken (as distinguished from written) language – but that is not where the analysis starts. Rather, creation begins with a statement, which includes the required discourse elements: time ("In the beginning"), character ("God"), causality ("created"), and place ("the heavens and the Earth").

In the words used, there is additional information about time and character. First, the narrator of this text is not directly God (God inspired it, but He did not override the human author's linguistic perspective). Rather, the narrator refers to God in the third person, which is why he writes "God created" instead of writing "I created," which would place God as the direct narrator; or "You created," which would make God the audience for the narrator's account of creation. In other words, the narrator is an indirect character in *Genesis* 1. Also, the tense marking on "created" gives the narrator a time different from the event described in the discourse. The narrator is chronologically looking back to the time of creation. Had the narrator been writing from God's perspective before creation in eternity past, the passage would have said "God will create," and had the narrator been writing from the perspective of God

at the time of creation, he would have written "God creates." The narrator's writing is an indirect event; the direct event described in the first chapter of *Genesis* is the spoken creation that God was doing. Finally, causality is a component of the indirect discourse: The narrator is, from the perspective given by the tense and person information, causing the pen to move on the paper or the chisel to move on the stone, or the stylus to carve in the clay, or however *Genesis* was written.

Thus, in the very first verse, there are two series of events – one reported and one implied – and, therefore, two levels of discourse, which I term the direct (what happened) and the indirect (the writing about what happened). In linguistic jargon, the direct portion would be studied by syntacticians, semanticists, and morphologists; the indirect portion would be studied by semanticists and discourse analysts. The information given by person and tense is called "deixis" in linguistic jargon; these are words or elements that require a certain perspective in order to mean what they mean. In this case, the perspective gives us information about the narrator.

Event structure is straightforward (on the direct level) in *Genesis* 1, but this should not be understood too narrowly; indirect discourse shows that events can be implied through grammatical and morphological means rather than reported directly as a subject of the text. When God said, "Let there be light," and there was light, the word (and therefore the idea) chronologically and logically preceded the visible light. God's idea of light and God's language about light preceded visible light. Events (discourses in linguistics) are composed of everything required for a context, to use a word that comes up in Biblical exposition.

That language precedes creation is an important point: Language was not created and did not evolve from animal grunts or mews. God eternally has language as part of His rationality. Human beings have language because it is part of the image of God. Thus, God's use of language is an exemplar for human use of language, and it can be used to provide information about human language

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A subfield within discourse analysis is pragmatics, which is the study of information that is not stated but that is expected to be understood. If a window were open, and I were to say, "It's cold in here," and the person to whom I was speaking had closed the window, that person would have understood and acted on the pragmatics of what I had said; for nothing in what I said mentioned the window. Similarly, it can be understood from *Genesis* 1:1-3 that what God says happens. That does not have to be stated directly (although it is). Understanding from the discourse that what God says happens lays the foundation for understanding the later sentence, "Thus says the Lord." It also provides an example of how people ought to use language: God's abhorrence of lying makes sense because when God speaks, He describes or creates reality, and when people speak, God commands that human language should express the truth. God did not capriciously decide that human beings should not lie; He objects to lying because He is Truth itself, and His own use of language is truthful. If anyone fails to understand the pragmatics of first-words-then-things in *Genesis* 1, the significance of "Thus says the Lord" and God's abhorrence of lying might also be missed.

Language between Human Beings

God's using language to create indicates that language can be used to tag thoughts (the words labeled the thoughts before creation existed to be talked about). The indirect aspect of the discourse, the writing about the creation, assumes that there is an audience who will read the discourse. This is another function of language: communication. The study of language as communication is called sociolinguistics. As noted above, a lot more information can be conveyed in language than is explicitly stated. *Judges* 12 is another example of this: The pronunciation of shibboleth/sibboleth identified people as Gileadite or Ephraimite, and that information, communicated via pronunciation, was used to discriminate. Language-based discrimination is a popular subject in sociolinguistics. God's command to Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply gives pragmatic information about God's relationship to them: He is entitled to tell them what to do: He outranks them.

Sociolinguists also study what language reveals about hierarchies among people. Human beings possess language as part of the image of God; animals, like the serpent in *Genesis* 3 and Balaam's donkey in *Numbers* 22, possess language only for special occasions. It is interesting to note, on the topic of hierarchies revealed by language, that when animals speak, they win the argument (*Genesis* 3:1-6; *Numbers* 22:28-38). Language seems to be is a good bit of what enables men to have dominion over "every living thing that moves on the Earth" (*Genesis* 1:28). It is man's mind – the image of God – that gives him dominion.

