

# LANGUAGE AND RELIGION

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In a recent book for the *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Catholicism* called *Linguistics, Language and Religion*, I have introduced and begun to discuss the implications of a theme whose study has hitherto been much neglected by Catholics (and everyone else, for that matter). As the title suggests, the book emphasizes the fundamental rôle language plays in the practical understanding, expression, presentation and furtherance of any set of religious beliefs (with particular reference to Catholicism), and the invaluable assistance which linguistics, the scientific study of language, can give. In this article, I want to draw attention to some of the more important points made there, and to amplify two issues which were given little treatment for reasons of space; namely, the requirements of intelligibility between the religious teachers and the faithful on the one hand, and between the faithful and everyone else on the other. One of the main causes of Catholic apathy, and the major barrier to the ecumenical movement, it can be argued, is entirely linguistic in character.

One of the important principles emphasized in the book is that language must be studied in its correct social perspective, as the most flexible and potentially subtle kind of human communicative behaviour; it is capable of communicating mes-

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sages of different kinds and different degrees of detail more successfully than any other set of behavioural conventions. Primarily, also, language is studied through the fact of speech, from which other codes (such as writing and various sign languages) are derived. The second important principle is that the use of language implies intelligibility—to *someone*. Unless sound has a definable meaning to some members of a social group, then it is not language.<sup>1</sup> Sound, to be called language, needs to be organized into conventional patterns and given a conventional, non-random relation to reality, or *context*, wherein lies its meaning. Linguistics is the science which has developed over the past 150 years with the aim of studying the fact of language in its context to find out as much as possible about what language is, how it is organized (its internal structure), and how it is used in relation to reality (its external function, or meaning). Associated issues involve a consideration of the user (the pragmatic side—attitudes to language, and so on), and the many fields of application—in language teaching, translation, stylistics, philosophy, speech therapy and psychiatry, to name a few. As society is so bound up with using language in one of its forms, there is a never-ending supply of data for the linguist to work with. But he is first of all concerned with language studied as an end in itself, to provide more knowledge about what is, after all, a uniquely human attribute; only secondarily is he concerned with applying the results of his knowledge to specific situations and to elucidating and suggesting solutions for the main language problems that are inherent in all social linguistic situations.

This therapeutic aim is important, such dangers as misinterpretation and unintelligibility being very great. In any

<sup>1</sup> The social group may be relatively small and specialized, of course; for example, the "secret languages" of thieves and cliques, and some primitive religious languages.

minimal communication between two people, each is going to interpret any linguistic message in accordance with his own experience, memory, personal associations, environment, learning, etc. And as no two people have the same background, the meaning of the language they use is necessarily going to be different to both. Normally, the discrepancies are trivial: no one worries over or would quarrel about the way the word "table" was to be interpreted in everyday discourse. Most speech-situations of our day-to-day existence are relatively informal and do not require precision to any great degree. It is when the needs of the speakers are more defined, as in any kind of intellectual conversation (for example, philosophical, political or theological discussion), that these discrepancies can assume very large proportions and must be given due recognition. But even in a non-intellectual climate, differences frequently arise due to the personal emotional associations of words (connotations)—for example, the different, semi-instinctive reactions of people with divergent beliefs to such words as "Catholic" or "atheist"; or to the word "art", which to many is inextricably associated with snobbery. Some words are always loaded to some people, and, unless the subjective element is adequately isolated, their presence can prove fatal to constructive discussion.

The discipline of linguistics has existed a sufficiently long time to have amassed a great deal of data about what language is, the way it is used, and so on. It has established fundamental principles to be borne in mind in discussion about language, a methodology of approach in practical matters of analysis and classification, and a terminology of description that can be applied to any speech-situation. It has come to be recognized as a scholarly and sensible way of looking at language and language problems. No one else looks at language with the specialized interest and training of the linguist, and consequently he provides information that no one

else is able to give. As a result, other disciplines, such as those already mentioned, are discovering the potential usefulness of linguistics.

