Thesis

A Christian View of Language Universals and Linguistic Variabilities

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In this short article I would like to present a Christian view of why languages of the world are as they are. The world's languages display considerable variety. Upon a closer examination, however, one can observe that they have much in common. Moreover, the differences among languages are not random variations but are systematic to a surprising degree so that these differences are predictable to some extent. In this paper, I would explore the significance of this fact for reflective Christians.

I will first discuss the starting point of this paper: God is in control of the grammar of a language (Section 1). From this viewpoint, grammars of all human languages can be understood to be the works of His hands. Based on this assumption, I will discuss why languages are as they are, and consider what God must be doing through them.

1. Human Freedom and God's Control over Language

According to the Bible, language is God's gift to mankind. This point is aptly expressed in the fact that God gave Adam freedom to give names to the animals he saw. Thus Genesis 2:19–20 reads:

> Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field.

This story tells us that God gave Adam the freedom to choose whatever name he could think of to name things (animals in this case). This is an interesting point,

especially when we consider the nature of sound-meaning association in language. The association of a sequence of sounds, say [dag] and the meaning of it, say canine animal, is said to be arbitrary (Saussure 1959 [1915]). That is, there is nothing intrinsic in the sounds of [dag] that forces it to have the meaning it has in English; a sequence of sounds can have whatever meaning that a linguistic community has tacitly agreed to assign.

Then, is our language based solely on our freedom of choice? In spite of the freedom that we have, God is in control of it. This point is eloquently told in the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9).
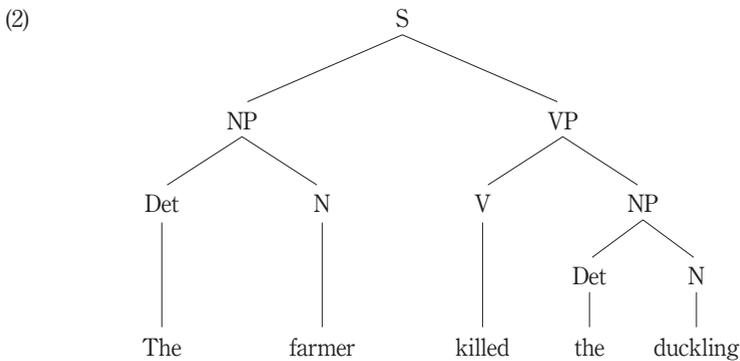
> Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth." But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel — because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

This story is interesting in many ways. Of course it tells of our inclination to be equal with God, and of God's anger toward such rebellion against him. This story is also often understood to tell us how different languages came to be spoken.[1] Another, and perhaps the most important, message that this story tells us about language is that God can change a language at his will. That is, God has the power to change the lexicon and the grammatical rules of a language, which the speakers of the same language share.

Let me explain what I mean by grammatical rules. By grammatical rules I mean those generalizations for constructing and interpreting linguistic expressions, which are a part of the knowledge of the speaker of a language. Some examples of grammatical rules are given in (1), which are somewhat simplified rules of English capturing some regularities of the structure of a sentence and a noun phrase in this language (cf. Chomsky 1965).

(1) a S $\longrightarrow$ NP VP
     b NP $\longrightarrow$ Det N
     c VP $\longrightarrow$ V NP

The rule (1a) states that a S(entence) is composed of a N(oun) P(hrase), which is a subject, and a V(erb) P(hrase), which is a predicate phrase, arranged in this order. The rule (1b) states that an NP consists of a Det(erminer) (*i.e.,* articles and possessive pronouns) and a N(oun), arranged in this order. The rule (1c) states that a V(erb) P(hrase) consists of an NP and a V(erb) arranged in this order. The rules in (1) create a phrase structure of a sentence, which is exemplified in (2).

(2)

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                        S
              ┌─────────┴─────────┐
             NP                   VP
          ┌───┴───┐          ┌────┴────┐
         Det      N          V         NP
          │       │          │      ┌──┴──┐
          │       │          │     Det    N
          │       │          │      │     │
         The    farmer     killed  the  duckling
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These rules reside in the brain, and determines the way English speakers construct and interpret sentences.

The story of the Tower of Babel tells us that God can change such grammatical rules suddenly. English continues to have the rules in (1) as long as God decides not to change them. If God chooses to, he can replace (1) by some other rules, or even give

different rules to different speakers in place of (1), just as he did in the story the Tower of Babel. This means that the linguistic rules such as those in (1) can be regarded as the statements of what God is doing to sustain a linguistic community, so that it will not fall apart. In this sense God is the creator and sustainer of our language, and rules like (1) are authored by God.[2] The linguist's task of discovering linguistic rules is, then, to discover what God is doing, just as physicists can find out what God is doing by discovering physical laws.

