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THE PORBLEM OF LANGUAGE VARIETY: AN EXAMPLE FROM RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

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One of the most significant trends within linguistics in the 1970s has been the move away from the formalised models of language introduced by Chomsky towards an account of language that incorporates functional premises.[1] As Charles Fillmore put it, in a 1972 paper, the emphasis on formalisation needs to be balanced by a consideration of what exactly it is that linguists want to formalise.[2] Putting this another way, a contrast can be drawn between the stress laid in the 1960s on the specification in formal terms of the *common factors* that underlie utterances (on the similarities – deep or surface – between the sentences of a language, and on the similarities – the formal and substantive universals – between different languages) and the stress laid in the 1970s on the specification in functional terms of the *differences* between language forms, as captured by such notions as dialect, style, level, etc. This change of emphasis has thus brought a revived interest in the concept of 'language variety', and in the social, psychological and historical factors that underlie it. And it is the implications of this shift in thinking that I propose to examine in the present paper. How far has the idea of language variety, as developed by sociolinguistics, been of value in the elucidation of philosophical problems? I shall argue that its contribution in this field is in fact extremely restricted, and that the notion of variety cannot bear the weight that some recent philosophical discussion has placed upon it, as the main methodological principles involved are themselves in need of philosophical support.

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Sociolinguistics postulates the systematic co-variation of language and society. It argues that there is no such thing as 'a' language, in the sense of a single, homogeneous set of structures and features, capable of being picked up and examined as one might a test-tube. Rather, the idea of a common language is an abstraction, based on our perception of the common properties that relate the different dialects, styles and other group uses of language. Dictionaries label some (but only some) of these variations, using such terms as 'formal', 'legal', 'slang', and 'American'; but it must not be forgotten that grammatical, phonological and graphological variability is also involved. As an academic subject, the coverage of sociolinguistics is extremely broad, ranging from the study of the relationship between languages and ethnic, political or national groups, to the study of the mutual influence exercised by individuals on each other in particular social settings, using language. At one extreme, therefore, the variations found in language raise questions of interest to anthropologists and ethnographers; at the other extreme, the point of contact is with the social psychologist. In between, there is a wide range of group uses of language that have attracted the interest of various disciplines: for example, sociologists, interested in the relationship between language and socio-economic class; literary critics, interested in the stylistic analysis of texts; and philosophers, interested in the functional analysis of language, as interpreted in such notions as 'speech act' and 'language game'. 'What should we say when?' (Austin) has a broader range of implications to sociolinguists: it is more 'What kind of person can say what, how, using what means, to whom, when, and why?'

The study of sociolinguistics has both applied and theoretical implications. Under the heading of applications, for example, one could cite the various projects on language planning in multi-lingual communities (such as in East Africa), where the principle basis required has come from sociolinguistics. The subject has also developed our understanding of the way standard and non-standard forms of language are related (e.g. detailed studies of pidgin and creole languages), and suggested fresh educational perspectives for evaluating non-standard dialects (e.g. replacing the traditional prescriptive criteria of correctness in usage by relativistic criteria of appropriateness). It has also shown how important attitudes are in evaluating linguistic usage (e.g. by isolating the stereotypes of identity which are based on language – an accent being said to express intelligence, dominance, sexiness,

etc.). From these examples, it should be evident that sociolinguistic research faces enormous methodological obstacles, mainly because of the problem of having to use language as a means of finding out about language. Obtaining naturalistic samples of data, and reliable informant responses to questions about usage are particular difficulties; and few varieties of English (hardly any spoken varieties) have been given the detailed linguistic analysis that is required. At present, therefore, other disciplines looking to sociolinguistics for guidance will often find empirical findings lacking; but a great deal of information concerning the procedures involved in doing any field-work on language has now been accumulated, and several interesting models of language function have been proposed.[3]

The theoretical implications of sociolinguistic research are of immediate significance, and it is some of these which I want now to examine. The subject raises basic questions about assumptions in linguistic enquiry that have for several years been taken as axiomatic. Hymes and others, for example, have objected to the Chomskyan notion of linguistic competence, in the sense of our tacit knowledge of formal structures, on the grounds that any theory of language must also take into account our tacit knowledge of the social and other factors that condition our selection and use of these structures. In their view, Chomskyan competence has to be developed into a broader notion of 'communicative competence' to take account of this (Hymes, 1972). There are difficulties in extending the notion of competence in this way, but the emphasis is certainly correct, in my view. It is counter-intuitive to lump all our knowledge of linguistic variety and appropriateness under the heading of 'performance', along with our linguistic mistakes, non-fluencies, and the like. Qualitatively different behaviour is involved. Another theoretical implication is that only by studying language variety can we hope to arrive at an understanding of linguistic change. Traditional philological accounts have been unable to arrive at an explanation of why sounds, structures and words change in the way they do. Looking at change from a sociolinguistic point of view, it is felt, will be illuminating; and studies of change in contemporary English by Labov and others have already proved to be so (Labov, 1972).