Religion in general, but Catholicism in particular, has not yet tried to utilize the results that modern linguistic research is providing, partly because of the dearth of Catholic linguists, and partly because there has so far been little published on the subject other than the specialists' textbooks and monographs. The situation is improving, of course, and readable introductions to the subject are increasing in number, providing material for the interested non-specialist as well as the schools, where the future Catholic linguists lie. It is essential that more Catholic people should be better informed about the language(s) they use; and linguistics can help, simply by suggesting objective ways of looking at and criticizing Catholic as well as non-Catholic expression in the many fields of discourse—biblical, theological, pastoral, liturgical, ecumenical, and so on. In *Linguistics, Language and Religion*, after the introduction of the subject matter of linguistics in some detail, a few of these specific situations are discussed: problems of meaning in communication, the place of language in primitive societies (with particular reference to its magical and superstitious functions), the character of anthropomorphic language in talking about God, the linguistic basis of textual studies and critical interpretation, the clash between religion (and metaphysical statements in general) and logical positivism, with some discussion of theological language, and the important question of language in the liturgy, which is also amplified elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I want to amplify two points of particular

<sup>2</sup> "A liturgical language in a linguistic perspective", *New Blackfriars* (November 1964). An introductory book, of course, cannot cover all the relationships between language and religion. A further (currently controversial) link is in the field of stylistics, where attempts to determine the authorship of the Pauline Epistles by means of a computer require a thorough linguistic basis.

current relevance to Catholicism dealing with degrees of unintelligibility (which has been called, with some justification, the linguistic original sin). All language being fated to be to some degree unintelligible, and the primary cause of misinterpretation residing in human beings rather than in the relatively easily traceable and correctible mechanical mode of transmission, it is important to concentrate on the human potential for improvement, to study where things can and do start to go wrong when people begin to use words, such things resulting in misrepresentation, embarrassment and confusion. What the powers and limitations of language are; which words are neutral, which loaded, and to whom; how one allows for differing attitudes to language, and takes into account such variable and disturbing factors as language change, polysemy, ambiguity and connotation: these are real problems which can only be attacked by people who have a fairly deep knowledge of the realities of language form and function. This knowledge can only be obtained through a linguistic survey of usage—in our case, religious usage. Personal impressions about what one thinks happens in language are relatively useless; people's ideas about their own language are normally quite vague and undefined, and in addition are prejudiced by their own upbringing. To obtain facts about usage as objectively as possible one needs more than the isolated opinions of individuals: one needs the statistically based recommendations which are the product of a comprehensive, methodical synchronic description of the language usages of as many people as possible.

Problems arise particularly when a language (or style) has any official status, such as when it is used liturgically or when doctrinal definitions are involved. The users of the language have to be continually on the defensive, particularly when it is a living dialect, because of the permanent presence of linguistic and social change. A renewal of language is essential from time to time, as metaphors tend to become clichés,

words and analogies tend to become archaic, new similes suggest themselves, a new "spirit of the age" has to be met, and so on. If a living language is ever used in an official capacity, and the relevance of its status maintained, then it must constantly be kept under review. In choosing a liturgical language, for example, one must be continually aware of the current range of stylistic and social variations in, for example, English, and these can and do vary with time. Once again, the need for precise knowledge is emphasized: one obviously needs to strike a balance between extreme colloquialism and the unintelligibility of an extreme archaism, to provide a language removed from the style of everyday domestic speech which is at the same time intelligible and characterizable as God's—but, for this, a full comprehension of linguistic variation is prerequisite. Similarly, how can one spread any religious message if one is continually dropping verbal bricks and spreading verbal smoke-screens? Names, it must be remembered, can be little more than "sound and smoke" (Goethe).

Catholicism is at the moment particularly concerned with a process of linguistic renewal, for if it cannot communicate its relevance and beliefs clearly to a modern world in modern language, then it has failed in its purpose. There are basically two kinds of intelligibility required in a linguistic presentation of the faith, one inward-looking, the other outward-looking: the first is the intelligibility of the clerical and/or lay transmitters of the faith to members of the Church, and the second is the intelligibility within the ecumenical movement. Both are based on the need for correct transmission and clarification of belief, but between them there is an important difference of contextual orientation which requires that the language used differ in a number of important respects. The language of an intra-Catholic discussion will be very different from that of a discussion involving people of different faiths; for example, the former will be able to take many terms for granted which the latter will have to define; there will be important

variation in the general tone of discussion (signalled by intonation and related features), and, in the latter, there will be more compromise, particularly in these ecumenical days, which will be reflected in the conciliatory phrasing of points at issue, the reformation of basic ideas to meet with more general approval, and so on. Of course, the information about the faith which the Catholic has at his disposal will be the same no matter which company he is in, but his technique for presenting this information will differ. It will not be what he says, but the way in which he says it, which will attract most sympathy in any given situation.