Meaning

The meanings of words or components of words, such as prefixes, suffixes, roots, *etc*. (semantics), can usually be understood from surrounding discourse. This assumes (a point of pragmatics) that people are understanding the discourse for the most part (if there is any question about what a word means, there is a question about what the discourse means, but pragmatics can usually clarify what is meant by a word in a discourse). Stating at the outset

what words mean is helpful, but it is not always necessary if people are willing to do discourse analysis on their own: God does not define most terms explicitly at the outset in *Genesis* 1: The word "day" is a notable exception. The *Oxford English Dictionary* uses quotations to track the changing semantics of words through the history of the English language, which is a Biblical approach, but it would not work for people who speak only Guniyandi – Guniyandi speakers would need Guniyandi discourses in order to use Guniyandi pragmatics to figure out Guniyandi semantics. In *Genesis* 1, we can understand that evening and morning compose a day; "day" means an evening and a morning in *Genesis* 1. This is why Jewish holidays start at sundown on the day prior to the morning of the holiday. In English, a morning and an evening compose a day, which is why we have to do some verbal gymnastics in English to describe Jewish holidays.

As another example of understanding semantics from discourse, it is possible to understand the meaning of the term "created" from the discourse. It means making something that was not in existence previously. Light did not exist except as an idea in God's mind until God created it.

Grammar as Such

First, a bit of terminological clarification: Grammar is called syntax in linguistics. The different term is necessary in order to distinguish description from prescription. Linguists study language, even when language is not working as well as it could or according to rules that were invented for it by grammarians. This study is called descriptive linguistics – the study of what actually happens in language. Prescriptive linguistics is what some people think ought to be done with language. In order to be useful, language has to follow rules and be orderly, but the rules that exist in the minds of speakers do not always need to line up with the rules that prescriptive grammarians say should be used.

Infinitives are defined as the most basic form of a verb, expressed in English as "to V," for example, "to be," "to sit," "to think." In English, it is said that one should not split infinitives, but English speakers can and regularly do split infinitives; English works that way. The prescriptive prohibition against splitting infinitives in English is a holdover from Latin; in Latin, infinitives are single words, for example, "illucere" (to shine on); and Latin is not a language that does much infixing (an infix is like a prefix or suffix, but inside a word rather than on the beginning or end). In English, infinitives are two words, so more words can be inserted if the speaker or writer wishes. Splitting infinitives in English is sometimes the most linguistically natural way to express an idea; when not splitting an infinitive is unnatural, a hearer's or reader's attention may be distracted from the idea to be conveyed. God does not speak to people in languages they do not understand (in *Daniel* 5, the writing on the wall had to be explained, but Daniel was there to explain it, thereby establishing himself

as a spokesman for God [a pragmatics point]: God did not leave the king stranded with incomprehensible language). Even when there were prescriptively better languages available, God used common language, Koiné Greek, not the more prestigious classical Greek, to write the New Testament; Christ Himself spoke Aramaic outside the synagogue and read Hebrew in the synagogue. God used Hebrew to write for the ancient Jews. Given God's example of understandability, it is undesirable to distract people from clearly understanding an idea by using language that is not easily understandable. In fact, God says that speaking words that cannot be understood is pointless, and He issues a command against it: *I Corinthians* 14:9 indicates that unless one is speaking words that are easily understood, the speaking is as good as addressing the air; and in *I Corinthians* 14:28 He issues the command to be quiet unless it is possible to be understood.

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Syntax is the study of how meaning-bearing elements combine to form words and sentences. Linguists call meaning-bearing elements "morphemes." These are different from words. The "–ed" in the verb "created" conveys the meaning of pastness. The morpheme "–ed" cannot occur independently of a verb in English, so it is not a word, but it still has meaning. "Create" is a morpheme; and because it can occur independently, it is also a word. "Created" is one word composed of two morphemes. Syntacticians will tell us that the past "–ed" is always a verbal suffix: It attaches to the ends of verbs.

Syntacticians will also tell us that English is an SVO language, meaning that most declarative sentences in English have a subject element, a verbal element, and an object element, in that order. For emphasis, the O can be placed first: "That (O) I (S) like (V)," as compared to the more customary "I like that." Note that word order contributes to the pragmatics of emphasis. In order to know how the morphemes of "In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth" compose a sentence and how to understand what the elements mean in relation to one another, we have to know the syntax.[*] Speakers of English know that prepositional phrases often convey temporal or spatial information. They recognize prepositional phrases as having a preposition followed by a noun phrase. The first three words of *Genesis* 1, in our English translation, give a known syntactical form in English. English speakers know that it is not the subject of the sentence, because the verb agrees in form and agency with God, not with the prepositional phrase (creation

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[*] I wish to express my appreciation to the editor for the following insight: Knowing the syntax in order to know the meaning of the elements of a sentence is a corollary of the logical principle that the proposition is the basic unit of rational thought; its components, such as words, phrases, and sounds, are not.

semantically requires that someone do the creating, so there must be a person or persons, not a preposition). They also know, as English-speakers, that what follows an agentive verb is the object phrase that takes the agent's action. In English, then, the order of the elements, along with some semantic information from the morphemes, largely determines how information is conveyed in sentences, and speakers of English know how to use English syntax, even if they do not take the time to think about it.