To what extent can sociolinguistic insights help to elucidate the theoretical problems of disciplines outside of linguistics? Certainly, frequent use is made of notions that correspond to those which sociolinguistics attempts to explicate, and this suggests that there

is a contribution to be made. In the context of philosophy, the re-definition of traditional problems in linguistic terms, and the well-established emphasis on the study of language in use seem to provide illustrations, in that the notion of variety is (implicitly or explicitly) involved. The total analysis of the 'logic' of a particular language use, for instance, will involve an analysis of linguistic (e.g. syntactic, lexical) as well as non-linguistic (e.g. subject-matter, truth-value) considerations, and part of the linguistic process will involve a contrastive analysis of the forms used with reference to other language uses. De Saussure's dictum that in language 'there are only oppositions' applies as much to the study of language varieties as to language features. There are several points at which a sociolinguistic orientation applies. How far is the 'language' cited in academic discussions of a particular kind of language-game a realistic reflection of the spontaneous usage of the users? How far is it a stereotype, created by the application of traditional paradigms of enquiry (see further below)? Then, more fundamentally, to what extent can there be a linguistic 'key' to non-linguistic problems? What exactly is to be gained by trans-lating philosophical questions into sociolinguistic terms? In recent decades, in certain branches of philosophy, the validity of the assumption underlying this last procedure seems unquestioned, and frequent reference is made to current thinking in linguistics, and to the usefulness of using linguistic models (e.g. of generative grammar) as a means of casting fresh light on old issues. It may seem paradoxical to hear a linguist attack a tendency that might seem to be a growth area within his subject, but it must be done. My view is that while there are several methodological areas where sociolinguistic techniques can be illuminating, ultimately there is no more satisfactory explanation of central philosophical issues to be gained by rephrasing them in linguistic terms. The study of religious belief is one of the areas that has been particularly affected (?infected) by linguisticisation, and clearly illustrates the nature of the problem.

I shall focus the discussion on a series of books on religious language which appeared in 1974, making that year something of an annus mirabilis for linguistic theologians (or theological lin-guists?). They are Paul Van Buren, *The edges of language*, Gerhard Ebeling, *Introduction to a theological theory of language*, Paul Helm, *The varieties of belief*, Anders Jeffner, *The study of religious language*, and Jean Ladrière, *Language and belief* (trans. by Garrett Garden). Much of the emphasis in these books takes the form of a readiness

to return to first principles, to clarify the nature of the models and presuppositions which orientate our views of religious behaviour, and to attack the stereotypes of religious language that have evolved in the theological/philosophical debates of the last thirty years. Van Buren, Ebeling and Jeffner all begin by expressing a profound dissatisfaction with the direction of current trends; all proceed to a general investigation of the properties of language, as a preliminary to diagnosing causes for this dissatisfaction; and all conclude by suggesting a fresh orientation for their subject, whereby religious language is seen taking its place within a more broadly-based linguistic perspective.

Their dissatisfaction has many causes. For Van Buren, it arises out of the inadequacy of the traditional paradigms of enquiry within the philosophy of religion (in which, for example, religious utterances are seen as factual claims, or as the expression of moral commitment) these, he claims, 'ignores so much of what has happened in Christianity . . . that contemporary religion seems hardly to be the subject of discussion' (p. 33). Jeffner echoes this in his view that most statements about how religious men use language have no empirical basis: they are personal impressions, generating conflict through it being 'far from certain that different philosophers have the same group of religious men in mind' (p. 25). Ebeling's long first chapter is called 'Boredom with language': he argues that assent is no longer freely given to the tradition of Christian language, because it has become specialised, stereotyped, and inapplicable as an interpretation of daily experience. Uncertainty about its interpretation leads to misuse, non-use, and boredom: 'People become tired of using a language with which they have a troubled relationship' (p. 33). If Christian language is restricted to set rituals, sermons, etc., and fails to be confirmed and verified by one's own experience, it ceases to be relevant, and people look elsewhere.

