

# Linguistics and Liturgy

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LINGUISTICS, the science of language, is a fairly recent feature of the academic scene in Great Britain, though it is now possible to take a degree in the subject at a number of universities. It has grown rapidly, due to people becoming increasingly aware of the importance of language in society, and of the problems that arise when language becomes a barrier rather than a channel of communication—a master rather than a servant. The relevance of language study to the philosopher, the logician, the sociologist, the theologian, the psychologist, and others, has long been realized.<sup>1</sup> Its relevance to the liturgist is less obvious, but it is nonetheless there.

The essential difference between linguistics and traditional approaches to language study lies in the implications of the word 'science' used above. To say that linguistics is a science is to say that it tries to study language using the state of mind and experimental techniques that one normally associates with the natural and physical sciences. Much of the earlier study of language was selective, vague, and impressionistic. There was little attempt to survey the multiform nature of language systematically and

comprehensively, defining the various features of its structure in precise terms. We are all familiar with the vague grammatical definitions (such as the sentence as a 'complete thought') and mistaken reasoning (such as is found with the 'etymological fallacy', i.e. that the present meaning of a word can be discovered by studying its history<sup>2</sup>) that characterize so much traditional thinking about language; but a more important criticism can be made concerning the amount of information which was ignored in earlier study—one rarely finds data concerning the many uses of language, for example, or concerning the less readily definable areas of language form and structure, such as intonation. A great deal of naïve discussion has taken place over such questions as the relationship between language and thought, language and reality, the function of language, and the nature of translation, and much of this is still with us. The main purpose of linguistics is to provide a clear method for talking about and understanding the complexity of language, so that its form and function in relation to other aspects of human behaviour and experience can be established and better appreciated. This goal has by no means been attained, and linguistics is by no means free of the naïvety it castigates in others, but a great deal of progress has been made. In the present article I shall make a few suggestions as to how some of the more well-established linguistic ideas can be applied to the study of liturgy. I shall argue that the main function of linguistics here is to provide an objective framework within which the characteristically subjective notions currently being voiced about the nature of language can be discussed.

A preliminary point which must be made is that I, as a linguist, am not concerned with the pastoral, theological, or liturgical reasons which have led to a particular choice of language, e.g. why Scripture text X was chosen for recitation on a particular day, as opposed to text Y. This is a question which, *as a linguist*, I am not competent to answer. Nor is it my aim, in the first instance, to produce a 'better' version of a liturgy, as this is a job for a number of specialists working together. The linguist's task is simpler than this, and more basic: it is to ensure that when people *do* feel the need to introduce linguistic considerations into their discussion, they do so aware of the complexity of language, and make statements which are precise, organized, capable of verification, and couched in relatively objective and interpretable language. It may not be self-evident, but in fact this task is extremely large, as people are regularly at fault in these respects in their discussions over liturgical language.

There is of course a major psychological block which has to be eroded before constructive thinking can take place, namely, the tempting view that because someone can speak a language, therefore he knows about that language and can pontificate about its structure, function, and the like. But the operative word here is 'knowing *about*' the language; this is not the same as 'knowing' it, i.e. being fluent in its use. To talk precisely and objectively about a language requires a certain amount of training—it does not come naturally. Of course, we can all make some general statements about our language (such as that adjectives go before nouns), but this is hardly enough when we are dealing with detailed and sophisticated matters

of usage in a religious context. The danger is that people tend to comment only upon those features of the language with which they are familiar from traditional school grammar, or which stand out because of some distinctive property (such as an archaic ending, like '-eth'). They ignore features which may be less obvious, but as important to the understanding of liturgical language. For example, much too much attention has been paid in press discussion over the past few years to the relative merits and demerits of alternative items of vocabulary in a particular liturgical context, such as using 'thou' as opposed to 'you', or 'vouchsafe' as opposed to 'grant'; and hardly any to the importance of syntactic constructions, which in fact condition our response to the language much more strongly, albeit in a less obvious or conscious kind of way. Again, the language used for describing the quality of translations has been vague in the extreme: "'sober" and "discreet" translations are what we need,' wrote someone in a recent letter to an editor, though it is difficult to see in what way such notions as linguistic sobriety might be defined.

The whole issue of what is involved in an 'acceptable translation' of the liturgy from an original language L1 into a second language L2 has been treated very imprecisely. (And here let it be said that the movement from L1 to L2 may be the translation from one language to another or the translation within a single language from its usage at a given period to that at another. In my own Communion, the L1—L2 transition is primarily from Latin to the vernacular, whereas the Anglican Church is currently exercised in translating from sixteenth- to twentieth-century English. But the problems—as problems of translation theory—are very similar.)