It must not be forgotten, however, that no amount of language skill can hide insufficient knowledge of the faith or carelessness in thinking. It is a point to bear in mind about the new liturgy that a change in language will not solve all problems for the faithful: some of their difficulties will have been removed, but they will still have to *want* to pray and take part in the rites, and this initial stimulus is largely outside the influence of language. However, assuming that one has knowledge, intention, and a certain amount of ability, there is still much that needs to be said about the kind of principle which lies behind any acquisition of a skillful use of language for homiletic purposes. Good public speaking does not come naturally: one has to train oneself and be trained for it. A course in effective communication or public speaking should be a compulsory part of all religious teachers' training. Basically, what the professional religious speaker is aiming at is the successful communication of a message and the explication of any verbal or contextual difficulties involved in its formulation due to archaic literary forms, difficulties in phraseology, or unfamiliar customs. His job is to cut down the amount of "noise"<sup>3</sup> which can interfere with the com-

<sup>3</sup> A term borrowed from the language of communication engineering, referring to the amount of distraction (irrelevant information) present in a communication situation which obscures the intelligibility of a message.

munication of God's voice to the people, whether they be an audience, a congregation, or a class of school children. What things should he be aware of, therefore, and what should he avoid?

There are three variables the public speaker must always bear in mind: the subject matter of his discourse, the type of audience he has, and the needs of that audience; that is, why they have come to hear him.

As to the first, the language he will use will vary according to the importance and complexity of the subject matter: in the instances of explaining a biblical text, urging a greater interest in church activity, and reading parish notices, he will use three distinct styles of language which a synchronic description could define. Many priests, for example, change their style automatically when a new subject presents itself; it is essential that the rest learn to vary their technique in this way. A "higher" subject matter, to be recognized and appreciated as such, needs a heightened language—an abnormally formal expression which, because of its unfamiliarity, attracts the attention and concentration of the audience the more.

In the second place, the type of audience and its situation naturally exercise a pressure on language style. It should be obvious that one unvarying style will not suit equally a lecture hall, a pulpit, a presbytery, a parish meeting and a private house. Nor will one style be equally satisfactory for such disparate situations as those of talking to an audience of one and speaking before an audience of many, which may be composed of Catholics, persons undergoing instruction, and/or people with no interest in religion at all. Again, letters to the press have indicated that not a few are dissatisfied with the catechism phraseology used for children; if the complaints are justified, here would be another case of mismatching of style to purpose. The priest more than anyone must conform to the linguistic situation in which he is placed, for, if he does not, he is inviting inattention and unintelligibility, which make



his mission fruitless. The thought of so many different styles should not be a frightening prospect, of course, for two reasons. For one, each of us has already amassed a great knowledge of stylistic variations in English which we use semi-instinctively—we tend to react automatically in a definable, conditioned way to a particular situation, if it has been a frequently occurring part of our experience (and if it has not, we try to assess the requirements of the new situation as sensitively as possible). For the other, each style having more in common with the others than differences, in that all are English, the range of stylistic variation is relatively small, and can be recognized and learned with little difficulty.<sup>4</sup>

As to the third variable, the needs of the audience must be borne in mind. These are such needs as those of maintaining intelligibility and keeping interest alive, without which the audience's attendance would be a waste of time. Moreover, in the case of the sermon, incomprehensibility may be more than a mere waste of time: it can easily be the cause of a permanent emotional opposition to the preacher, and, possibly, to what he stands for.