What aspects of religious language have been underestimated or misinterpreted, therefore? For Van Buren, it is the sense of the mysterious and awe which surrounds religious utterance, the fact that if we look at how people use the word 'God', we find poetry, metaphor, paradox, ambiguity, incoherence, and silence. Not only well-educated and intelligent atheists, but theists too say that they do not know how to use the words (p. 17). Jeffner also is much concerned with the rôle of metaphor and the importance of ambiguity in analysing the properties of religious utterances (p. 44, ff.). Ladrière talks about figurative procedures which promote the

'transcending of meaning' (p. 195). And for Ebeling, the word 'God' 'brings to utterance the mystery of reality as such' (p. 55): it summarises our concern to make statements about mystery, denying the possibility of speaking about reality solely in terms of the world. It represents 'the most extreme and . . . the most pure possibility of language' (p. 55).

The existence of such things has often been noted, but all authors argue that their pervasiveness in religion has been much underestimated, and that there has been a regrettable tendency to judge this language in terms of the criteria established for the study of other varieties, especially scientific usage. The concept of sociolinguistic variety is therefore basic to all these books, but it comes out most explicitly in Ladrière (who uses the conceptual apparatus of the philosophy of science to bring out the linguistic contrasts between science and religion) and Helm (whose purpose is to demonstrate the heterogeneity underlying the notion of 'religious language'). The force of Van Buren's attack lies in his argument that religious language is by no means unique in displaying the above characteristics, and that if we reject religious utterance, on whatever grounds, we must reject a great deal else besides – much of humour, satire, poetry, and emotional expression. His model of language tries to account for this by recognising a central area of linguistic organisation, 'where the rules work so well that we scarcely notice them' (p. 83), and a gradient through to the 'edges' of language, where usage is less predictable, deviations from norms more noticeable, and meaning less definable. A word like 'grow' applies centrally to plants, animals, and people; less centrally to cities or ideas; still less to cars under construction or cultures; and probably not at all to planets. From the centre of language, we progress through increasing ambiguity to the edges of language, which mark the boundary between sense and nonsense, between sayable and unsayable. Literature, humour and religion are the three main areas that explore language's edges, and the fact of such explorations reflects a basic human need to express more than our ordinary, rule-governed behaviour allows, and to be opaque and inexact upon occasion. 'The wider the spectrum of language a man employs . . . the richer is the world in which he finds himself' (p. 100). The point is not unfamiliar to teachers of literature, stylistics, or mother-tongue teaching, but it is uncommon to see it made in theology. It is developed at length by Ebeling, who also points to the longing to express the inexpressible, intimate experience, and the constant search in litera-

ture for new forms of expression, whereby we find, in the face of the threat of silence, fresh motivation to produce forceful and vivid language (p. 76).

The implications for religious language then follow. For Van Buren, 'God' is religion's peculiar way of marking the boundary of language: it is an utterance 'when one wants desperately to say the most this is possible' (p. 133), 'a speech-act acknowledging the limits of speech' (p. 147). As such, the tests of coherence and meaningfulness by which we normally judge the centre of language simply do not apply.

An attack of this kind, of course, hits out at everyone, not solely the critic of religion. Van Buren's own earlier work is just as much a target (a point he readily admits). Perhaps because of its wide-ranging force, both Van Buren and Ebeling spend a great deal of space justifying their approaches by referring to general considerations about the nature of language. This is the theme of Ladrière's introductory section also. Thus Van Buren concentrates on the fact of language variety, illustrating that language has many purposes other than communication: language is not only a tool for understanding, it 'determines the context in which we seek that understanding' (p. 57). The term 'God' has to be seen in its context, and this involves reference to edge-language. Ebeling too discusses language variety, but spends more space developing a series of fundamental dichotomies (reminiscent of De Saussure) which he sees as shaping our models of language structure and function (e.g. language as potential and act, as encounter between individual and community, as means of unification and differentiation).

What comments can a linguist, then, make about this way of doing things? Compared with traditional discussions of religious language, the present group of books is sophisticated in its linguistic awareness; but a certain amount of naïvety is at times detectable, which a greater cognisance of linguistics might have helped to avoid. There is still a marked focus on the written language, as opposed to speech, for instance (as in Jeffner's definition of the sentence (p. 3), and also in Ebeling (p. 131)). There is an unfortunate restriction of languages of illustration to English: Van Buren's discussion of the dependence of emotion on language would have been helped by showing the cross-cultural differences in the linguistic categorisation of emotion.[4] His ideas about gradience between centre and edge of language could also have been systematised using the criteria which have been developed to

handle such notions in linguistics – Haas's degrees of contextualisa-
tion, or Quirk's notion of serial relationship, for instance (Haas,
1973; Quirk, 1965). Awareness of such literature might have
prompted him (and others in this field) to move away from the
tiresome talk of 'words' as units of meaning (or as a metonym for
'language') into a more fruitful discussion of 'sentences'. For
example, he is worried (pp. 84–5) about how to distinguish be-
tween the central senses of a word and its extended senses. He has
(rightly) disallowed an appeal to etymology (p. 55). If, however,
he had talked in terms of sentences, then he could have used
distributional measures (such as the notion of collocation) to help
define his marginal uses.