There are many kinds of translation, and many kinds of acceptability, and people tend to mix them up, and make impossible demands of the translating process, whose limitations should be clearly realized.<sup>3</sup> To take first the case of translation: there is, for instance, the notion of 'word-for-word' translation, which is sometimes mentioned as if it were a desirable kind of translation to have ('every Latin word *must* be translated into an English word'), whereas it rarely produces anything other than a highly artificial or ungrammatical utterance (especially when the more idiomatic types of structure are involved, e.g. when 'It's raining cats and dogs' becomes 'Il est pleut chats et chiens'). Distinct from this is a 'literal' translation, where one translates with minimum alteration of the original utterance to produce a translation which is grammatically acceptable, but which may still be nonsensical, e.g. 'Il pleut des chats et des chiens'. A third sense is 'free' translation. This does not mean a 'loose' or 'inaccurate' translation, merely that the unit of translation is not the word: one takes the sentence, or some other major grammatical unit, as the starting-point, and translates sense for sense. There is no *necessary* correspondence between any grammatical or vocabulary pattern in the two languages—though some general parallels will usually emerge, as in 'Il pleut à verse'. This is clearly a much more realistic kind of translation to aim for than the first two types mentioned, as clearly the end of the translation process as such is to 'get the meaning across' as accurately as possible. That is, the equiva-

lance is between the *sense* of the utterance in L1, and the *sense* of the utterance in L2, not merely between the physical words or sentences of the utterances as such. The words, as it were, get in the way of the transmission of ideas, and, in making a translation, we have to 'see through' them, to the intention of the language-user. But in trying to do this, a number of other factors have to be borne in mind, in order to make the translation as exact as possible.

The first of these is to ensure as much *stylistic* equivalence as possible. The general style, or 'tone' of the utterance in L2 must be made comparable to that in L1. For example, in translating English greetings into other languages, one has to be careful not to treat 'How do you do' and 'How's it going' as identical, for though almost synonymous, they are never used in the same context, the first being much more formal than the second. Thus, if a text is written in a very formal style, then to produce an *accurate* translation, one needs to use a formal style in L2; and similar reasoning holds for an archaic style, a conversational style, and so on. This principle is as relevant for translating the liturgy as it is for any other use of language. Of course, if, after translating a formal sixteenth-century text into formal twentieth-century English, one does not like the result, then one is at liberty to change the language to a less formal liturgical style—but it should be noted that this is no longer a question of translation, but one of stylistic choice, which has to be argued in quite different terms.<sup>4</sup>

The second factor in obtaining *semantic* equivalence is to recognize the relevance of dialect differences in L2. Is it possible to produce a single translation which will be equally accurate for (in our case) all English-speaking peoples? The demand for such a single, unified, homogenous translation is sometimes made; but really, the answer to this question is (a) that no one knows, and (b) that it is unlikely. The differences between the international dialects of English (American, British, Australian, etc.) are considerable, as are those between the intra-national (Yorkshire, Liverpoolian, etc.), though no one has as yet tabulated these in comprehensive detail. In some parts of the world, moreover, (e.g. West Africa) differences are increasing rather than diminishing. Enough is known, however, to suggest that dialectal considerations must be borne in mind when preparing a translation. At least the question must be asked: do any of the words (phrases, etc.) in the text have a different connotation or denotation from standard usage in any given dialect? And so far this issue has hardly been mentioned.

Diachronic (historical) change is another complicating factor. It arises when one wishes to translate a concept or object which once existed but does not any longer. For example, does one retain a term such as 'centurion' or does one choose the appropriate British military rank? Does one talk about 'drachmas' or 'pennies', or whatever? Principles for dealing with this very frequent problem need to be formulated to avoid inconsistent practice, though I am not aware of an explicit statement anywhere. It is an important point, as it bears very closely on our judgements of the intelligibility and tone of a translation.

The two remaining translation criteria are impossible to attain in their

entirety (thus making chimerical the notion of a 'perfect' translation), but they need to be remembered while carrying on the actual business of translation. First, the requirement of *total linguistic equivalence* between translations is sometimes cited. By this is meant that *all* the linguistic features of the L1 text are given some equivalent in the L2, which means not only the syntactic and lexical patterns but also the phonetic features of rhythm, alliteration, assonance, and the like. This is, quite simply, unrealistic. It is not possible to imitate all the sonic effects of L1 in L2, for the obvious reasons that no two languages display the same range and organization of sounds. In any case (some kinds of poetry aside), a translation's primary aim is to equate sense for sense: to obtain a sonic equivalence is normally of secondary importance, and attainable only with severe distortion of the syntactical patterns of the language (cf. the weird word-orders introduced into many hymns in order to get the lines to rhyme). In similar manner, the second criterion, that of *total cultural equivalence*, is impossible. Here one is trying to avoid using terms, structures, and so on, which evoke radically different reactions in the respective cultures of L1 and L2, and to use terms which evoke appropriate cultural responses. A clear example of this concern for cultural equivalence would be the argument that 'Give us this day our daily bread' would be near-meaningless to many oriental cultures, because the connotation of 'bread' as 'staple of life' is lacking there. 'Give us this day our daily rice', it could be argued, is more appropriate, as far as grasping the full implications of this sentence is concerned. This is clearly an important issue. To obtain *total* cultural equivalence would require the assessment of the whole set of socio-, psycho-economic and other pressures in the two communities being compared, in principle an impossible task. But where possible, the aim of avoiding cultural clashes should be borne in mind.