These needs will be largely satisfied if one makes a judicious choice of the linguistic alternatives available for expression—what has been called "linguistic tact". And, while the ability for successful public speaking is partly a natural gift, there are certain recommendations for anyone to follow in order to lessen the potential barrier between speaker and audience—a barrier all the more dangerous because naturally gifted speakers do not usually realize it is there. Unintelligibility is normally caused by a failure to relate a linguistic form to concepts within the experience of the listener. In the case of the church congregation, where exegesis is the norm, but where the majority of people are unused to such exegesis,

<sup>4</sup> Stylistic variation here subsumes both variation in formality and variation due to register (situationally determined specialized language).

familiarity can only be induced by relating the relatively unknown to commonplace incidents and knowledge. This is the method of the parables, and the modern preacher needs to find his own parallels to the parables. If this is not done, the truths of religion will seem alien, impersonal and removed. The brain has a penchant for analogies, for perceiving relationships: common sense is often spoken of as "putting two and two together". This fact emphasizes the importance of verbal analogies, short stories, examples, familiar imagery, and so on, which are essential for the reinterpretation of a scriptural message of any kind. A modern story given a religious slant and capped by relevant scriptural quotation is particularly effective in a sermon—especially if the story has had some notoriety in the press or on radio and television. Every sermon should have at least one *memorable* point, and the best way of obtaining this is usually by stimulating recognition through current affairs. There is a continual need for good new metaphors and analogies which are both familiar and vivid. One recent example was Cardinal Suenens' image in a speech at the Vatican Council: he compared the whole Church to a truly "pneumatic" reality, filled with the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, paradox is usually out of place in the pulpit; and so are coldness and formality, which are all too often a characteristic of pastoral letters and official communications of any kind. Interestingly, the priest finds such papers difficult to read and the congregation (according to letters in the press) frequently finds the language so unfamiliar as to cause a failure in attention or complete incomprehension. How many people, for instance, understand what objections they can raise when the bans of marriage are called? How many parishioners can define "affinity" (even roughly)? Catholicism needs to present its relevance through a realistic world-view which utilizes terms and images from everyday non-religious life. Needless to say, careless use of

such language, where new comparisons are not polished satisfactorily, can be more of a hindrance than a help: one's world-view must be made to cohere; that is, to be linked with past teaching and ultimately with the words of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

What, then, should be avoided in homiletic communication? It is first of all important to realize that no sermon or talk can say everything about a subject—nor should this be its aim. It leaves a bad impression if there is a feeling at the end of a talk that everything has been said: on the contrary, one should go away stimulated and looking for more on the same theme. One way of helping to eradicate what is a natural tendency to complacency in the post-sermon hours is to recommend at the end of a talk a cheap, easily obtainable book or pamphlet as a guide to reading on the sermon subject. Another is to publish a weekly bulletin, with the main points of a homily there for reference; and of course many parishes do this. But within any sermon (taking this as one kind of regularly occurring homiletic) there are a number of linguistic bad habits which cause difficulty in comprehension: jargon for its own sake; carelessly used and ill-defined terminology (especially disturbing if usage is disputed in any way); academic equivocation, the sermon being a non-academic situation; irrelevant facts; incoherent or disjointed argument, which implies insufficient thought on the subject; unsatisfactorily related examples; clichés (particularly where points of doctrine are concerned, or controversial issues such as birth control, the basis of which cannot be conveyed by simply reiterating a few old phrases about "natural law" and giving no further explanation)—these are the main hindrances to direct understanding. But there is another group of linguistic bad habits which causes difficulties of a largely emotional kind by distracting the attention of the audience or causing irrita-

<sup>5</sup> The importance of linguistic tradition in Catholicism in relation to the liturgy and the language of theology is discussed in the book cited above.

tion—unexplained prohibitions; hyperintellectual “speaking down”; excessive repetition of pet themes (for example, too much “hell and thunder” week after week); overdramatic expression or slanted language of any kind, in particular the use of so-called “dangerous”, evocative words or phrases (“perfidious”, “the true Church”) when non-Catholics are present—these are very common examples, and letters are often written about them to the Catholic press.

There are further factors that one should be aware of. The aim is for balanced oration. This means compromising between the colloquial and the overprecise in grammar and vocabulary; utilizing concrete examples in an abstract argument; avoiding any extreme form of regional or social accent if one can help it, especially where there is a preponderance of local dialect forms in one’s audience; and shunning excessive visual or rhetorical activity, which can be as distracting as an unvaried, monotonous vocalization. In the last instance, a knowledge of the effect of varied voice quality and intonation, supported by visual gesture, can assist. It is a commonplace that the routine dulls attention, whereas the unexpected lightens: but it is something which particularly applies to linguistic forms.