2. Language variability and language universals

It is true that languages of the world are different from each other, reminding us of the curse of the Tower of Babel. But how much do they differ? As far as languages of the world are in control of God, as I have argued in the preceding section, God must be in control of the similarities and differences among different languages.

At one time in the history of linguistics many linguists believed that languages varied in so many ways that their differences were unpredictable (Sapir 1921). This was especially true in the days of American structural linguistics in early twentieth century. New facts of American Indian languages that could not be easily understood in the terms familiar to them have led many researchers to this position.

Linguistic researches in the last 3 decades have revealed, however, that in spite of a significant surface variability among languages, they share many features, and that differences are not random. In a preface to the pioneering work on this subject, Greenberg, Osgood & Jenkins (1963: xv) states that "[u]nderlying the endless and fascinating idiosyncracies of the world's languages there are uniformities of universal scope. Amid infinite diversity, all languages are, as it were, cut from the same pattern."

Some universals of human language are so natural that they tend to be assumed as a matter of course. For example, even in the early 20th century American linguistics it was assumed that all languages have such units as phonemes (minimal unit of sound, such as /s/, /k/, /p/, and /t/) and morphemes (minimal unit of meaningful forms, such as *dog, -s, -ing*), and such grammatical categories as nouns and verbs (see Comrie 1989). That is, all languages are made up of the same units or the same building blocks.

Two different approaches have been recognized in the study of universal properties of human language. One line of study was initiated by N. Chomsky. He has been interested in the general universal principles of grammar which apply to all languages. One such principle, he has argued, is structural dependency (Chomsky 1968). That is, grammatical rules of human language apply to such structural units as word, phrase, clause, etc. (cf. the phrase structure (2) above); they do not depend on non-structural properties. He argues that because of this constraint there are no such grammatical rules as the following in any language:

(3) a. Exchange the 3rd syllable and the 12th syllable of a sentence to form an interrogative sentence.
     b. Exchange the first and the second word in the sentence to form an interrogative sentence.[3]

These rules are not structurally dependent in the sense that they do not refer to the structural notions such as a noun phrase and a sentence (cf. (2) above). The formation of an interrogative sentence must refer to notions like the subject NP, which can be defined in terms of the structure of a sentence (*i.e.,* the NP immediately "dominated" by S, as is the case with the NP *the farmer* in (2)).

Chomsky explains those universal aspects of language by appealing to an innate language faculty of mankind. To him, human languages have common properties because they are innate, genetically inherited from generation to generation (Chomsky 1968). See Chomsky (1957, 1965, 1972, 1981, 1992) for the development of his universal theory of grammar.

Researches initiated by J. Greenberg have been characterized by the use of a wide range of data to support claims about universal tendencies in language. One line of research concerns the way languages vary systematically (Greenberg 1963). He has found, for example, a correlation between the ordering of a verb and its object on the one hand and that of an adposition (*i.e.,* preposition or postposition[4]) and its complement noun phrase. More specifically, he found that VO languages tend to have prepositions, while OV languages tend to have postpositions.

His study has influenced much of the work of "functional typology" of language (the study of the types of language with an emphasis on the functions or uses to which linguistic structures are put; see Givon 1979, 1984, Croft 1990, Comrie 1989). To those working in this approach, languages are as they are because of the communicative functions that they are put to.

Such universals can be found not only in syntax (sentence patterns) of language but also in all other aspects of language, including phonology (sound patterns), morphology (word structure), and semantics (meanings in language) (see, for example, Greenberg, Ferguson and Moravcsik 1978).

3. Significance of language universals for Christians

What do the above observations about language universals and linguistic variabilities mean to reflective Christians? To such Christians, all languages are cut from the same pattern because they are creations of the same author. Then, what do the current states of the languages of the world tell us about this author?

Language universals and systematicity in linguistic variations reveal the grace of God. If our God were a God of cursing (alone), he would not have created languages this way. If God thinks only of putting us into confusion (cf. Gen, 11:1–9), he could have created languages that are completely different and unacquirable by other speakers, but he didn't. In spite of the result of our sin (diversity in human languages), God has kept languages similar and acquirable by other speakers.

Why did God not choose to make languages completely different? The reason may well be related to the fact that God wants all people to be saved in spite of our sin. The fact that all languages are acquirable by any speaker is very important to Christian evangelism. This means that there is in principle no language that Christians cannot acquire. Thus, God has made it possible for the Gospel to be preached in any language. The speaking "in tongues" on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4) eloquently tells us of this fact, which has also made it possible to see all the children of God "from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing in front of the Lamb," praising God together (Rev. 7:9–10).

