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## The Language of "Born-Again" Christianity

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One of the problems with analyzing the effect of worldview on language is that it is difficult to find a case where differences in these two areas are not accompanied by other differences, e.g., social, cultural, historical, etc., which complicate the data. In this paper I will take an introductory look at the language use of a group which shares the history, culture and language of the larger society but which holds a very different worldview. The group is generally referred to as "Evangelical (or "Born-Again") Christians." An Evangelical is someone holding strong, orthodox Protestant beliefs based on a conversion experience (being "born again") in which they accepted Jesus Christ as their personal savior (Christianity Today, 21 Dec. 1979, p. 13). The Baptists are generally considered the most typical Evangelical denomination (Borker 1974:45).

I will begin by considering one area in which the Evangelical worldview (and some social constraints stemming from it) affects syntax. Secondly, I will point out some of the ways in which both the worldview and pragmatic assumptions of shared knowledge affect semantics, with special attention to the use of the language as in-group speech. Finally, I will examine an instance of language performing both these functions within a subgroup of Evangelicals. Because Evangelical belief is based on the Bible as the ultimate authority, I shall document assertions about specific doctrines with the Bible references normally cited as the bases for these doctrines. In all cases, the interpretations have been provided by Evangelicals.

A basic point of Evangelical belief is that human beings are at least partly depraved (exactly how much is a matter of theological argument). Therefore, we are incapable of doing good on our own, and anything good that one does is really a matter of God working through one (Rom. 7:18-20; II Cor. 4:7). Since a lot of language involves talking about people doing things, we would expect to find this reflected in Evangelical speech. For example, when an Evangelical says that he "had fellowship with" someone (necessarily another Christian), he may mean that they went out for coffee. He may also mean that he put them up for the night, gave them dinner, sent them money--in brief, helped them in any one of a number of ways. By phrasing it in this way, however, the Evangelical avoids claiming to have performed a specific good action. In other words, "have fellowship with" is a euphemism. It is, furthermore, a euphemism for something which most non-Evangelicals have no hesitancy about claiming responsibility for, since the broader culture would not perceive such a claim as an unwarranted boast.

What is concealed, however, is not merely the nature of the action, but the speaker's part in it as well. "Have fellowship

with" appears to describe a symmetrical relationship like analogous phrases such as "have a conversation with"--if A is having fellowship with B, then B is presumably simultaneously having fellowship with A. The actual relationship, however, is not at all symmetrical.

Most Evangelicals will admit that there is something euphemistic about their use of this term. However, a number of them have pointed out to me that it reflects--non-euphemistically--another aspect of their worldview. To the Evangelical, everything he has comes solely by the grace of God and is intended, in part at least, to be used to help other people, especially other Christians. And giving carries at least as much benefit to the giver as the receiver (Acts 20:35). Therefore, the relationship can be viewed as symmetrical in terms of deeper spiritual reality, since the receiver, by being in need, is also conveying some "blessing" to the giver merely by enabling him to fulfill a Christian responsibility. Again, in the view that everything is planned by God, the Evangelical can consistently hold that his large house, for instance, which enables him to "have fellowship with" someone by putting them up for the night, may have been given him by God solely because God knew that there were going to be people around who would need such accommodations, and that but for that he might be living in a one-room apartment. Thus, the Evangelical can view himself as having the benefit of a material excess given him precisely so that it can be used to benefit the Christian community.

There are, then, three reasons for the Evangelical to talk about "having fellowship with" someone, rather than doing them a favor. (1) Simply as a matter of politeness, it is inappropriate to claim credit for good actions, since God is the real agent. (2) The relationship is in some sense symmetrical below the surface, since the giver benefits at least as much as the receiver. (3) It is inaccurate to claim credit for an action when, in terms of the deeper spiritual reality, one was merely a go-between.

Another term with roughly the same meaning is "minister to." This term does not negate the agenthood of the surface subject, but there is a curious syntactic constraint on its use. While it is permissible if the subject is second or third person, most Evangelicals find it inappropriate in the first person.

- (1)a You/She/He/They ministered to them.
- b \*I/We ministered to them.

In other words, it is inappropriate to talk about what good actions one has performed oneself, but it is quite all right to praise someone else.

However, embedding sentences like (1)b with "God" as higher subject--either implicitly or explicitly--produces acceptable utterances, even though the speaker is still talking about his or her own good action:

- (2)a I was enabled to minister to him in some small way.
- b God enabled me to minister to them.

Embeddings of this sort are, in fact, quite common in Evangelical language:

- (3) We have been enabled to give some encouragement and help to a number of young people.
- (4) Ward's . . . teaching has been used by God to draw people and keep families coming. (Hadley 1980:6)

Like the second and third reasons for using "have fellowship with," (4) indicates that there is more than polite diffidence involved. In fact, Evangelical language use shows a general tendency to avoid referring to human beings as independent agents. It does this in a number of ways. We have already seen the use of embeddings in (1) - (4).