Nor should it be thought shameful to practise on modern electronic techniques, for their use does not come naturally. A microphone is not a natural extension of the voice: it has to be controlled, like a pen or pencil. The speaker’s careless physical movement or voice control can render a microphone a useless and annoying distraction; and a knowledge of the potential power of the technique, as well as of the acoustics of one’s church or hall, is essential for successful use. It is a basic point, of course, that one should never be too proud to accept criticism from one’s audience on such factors as excessive speed of utterance or inaudibility. Again, as it usually does not feel natural to read out loud, scriptural reading infrequently sounds well. It is rare to hear the Gospel, for ex-

ample, read in the vernacular with feeling and careful attention to the meaning. Conversation too often merges with narrative without a pause; at times, even, the words are incomprehensible—a bad omen for a vernacular liturgy. It must not be forgotten that English, even for those to whom it is a native tongue, is only a *potentially* intelligible language, from this point of view: without clear enunciation and a sympathetic reading, the value of the vernacular is greatly diminished.

It is the aim of the Mass to concentrate on one sacrificial activity, with both visual and verbal activity being essential (one needs the myth to explain the ritual), reinforcing each other, and leading up to and away from the climax of consecration. The introduction of activity that is or seems to be irrelevant naturally causes some degree of distraction; therefore it should be minimized. Pleas to reduce non-religious information during Mass (the notices, for example) or mention of the collection have long been heard; but similar arguments also apply to the singing of irrelevant, difficult or unfamiliar hymns, or to priests leading children (or the congregation as a whole) in prayers which they cannot understand or find difficult to say. If congregational participation is desired, then there must be careful practice in the organization of the form of public prayer, so that the rhythm of the prose is followed and pronunciation is no difficulty. There is a power in organized prayer, the "one voice" of the congregation, but this can only be achieved when familiarity comes: in the final analysis, people cannot give their full attention to the public prayers until they have mastered completely the technique of reciting them, the mechanical problems of pronunciation, rhythm and, above all, where to pause. Again, there is no point in urging a congregation to sing if the tunes are unfamiliar, the organist too loud, or the choir too high: discomfort decreases devotion.

Finally, one must not forget the importance of the more

permanent written medium—possibly not the most influential these days, in view of radio and television, but certainly a powerful, much used and much abused instrument. The need for spiritual reading and exegetical commentary has already been discussed; and it is likely that, for the majority, any profound argument or idea needs to be written down before its content can be fully appreciated. The importance of writing as a mechanical (although theoretically inessential) aid to liturgical celebration and as a medium for the formulation of doctrinal belief would also be treated at this point if space allowed. Similarly, the vital question of the treatment of religion by the mass media in general would take another book.<sup>6</sup> But there is space to instance here the habit, particularly of the press, of referring to Catholicism in unpleasant and often unrelated contexts, presumably with the aim of indicating its association with whatever is being discussed. (Such a policy is not restricted to religious matters, of course; one finds slanted reports, carefully selective edited material and allowed ambiguities in any controversial field.) Some appreciation of the way language works is required for adequate counter-criticism. A notorious policy is to raise an anti-Catholic storm in a tea-cup, and then to print few, if any, of the readers' letters which protest. The function of the lay apostolate in such matters is clear: to make increasing use of the pen, writing to the press or to public authorities when Catholic beliefs are abused, intentionally or otherwise, and providing alternative views to anti-Catholic opinions. This kind of action is extremely important: if well-supported, the body of criticism will not lie mouldering at the bottom of a sub-editor's in-tray or on a city council's agenda. Words must be used to fight words. Quality is needed, but so is quantity.

This question of publicity introduces the final point in this

<sup>6</sup> Cf. J. D. Halloran, *Control or Consent* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1963).

article: the furtherance of the ecumenical movement. Here the primary rôle of linguistic communication should be self-evident. There are two linguistic sides to ecumenism: the decreasing of misunderstanding between groups and the increasing of understanding—and the former must be approached first. One needs to locate the causes of misunderstanding in one's own use of language before going on to criticize someone else's. And, having found them, then one has to make a conciliatory effort to remove the bad impressions caused by certain words, perhaps due to a mistaken usage of a technical term, or a failure to appreciate the full context of a form. One could compare with this the terminological problems that were rife in the period of the early Councils. A typical modern example of misinterpretation of the Christian position due to context is the way non-Christians tend to assume that the word "good" is to be interpreted along the lines that they habitually expect and understand. Often, for them, the contexts in which the term is found also include "happiness", "joy", "pleasure", "entertainment", "satisfaction", and so on. But the term "good" in a Christian context is likely to have other, different associations: here, words like "penance" and "suffering", "mortification" and "charity" are liable to be linked with goodness. The contexts of the two groups are noticeably different, and this difference (of "collocation") is the primary pointer to the different meanings the word has.

