

# The language game: tongue twister

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It's Year C again, and last month we had the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, which has my least favourite Pauline reading. But this year, it was replaced by the Presentation. Oh, the relief!

What's my problem? It's because the normal reading is from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (13:8). In the Jerusalem Bible translation: "If there are gifts of prophecy, the time will come when they must fail; or the gift of languages, it will not continue for ever ..." The usual translation of the Greek verb *παύω* (*paúo*) is "cease"; in the Latin Vulgate, *cessabunt* ("they will cease"). I'm a professor of linguistics, and I don't like the thought of there being no languages left to enjoy. Hence my grumpy mood.

But I find hope in the English Standard Version: "As for tongues, they will cease." And, combining the two translations: "gift of tongues". Ah, "tongues" – a tricky word. It usually means "different languages". In charismatic practice, it means speaking in a personally inspired language (technically called *glossolalia*). And it could be a case of *diglossia*. Which brings me to the Pentecostal miracle described in Acts 2.

*Diglossia* is the technical term for a situation where a culture uses two languages, or two varieties of a language, for different and complementary purposes. A "high" variety is for special, formal occasions, such as law and religion; and a "low" variety for everyday conversation. Many cultures are diglossic: Switzerland, with Standard and Swiss German; or among the Arab nations, where Classical Arabic coexists with Colloquial Arabic.

In old Palestine, Hebrew was the "high" language, used chiefly by the Temple priests. The "low" languages were Aramaic and Greek – the latter the *lingua franca* of the Eastern Mediterranean countries at the time. Virtually everyone would have been bilingual in those languages. (Bilingualism has always been the norm for most people in the world – a fact that usually surprises native English speakers.)

So, remember the scene. The Apostles were "filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak other languages as the Spirit gave them the gift of speech", and the people were "each one bewildered to hear these men speaking his own language", and they asked each other, "How does it happen that each of us hears them in his own native language?"

From a diglossic point of view, there is an answer. A group of ordinary Galileans begin to prophesy. Anyone claiming to speak with religious authority would be expected to use Hebrew. So, knowing the mixed cultures present in the city (over 15 are named in Acts 2 from the western and eastern Jewish diaspora: "the Parthians, Medes, Elamites ..." etc.), Peter and the others opt to use one of the "other tongues" – Greek, which everyone already knows. And that is why some thought the disciples had had too much wine. You would never prophesy in "low" language unless you were drunk!

The miracle, in other words, was one of the Spirit "giving them utterance". The amazing sight and sound of ordinary rustic Galileans speaking out so powerfully. Impressive witnessing.

So, to return to my problem. Paul is predicting a time when such witnessing – as manifested through "gifts" of prophecy, languages, and knowledge – won't be needed any more. But, we read in the same chapter, there'll be no end to love. That feels good. I can feel my grumpiness lifting.