Above all, in these books, there is a tendency to see language
as a kind of primitive, the ultimate datum of any investigation;
and this is misleading. Van Buren certainly underestimates the
theoretical relativity and controversy within language studies.
Radically different models of language structure and function co-
exist. To say, therefore, that 'Nothing that we need to know about
the meaning of our words is hidden from our sight' (p. 55) is hardly
a realistic account of the problems encountered by linguistic
semantics, nor to the theoretical differences which separate such
scholars as Fillmore, Chafe, or Lyons.[5] At least Jeffner emphasises
the important rôle of interpretation in science (p. 121), as of
course does Ladrière, whose background in the philosophy of
science leads him to make much of the personal and imaginative
pressures operating on the notion of scientific theory. But somehow
the possibility of these pressures affecting our conceptions of
language has been neglected.

The difficulties, from the linguistic point of view, are both
theoretical and methodological. Under the first heading, the pro-
cess of writing grammars of languages involves ultimately the
making of judgments that require validation in philosophical
terms. Contemporary grammars, in Chomsky's sense, are aiming
for 'descriptive adequacy', i.e. a satisfactory account of the lin-
guistic system that constitutes someone's competence. But given
the possibility of there being two (or more) accounts that both
satisfactorily explain competence, then some further criteria need
to be involved to evaluate one against the other, and this would
constitute Chomsky's level of 'explanatory adequacy'.[6] The evalua-
tive criteria which would be used to carry out this task, however,
are obscure. Formal simplicity is one which generative gram-
marians emphasise (i.e. the grammar with the fewer rules and

symbols is to be preferred), but there are linguistic as well as philosophical grounds for doubting the validity of this.[7] Other criteria involve such notions as the 'elegance' of a grammatical analysis, or its 'usefulness'. At this point in linguistic enquiry, therefore, it is the linguist who needs to turn to the philosopher for guidance, in explicating such notions.

The same reasoning also applies, in the final analysis, to the methodological contribution that linguistics and sociolinguistics can provide. At first sight, the contact seems promising. There is now a considerable literature in linguistics on such problems as eliciting paraphrase judgments and acceptability reactions from informants, or on the definition of 'social situation' in which linguistic features operate. Reference to this literature might therefore have been of value to Jeffner, for example, whose definition of 'religious situation' (p. 8) is weak, in that it overestimates the possibilities of achieving inter-observer agreement as to the distinctive features of situational categories, and who overemphasises the need to establish corpora of data concerning popular reactions to religious language. Some empirical surveys are certainly necessary, in order to provide a corrective to the introspection and impressionism which contributed to Van Buren's and Ebeling's dissatisfaction with the state of the art; but as linguistics learned in its structuralist phase, it is all too easy to accumulate enormous amounts of data on language, while lacking a sophisticated model that will make at least partial sense of it.[8]

But these points are of limited and largely cautionary value. Ultimately, sociolinguistic models and techniques cannot bear the weight of the arguments given above. Establishing a systematic co-variation between religious language and religious society (or for any variety) presupposes that several theoretical decisions have already been made, and these it is not the business of linguistics to provide. Fundamentally, what are the data that a sociolinguistic theory has to explain? Any sociolinguistic study presupposes that there has been a selection and arrangement of the units to be compared – features of language and features of society. These are then related by such notions as appropriateness and acceptability. But how are these to be determined? For example, if we are carrying out a stylistic analysis of scientific language, we would presumably need to select 'good', 'successful' samples of the postulated variety, and use 'appropriate' statistical techniques for analysing its homogeneity. But how are such notions as 'success' to be rated? The problem is obviously much greater when choosing samples of re-

ligious language. Again, if we were carrying out a stylistic analysis of journalese, we would have to explain why certain paragraph divisions and lay-out conventions were being used in one paper (say, the *Sun*) but not in another (say, *The Times*). Stylistics, in the linguistic sense, cannot by itself answer such questions.[9] The answers are presumably to be found in the publisher's judgments as to the 'level' of their audience and how 'effective' they feel a specific presentation technique to be. But how are such notions as 'level' and 'effectiveness' to be rated? Once again, the problem is much greater in analysing the discourse-rules of religious language.