In addition, passives are frequently used where a non-Evangelical would use an active verb, e.g.,

- (5) I feel/felt led to do X.
- (6) I have been exercised about X lately.

are equivalent to standard "I decided to do X" and "X has been bothering me lately," respectively. "God" is, of course, the agent in (5) and (6).<sup>1</sup> The other side of the coin is the active use of normally passive verbs, e.g.,

- (7) God has privileged us to partake of this remembrance feast. ("Remembrance feast" = communion) Standard language, of course, allows "I was privileged to attend a tea at Buckingham Palace," but not \*"The Queen privileged me. . . ."

In some cases, not merely is the human not perceived as agent, but an action is described as a quality or state of mind attributed to the human:

- (8)a God gave me/I have a burden for your health.
- b The Lord burdened H. to apply for a station permit. (Buckwalter 1980:18)

"To have a burden for" something can mean to think about it a lot, to pray about it, to be concerned about it, or to decide to do something about it. The implication is that the human subject would not ordinarily have been concerned about the matter.

Social taboos also have something to do with the use of constructions of this sort. It is inappropriate to judge others (Matt. 7:1-5), and sentences like (9) and (10) can be used to avoid imputing a potentially sinful action to someone else:

- (9) He's having doubts.
- (10) She had/developed a bitter and rebellious spirit.

It is acceptable to refer to doubting something--although (9) conveniently avoids having to say what it is precisely that is being doubted--or to refer to being bitter or rebelling. However, these active forms are more likely to be used of oneself than of others, as, for example, in "giving one's testimony," which involves describing the effect conversion has had on one's life.

Finally, human importance can be reduced simply by lexical selection. The Plymouth Brethren, a (non-charismatic) Evangelical group, believes strongly in getting constant guidance from the Holy Spirit. For this reason--and in part to distinguish themselves from other Evangelicals--they do not in reference to themselves talk about "preaching a sermon," but rather about "delivering a message." The activity, as they quite frankly admit, is the same; it is the concept underlying the activity which is different. It is possible to "preach a sermon" without any reference to God whatever; people who talk about "delivering a message," however, are stressing a total reliance on God's guidance rather than on their own abilities.

From what we have seen, then, it appears that a good deal of the Evangelical grammar, if we can call it that, seems designed to avoid reference to human beings as primary agents and to introduce God as the moving force behind all good actions. This is what we should expect, of course: the Evangelical needs to be able to talk about events in a way that members of the broader society generally do not, since the Evangelical is trying to reference two levels of reality which impinge on each other. However, there are cases where theological questions seem irrelevant to the choice of phraseology:

- (11) John has been active in Open Air Evangelism. . . .
- (12) We value the prayers of all the saints in every place that the work will prosper and continue until the Lord's coming.
- (13) We have been blessed to experience six young people make professions of faith and two return for renewal.

(11) means that John preaches on streetcorners. (12) counts as a request for prayer. The stative form in (11), which is very common, does not serve to introduce God in any way, and in (12) it would have been perfectly acceptable to request prayer directly--in fact, it is done all the time. (13) describes a situation in which the speaker was at least partially responsible for the conversions. The use of the passive of "bless" corresponds to some of the cases we have already looked at, where God's activity is emphasized, but the use of a verb like "experience" implies even less participation on the part of the speaker than is warranted by the Evangelical worldview.

What is evidently happening here is that various elements of the worldview have combined with a number of social constraints involving what sorts of things one may and may not say about oneself and others to produce a sort of pragmatic conspiracy--if I may borrow a term from generative phonology--towards reduction of human agenthood, which, when appropriate, counts as a "more holy" way to talk. This then spills over into areas where neither the worldview nor the social rules require less active forms, but where they nonetheless occur.<sup>2</sup>

Academics and other writers of expository prose are also notorious users of passives, embedded sentences, etc. (with somewhat less justification, perhaps, than Evangelicals). The

Evangelical tendency towards forms typical of written speech may also be a function of the fact that Evangelical speech is really the oral reflex of a basically written dialect. The (King James) Bible is the primary authority, and the "church fathers" of Protestantism tended, if writing in English, to imitate it. The style of these documents is apparently associated with authoritative religious utterances, and it is this style that Evangelicals imitate in their speech.

We have already noted the euphemistic treatment of good actions. While, by and large, Evangelicals share the euphemisms of the broader culture, their view of death is different, and so therefore is the pattern of euphemisms they use to refer to it. The most common way of describing death is with reference to "going home" (to heaven):

(14)a Brother Grant went home to be with the Lord.

b The Lord has called Brother Grant home.