That it is impossible to have a perfect translation carries with it the corollary that there may be many possible translations of a particular text, depending on the emphasis the individual translator (or team of translators) places on the separate variables. And instead of talking about the need for *an* acceptable translation of a liturgy, then, we should really be talking about *kinds* of acceptable translations. There are many possible approximations to the idealized notion of a 'best' translation, and the problem of acceptability is essentially that of making an *informed* selection from a set of alternatives. What, then, are the implications of this?

Most people cite two sides to acceptability. The Roman Catholic International Committee on English in the Liturgy, for example, requires that a translation must be acceptable in both *substance* and *style*. The question of accurate translation raised above essentially concerns substance, and is a question for the judgement of scholars, not of Everyman. The question of stylistic acceptability is not, however, just for scholars' eyes: here, everyone could be involved. The crux is, of course, acceptable to whom? This is not a question for the linguist to decide, but for the Church authorities who have required the translation in the first place. Once decided, however, then the linguist's task is to establish those issues which are relevant to determining the choice of style. Here again, discussion of some of the

criteria for stylistic choice which have been suggested in the press and elsewhere may be of value.

Frequent reference, for example, is made to the 'demands of corporate public worship': these, evidently, should influence the choice of liturgical style, but in what ways is unclear. Some people interpret this to mean that the language should avoid the use of very specialist theological terms. But what *is* such a term? Terms like 'consubstantial' and 'incarnate', which have been attacked in the Roman Catholic translations, look complex, but it can readily be shown that there is no intrinsic connection between word length and conceptual difficulty. This links up with the demand in correspondence columns for 'simplicity' of liturgical style, which seems to mean 'intelligibility without effort'—hardly a desirable precondition for intellectual liturgical participation! As has often been pointed out, liturgical language is not meant to be viewed as a self-contained set of utterances. The prayers are not meant to be paraphrases. They *need* further explanation, which it is the function of other liturgical events (e.g. the homily) to perform. True, the language should be familiar, but this is not the same as saying it should be 'immediately comprehensible'. 'Blood of the covenant' may be obscure but that is not because it is technical; and some words, e.g. 'God', though in one sense simple, are never fully comprehensible.

Again, to say that a liturgical style should display 'dignity' or 'consistency' or 'euphony' without further definition, is to say little. Exactly what is meant here? What features of the language constitute the physical correlates of dignity or euphony? To take the latter term. Euphony has been defined as language which is 'suitable for praying aloud', 'suitable for singing', or, simply, 'beautiful', 'harmonious'. This last pair of glosses is impossible to turn to practical utility, for obvious reasons to do with the relativity of personal value-judgments. But even the first two definitions are difficult to make sense of. How does one decide what is suitable, after all? What does one listen for, and who are the judges? Moreover, the concept of 'praying aloud' is not unitary: there is the priest alone, the congregation as a whole, and so on. The point here is that there are different linguistic requirements for each context, for example, the lay-out of the printed text prerequisite for successful congregational unison is not so necessary in the case of the lay-reader or the priest. But few people ever pay any attention to punctuation when they are commenting on liturgical style—an odd omission, in view of the importance of punctuation in organizing the whole of the text before us. And of course there is the whole question of the kind of vocal qualifications a liturgical leader should have: what constitutes a successful reading of a liturgical text (e.g. should one read it with as much emotion as possible, or not?), and should there be training in order to attain this? St Benedict suggested one principle here<sup>5</sup>: 'The brethren are not to read or sing each in his turn, but only those who give edification to the hearers'!

Another criterion frequently cited for liturgical language is the need to remember the tradition of English devotional writing. This means, for example, bearing in mind when certain linguistic formulae have been sanctioned by generations of usage, so that they have achieved a favourite

place, so to say, in the minds of the Church community. This point is an important one, but it is often ignored, as in the 'thou/you' controversy. It is normally assumed here that the question of whether 'thou' or 'you' should be used in liturgical texts as the second person pronoun will have a single, straightforward, yes-or-no answer; but this is most unlikely, as it ignores the linguistic traditions which have been operative for centuries. To argue that 'thy' should be replaced by 'your' in *all* contexts is naïve; for while it may be relatively easy to persuade someone to change the pronoun in a sentence like 'I know thy name', it will be very difficult if not impossible to change it in 'thy kingdom come'. The latter phrase has been hallowed by usage, and is almost proverbial. It has, in short, become resistant to change.