There are thus theoretical and methodological grounds for suggesting that the above authors need to question the validity of their primary assumption, that language is the ultimate determinant of the debate. It is unlikely that anything will be solved by rephrasing all their concerns as language-games. And there is much suggestion in these books that, paradoxically, the solution does lie elsewhere. Ebeling's book, for example, is said to be a prolegomenon to the question of how we can speak of God; but his answer is that we cannot, if this question is isolated from our daily struggle with existence. On its own, he argues, a language theory is inadequate as a general explanation: it is an essential first step, but one which needs to be supplemented by a more comprehensive 'theory of life'. His 'theological theory of language', then, aims to account for the relationship between the language of our personal experience and that of theology, whereby the claims to truth of the (language of) Christian faith are verified against the reality of our daily experience of the (language of the) world. His theory insists on confronting theological language, in times of crisis, with experience: like a thermostat, it switches on when theological language is so removed from real life that it generates nothing but boredom; and once it has restored some dynamism to the situation, it switches itself off again. Now this emphasis on experience is shared by Van Buren: for him, Christianity is a story which promotes a more adequate view of oneself, the world, and human history (p. 169). And if this point is accepted, it is doubtful whether the linguistic issue provides a satisfactory explanation. Our language behaviour may be internally coherent, whether at centre or edge, but, as Van Buren says (p. 112), its reasonableness depends on other factors, on how much we weigh its merits – and this is not a linguistic issue. To find religious language meaningful, you must, it seems, first want belief – or, at least, be dissatisfied with unbelief. As Ebeling says (p. 127), there must be a genuine

willingness to achieve assent. As Ladrière says, the ultimate veri-
fication of the language of faith lies in the continuing process of
meditation on the part of the user, which produces an increasing
realisation of the adequacy of the language claims to his own ex-
perience (p. 201). As Jeffner says (p. 127), the test is does the God
hypothesis provide a better explanation of life than anything else?
A decision about this, it is argued, has to be made by everyone;
and it is a decision that cannot be reasoned. But whatever its basis
– social, psychological, developmental – one thing is clear: it is not
ultimately, a linguistic decision. By all means, then, let us allow a
place for linguistics and sociolinguistics in helping to sort out the
technical consequences of operating with the notion of language-
games, but this specialised and restricted rôle ought not to distract
from the more fundamental questions (to continue the metaphor)
of who makes the rules, who is allowed to play, and who is
qualified to act as referee. It is not possible to reduce these
questions to linguistic terms. Rather, it is the linguistic terms
themselves that are in need of philosophical support.

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NOTES

[1] In his new book (Chomsky, 1976) Chomsky insists that this is only a change of emphasis, arguing that in his thinking the 'significant connections between structure and function . . . has never been in doubt' (56). I would agree that the notions of form and function need to be systematically interrelated in any linguistic theory, and would be critical of any attempts to *replace* formal accounts of language by purely functional ones. On the other hand, it is difficult to see how any of the classical models of generative grammar can be formally extended to take functional features into account.

[2] Fillmore (1973) e.g. p. 276: 'There is no way . . . of talking about grammaticality or well-formedness without getting in many ways involved in the details of social interaction by means of language'.

[3] The field is well represented in Trudgill (1974) and Gumperz and Hymes (Eds.) (1972).

[4] For example, the papers by Mahl & Schulze, La Barre, and Stankiewicz in Sebeok, Hayes & Bateson (1964).

[5] See, for example, the statement of the issues in Lyons (1968) or Palmer (1975).

[6] For these distinctions, see Chomsky (1964), especially Ch. 2.

[7] Some linguistic arguments are to be found in Derwing (1973), Chs. 5 and 7; some philosophical arguments in Bunge (0000).

[8] In fact, no empirical surveys seem to have been used as part of the above studies: the suggestions are programmatic. If there had been, for instance, I would have expected them to have laid more emphasis on God as a name – as a 'someone' with whom one may have a personal

relationship (as J. Dominian puts it). In stating the case for God as edge-language so strongly, Van Buren runs the risk of falling into the same trap as the philosophers he has himself criticised – of constructing a stereotyped variety which ignores categories of usage incompatible with its basic assumptions. Is 'God' on the edge of *everyone's* idiolect?

[9] See further, Crystal (1972).