The observation that all languages are cut from the same patterns, with the same kinds of building blocks and principles, must be a reassuring observation for those missionary linguists who try to put the Bible into the languages that they analyze. In analyzing any language, they can be assured that the language they are working on is constructed in the same way as other languages. Thus they do not have to develop a different framework for analysis every time they face a new language, as long as they have a correct universal theory of grammar.[5] They do not have to wonder if the Word of God is translatable after all. God is ahead of them, having begun working on the community by creating a grammar to be discovered and to be used in expressing the Gospel. The missionary linguist's role is to find out what God is doing, and use it to express the Gospel.

4. More on God's grace: distribution of languages in the world

Another aspect of God's love in the differences among languages is that God has created linguistic communities (the group of speakers of the same language). If our God were a God of curse, he could have made as many languages as human beings to put us into an eternal confusion. Even though this is strictly correct (no two persons speak exactly the same language or "idiolect"), languages spoken by many speakers are similar enough to be called the same language. That is, God has created a language to be shared in a community. This means that if one person becomes a Christian, other members of the community will be given an opportunity to hear the Gospel.

By allowing many people to share one language God reduces the number of languages that Christians need to know before the Gospel can be known to every people. The number of languages spoken in the world is very difficult to estimate, because one cannot easily define what constitutes a language. For example, different "dialects" of Chinese are so different that one may well treat them as different languages from a linguistic point of view, although sociologically one might be inclined to believe that they are one language. In spite of such difficulty, some have put forward some approximate figure. Comrie (1987), for example, states that "at a very conservative estimate some 4,000 languages are spoken today (p.2)." Grimes (1988) estimates that there are 6,170 languages in the world. Whatever this figure is, it is clear that God has restricted

the number of languages spoken in the world to a number much smaller than it could be. Grimes (1988) states that 3,958 out of the total number of languages still do not have any portions of Bible (1,167 of them have linguistic and translation work in progress). By the grace of God, there are *only* 3,958 languages to go.

One more striking fact of the distribution of languages in the world is that some languages are spoken by more speakers than others. The statistics on the number of speakers of a language is notoriously unreliable for the same reason it is difficult to tell the number of languages spoken in the world. In spite of this problem, it can be safely said that some languages are spoken by more speakers than others.

English is often placed as the language spoken by more speakers than any other language in statistics in which the Chinese "dialects" are treated as different languages and dialects of English are treated as one language (e.g., Grimes 1988). According to Grimes (1988), English is spoken by 800 million speakers as their first or second language, and is followed by Mandarin Chinese, which is spoken by more than 730 million speakers. One half of the number of speakers of English mentioned above speak English as a second language. English is also the language studied as a foreign language in the classroom by many people. This situation owes much to the role of England and the US in recent history of the world. English is also very important in the Christian community of the world. Much of the Christian literature of today is written in English, and the international Christian community frequently uses it as a common language.

What this means to theological education in non-English speaking world is enormous. In many theological schools in the world including those in Japan, students can use (or improve!) the knowledge of English acquired in high schools to read Christian books and to be prepared to join in a missionary community. In principle this could have been otherwise. The language that you study in high school might have been different from those necessary in reading Christian books or in joining in a missionary community with a little twist in the history of the world. It appears that God has chosen one language (English) out of several thousand languages to make the theological education available with fewer linguistic efforts.

5. Conclusion

In this article I have discussed why languages are as they are on the assumption that God is in control of the languages we speak. Based on this assumption, I have discussed why languages are as they are, and considered what God must be doing through them. I have pointed out that both the fact of language universals and the distribution of languages in the world suggest that God has made it possible and easier for the Gospel to reach the speakers of all languages.

Notes

1 One popular view of the story of the Tower of Babel is that it tells us of how languages of the world have developed from the same languages. This view, it seems to me, is mistaken. What this story tells us is that people who had spoken the same language began to speak different languages. This does not mean that new languages *developed* from the same source. As I read it, this story seems to tell us that the old language has been *replaced* by a number of new languages, and that there can be no continuity from the old language to the new languages.

2 The view that the structure of language is created by God is by no means new. The following comment of Kenneth Pike is worth quoting. "Language was built by God to do a job…… Language reflects the image of God, so could you expect it to be anything other than beautiful, elegantly patterned, glorious, and difficult?" (E. Pike 1972). See also Pike (1989: 30–31) for his view on language and God.

3 The rule might appear to be true if we consider only those English sentences in which the first word is a subject NP consisting of just one word (as it is when it is a pronoun) and the second word is an auxiliary verb. The inadequacy of this rule as a rule of English is obvious when we consider sentences like (2).

4 Postpositions are preposition-like elements that follow their complement noun phrase.

5 This condition is very important. If their framework for analysis turns out to be unapplicable to a new language, it is their framework, not God, which is to blame. They need to revise their theory of grammer to account for new facts.

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