Other languages have other ways to organize their morphemes into sentences. God used multiple languages to speak to people: Hebrew and Koiné Greek, for example. These languages differ syntactically; God did not inspire a single syntax but used various languages as His audiences would best understand them. God's example of using very different languages to communicate truth adequately and accurately indicates that translations are possible, good, and necessary. Hebrew is a verb-initial language, specifically VSO; among the languages of the world, putting the verb first is fairly rare – God uses forms that are not common when those are what people need in order to understand. Koiné Greek is preferentially verb final – SOV – but thanks to having four cases, it has some flexibility in its word order. SOV is the most common order among languages of the world. God was not making an elitist point with Hebrew: Common order works, too. Neither of those forms would be the most understandable form to an English speaker. Putting the verb first, as Hebrew would, in a sentence such as "I am the Lord your God" would make it sound like a question to a speaker of English: "Am I the Lord your God?" Putting the verb last, as Greek would likely do, would sound to an English speaker as if "the Lord your God" was connected with the "I," and that there might be more information to follow after the verb: "I, the Lord your God, am…." Each of these languages is orderly and rule-governed, but their orders and rules differ. God's use of varying rules and languages shows that (1) no one language is the best language; (2) the purpose of using language is to be understood; (3) whatever orders and rules facilitate the audience's understanding should be used; (4) human language is completely adequate to express divine truth; and (5) language is not an obstacle to communication, but the means of communication.

Language variation, such as the different preferred word orders in Hebrew and Greek, is a result of the curse at Babel (*Genesis* 11). Until that time, everyone spoke the same language. When God confused the language, linguistic drift began. There are now multiple ways to do syntax, depending on what language is being spoken. Spanish, French, Italian, Ladin, Romanian, Portuguese, *etc*. exist because Latin drifted. Speakers of English now have the *OED* to keep them informed of semantic drift within English. There are numerous dialects and accents, which are linguistic drift within a single language. Variation in language does not mean that human beings cannnot communicate, as some have argued; it simply means that it takes some work in order to communicate effectively –

God's example of communicating adequately and accurately in multiple languages applies at every other level. Human beings need to pay attention to one another's discourse in order to understand what is meant and where differences might exist. Misunderstandings often indicate the existence of linguistic drift between the people involved in the misunderstanding; paying better attention to the discourse in order to identify the components that need clarification and making that clarification is, on a small scale, the work of translation.

Sounds

The ability to speak and write is assumed from *Genesis* 1, but information about the analysis of sound occurs explicitly in Scripture; *Judges* 12 is an example of this. It is clearly indicated that "s" and "sh" indicate different sounds; if they did not, there would be no basis for the discrimination that clearly follows from the difference. The study of different sounds is called "phonetics." The difference between "s" and "sh" lies in where the tongue is placed in proximity to the roof of the mouth to make the sounds – toward the alveolar ridge for "s" and just throat-ward of the alveolar ridge for "sh." The Ephraimites could have been taught to pull their tongues back a short way in their mouths – the place of articulation is the only difference between the sounds. They are both sibilants (hissing sounds) and both unvoiced (without vibration in the vocal cords). This text also leads into phonology, which is the study of how languages treat the sounds that they have. "Shibboleth" and "sibboleth" are the same word. The narrator in this text says that the Ephraimites were pronouncing "Shibboleth" incorrectly, not that they were saying a different word; in linguistic terms, the "s" and "sh" are allophonic, not phonemic, for the Gileadites and Ephraimites. In English, "s" and "sh" alone are enough to make different words: "Sip" and "ship," for example – they are phonemic sounds in English. In the language of Gilead/Ephraim, the sounds were recognizably different but did not make different words. An example of non-phonemic sound difference in English is the various sounds that we spell with "t." The sounds indicated by "t" in the words "tack," "stop," "liter," and "cat" are all different sounds. If someone uses the sound of the "t" sound in "tack" in the word "liter," English speakers will not get a different word (they will still understand the word "liter"), but they will suspect that the speaker is not a native speaker of English. These kinds of differences in sound, even though indicated with the same letter, are often difficult for people to learn in other languages.

Close

Scripture gives us all the major components of linguistics and patterns for analyzing them. It also shows that the order in which linguists usually introduce these components, largely because of an evolutionary assumption, is un-Biblical. In the beginning was the *Logos*: the Discourse.