Some verbal disputes, of course, are more difficult to resolve than others: naturally, the older the rift between two groups, the more entrenched will be the habitual connotations of frequently occurring forms, and the harder it will be for each to see the other side's opinion clearly, without prejudice, and to rethink in terms of hitherto unfamiliar categories, definitions and attitudes. A superficial knowledge of the language of other religious groups is inadequate. Ecumenism requires a much more detailed and sympathetic study, if one

is to perceive the sense of an orientation different from one's own. As Malinowski said, it is impossible to understand words without to some extent sharing the life of the users.

The process of increasing understanding between groups, then, must begin at the beginning, regardless of whether or not they have nothing at all in common or they have some history of unity which has been lost. Nothing can be taken for granted. All degrees of belief and unbelief, all traditions, with their various kinds of compatibility, must be considered on their own merits in their own contexts; and they must be examined for similarities, the common ground that can be the way in to better understanding. This is frequently a language problem, but, as the mission priests have discovered, it is very difficult to understand or adopt the new language habits which are a necessary prelude to confidence and familiarity, especially when the forms of the language are as strange to Western scholars as those used by Zen Buddhism, for example. Here, the Western scholar needs much time and familiarity before he can appreciate the alien, and what often seem vague, ways of expressing fundamental mystical concepts. Successful ecumenism requires a thorough linguistic knowledge of the weaknesses and strengths inherent in the languages of both sides, as well as of the dangers present in *any* act of translation.

A knowledge of the way other people use language often assists one in seeing what is the weak area of one's own. It is sometimes difficult to see the obscurities in one's own language purely by introspection; it may help to examine the language of one's critics, to see which points *they* consider obscure, and then to go back and reconsider those points. For example, if one can see no reason why the term "superstition" is so often applied pejoratively to Catholicism, then an examination of the linguistic contexts in which the term is used will quickly provide suggestions for the answer. It may then appear that there was a problem in interpreting such words



as "statue"; these words may not have been defined sufficiently clearly and their function in Catholicism made plain enough. Introspection can then try to provide clearer analogies, to emphasize the denotative functions of such words, and to get away from any unfortunate connotation. But here, as elsewhere, such a process demands a fairly detailed analysis of the way the language of one's critics works, of their main terms and phraseology as well as of one's own. Once again, descriptive linguistic techniques are the most useful for obtaining this information.

The Vatican Council has rightly directed the attention of the Church to the many means of expression it has at its disposal, for ultimately the effect of *what* one wants to say is going to be realized in fact by *how* one says it. The symbols have the pre-eminent rôle. The Council has fostered a new brand image of the Church, and has drawn attention to those aspects of its form which are most in need of renewal. The analogy with advertisements is useful—one is, after all, giving away a religion, and, if the potential consumer is to be convinced that this is something he needs, then the facts must be advertised in terms he can understand. Emphasizing the need for renewal is the first stage only: examining the procedures which would implement this need with most effect is the second and more difficult stage—it requires the advice of the specialist. For example, one knows that the mass media are of importance in constructing an image of a living and up-to-date Church, but this principle needs to be supported by technical information as to how it is to be effected. How does one televise a Mass most successfully? What are the best visual aids for producing a vivid house style that attracts most attention to religious functions? Much research has been done into the effectiveness of various colors, type faces, and designs for notices and other publications. It is merely waiting to be used. And, in the same way, knowledge about language is available to assist in resolving such current language problems as the

breakdown of linguistic barriers to ecumenism. But first, as we have seen, one must consider such internal problems as the question of a realistic and effective liturgical language and a clearer way of making the faithful's knowledge of the faith even fuller. Charity in linguistics, as elsewhere, begins at home.