A further criterion regularly raised is the concern to reflect contemporary linguistic usage, and to avoid 'archaisms'. The term 'archaism' is rarely defined, however, and it needs to be; for if it means 'avoidance of words and phrases not in living use' (or, more precisely, '*senses* of words . . .'), then it clearly goes too far, as items such as 'trespass', 'Ghost', 'covenant', 'sacrifice', would have to be excluded, and most people would not wish to remove all such words from liturgical vocabulary. To paraphrase the senses of many such words would result in highly cumbersome circumlocutions. Obviously, when people castigate archaisms, they are referring to certain kinds of old vocabulary and syntax only—and exactly what the term does refer to should therefore be made quite clear.

There is thus a great deal of uncertainty over the criteria for making stylistic judgements. But perhaps the most central difficulty lies at an even more fundamental level, namely, the initial methodological problem of how one obtains information about language from people. This is a problem which has long bothered linguists, and while it is not yet solved, sufficient is known about the difficulties to forestall the conclusion that the task is simple. Given a liturgical text developed by some committee, for instance, *who* are the people one asks questions about it, and *how* does one ask them? The problem of sampling is basic to the first question. How does one ensure that a sample is representative? What is the population from which one takes the sample? From *all* churchgoers? This assumes that everyone is equally qualified to make judgments about language, which I have implied above is not the case. But what would be the criteria for being qualified anyway? Presumably some measure of sensitivity and consistency in making judgments is necessary (though how are *these* notions assessed?) and, perhaps most important of all, an ability to explain one's judgments to others. 'I like it' is no explanation. Precisely what in the language is being liked, and why? The same information can be given for a variety of different reasons.

But, even granted a reliable sample of informants, are the questions being asked and answered in the right way? So far the main method of research has been to print a text (or parallel texts) and ask people to make up their minds as to whether they like the language or not. But there are certain objections to this procedure. The format presented restricts the spontaneity of the informants' responses—their answers are to a certain

extent prejudged. Moreover, just because a person fails to comment on a linguistic issue does not mean that he considers that issue unimportant. As already suggested, he may simply have overlooked it. If he had had it pointed out, he may well have altered his opinion about the text as a whole. Again, the terms in which stylistic judgements are made, when people are responding in an *ad hoc* way to texts, are, on the whole, uninterpretable: vague labels are attached to utterances (people talk about 'harsh', 'bouncing', 'dull', 'sober', 'vivid' language, for example), and there is no guarantee that the analyst will understand these labels in the same sense as the informant.

These are serious difficulties, and it is obvious that if Church authorities want reliable information from the religious community as a whole, or if the community wishes to make its point of view felt, then they must be faced. There may not be many answers available at the present time, but at least the relevant problems should begin to be recognized. Moreover, these problems must be seen within the more general context of liturgical function as a whole, and not be discussed in a vacuum. It will never be possible to devise an adequate liturgical language until one has a very clear idea as to what the purpose of the liturgy is in the first place. Once one is agreed on the *kind* of language one would like to have (e.g. relatively formal, relatively colloquial), then it is possible to go ahead and work out some alternative versions. But until these more basic issues of liturgical appropriateness have been established, stylistic discussion will stay confused.

Finally, it would be wrong to get out of focus in this matter of the use of language. Language is very much a means to an end, and not an end in itself. It is just one aspect of the total cultural *Gestalt* within which the liturgical situation has to be defined; and in many ways it is the least important aspect. The study of language will never fill the gap created by doctrinal ignorance, for example. But some discussion of these matters is essential if liturgical language is to become a means of facilitating community worship, rather than being a barrier to it, and it is hoped that the few suggestions made here will be relevant to this end. One thing is clear: it will never be too late to begin talking about language in this way. Our attitudes towards language are in a continual state of change (as our familiarity with a text develops), and of course language itself is in a perpetual state of change. One trusts that when the liturgical English of the mid-twentieth century has to be turned into that of the mid-twenty-first, the experience of our past theoretical and methodological mistakes will produce a smoother transition than the one which is taking place today.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to the relationship of linguistics to other disciplines, see M. Black *The Labyrinth of Language* (Pall Mall Press 1968) and D. Crystal *Linguistics, Language, and Religion* (Burns Oates 1964)

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. Barr *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford 1961), for some discussion of this point in relation to religious language.

<sup>3</sup> See J. C. Catford *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (OUP 1964)

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the stylistic features of liturgical language, see chapter 6 of D. Crystal and D. Davy *Investigating English Style* (Longmans 1969)

<sup>5</sup> In chapter 38 of his *Rule*.