However, Evangelicals have no hesitancy at all about using terms like these in conjunction with the straightforward "death" and "die," which suggests that what is involved here is not euphemism, but simply a different definition of the event. To the Evangelical, death is "going home to be with the Lord" (II Cor. 5:8), so there is no real difficulty in talking about it, except such as arises in the broader culture in talking about something like going to the dentist. It's an unpleasant experience, certainly, and one doesn't bring it up gratuitously, but to the Evangelical the only really unpleasant part is that the survivors will miss the deceased (Phil. 2:21-24). As with a trip to the dentist, they have every expectation of seeing the person again, and that in a healthier state than when they last saw them. The freedom in referring directly to death, however, operates only as long as the death in question is that of a Christian. In talking about the death of someone whose qualifications for heaven are at best questionable, the subject becomes unpleasant, and they revert to all the standard euphemisms of the broader culture--"pass on," "pass away," "leave us," etc.

As some of the above examples show, Evangelical language contains some terminology which is not immediately understandable to the non-Evangelical. In fact, it functions in some ways as an in-group jargon. Examples of this range from simple selectional restrictions to obscure metaphors which require a good knowledge of biblical trivia to parse.

An instance of selectional restriction violation occurred when a recent convert made the following announcement in an Evangelical church: "A new organ has been donated to our church. We pray that the Lord will lift up someone to play it." The long-time members tried hard to repress their smiles. It is, in fact, incorrect to talk of God lifting people up; he raises them up. People lift other people up (in prayer), but they cannot raise them up. While sometimes synonymous in standard language, the

two terms are not interchangeable in Evangelical speech.

Example (15) contains the text of a woman's apology--or non-apology--for her messy house:

- (15) I know you'll understand about the house. This is how far the Lord allowed me to get this morning. So this is just where I need to be. You'll just take it from his hand with me, I know. (Daniel 1980:14)

While (15) provides a clear example of the Evangelical worldview applied to what is generally considered a secular situation, the last sentence is particularly odd, as it is impossible to conceive of taking a state of messiness from anyone's hand, especially from the hand of someone who is not active in physical form. "To take something from someone's hand," however, is simply a special case of "accepting" it, which is what the speaker means here. This is a common Evangelical phrase and occurs also in a sermon cited by Borker (1974:367) in which the Christian is described as "[having] accepted the gift of life" and the non-Christian as "[having] neglected to reach out his hand and take it."

A more convoluted example of, among other things, a special case substituted for a general category occurs in (16):

- (16) The ordinance of the Lord's Supper . . . still speaks to every circumcised ear and every spiritual mind the same deep and precious truth. (Mackintosh 1976[1897]:798)

Circumcision symbolized the Jews' position as chosen people, and when Christians claimed this status, they eliminated those features of its meaning that involved a physical state (this is overtly done in Col. 2:11). "Circumcised" then had as its primary meaning in the Christian vocabulary "related to God's people" in general, therefore "Christian," as in (16).

Example (17) is from Christianity Today, the most popular Evangelical magazine:

- (17) . . . the way in which the mantles of evangelicalism's Elijahs will pass to the shoulders of successors has not yet been established. (Brown 1979:22)

Properly understanding (17) requires knowledge of the obscure occasion in the Bible (II Kings 2:13) where Elisha picks up Elijah's mantle as the latter ascends into heaven and promptly works a miracle with it, thereby giving indication that he has taken Elijah's place as the primary prophet of the time.

- (18) There is now a large assembly in A. with a testimony like that of Thessalonians chapter one.

First Thessalonians chapter one is a congratulatory note from St. Paul to a church which had a widespread reputation for faith in particular. ("Assembly" = Plymouth Brethren church)

(17) and (18) exemplify the sort of specialized biblical background knowledge the competent Evangelical is supposed to control--in one case a detail from a story and in the other the

contents of a chapter. Since the Pauline epistles comment variously on a number of different churches, there is no way that the salient feature "faith" can be deduced by someone unfamiliar with the text. The assumption of this kind of shared knowledge allows Evangelicals to create metaphors as in (17) and to communicate by oblique reference as in (18).

Danny Alford (personal communication) has pointed out that the sorts of correlations illustrated in (15) - (18) bear a peculiar resemblance to those of some secret languages, notably rhyming slang, where a word is replaced by a phrase that rhymes with it, and the last (and rhyming) part of the phrase is dropped. Thus "twist" = 'girl' from the original rhyme "twist and twirl" (Flexner 1975:607). The difference is that in Evangelical language the connection is logical rather than phonetic. The hearers' ability to interpret an utterance depends on their ability to reconstruct the rhyme or, in the case of Evangelical language, the sequence of logical connections.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the syntactic and pragmatic peculiarities we have observed, Evangelical language differs from the standard semantically as well, containing a number of elements of specialized terminology--lexical items which simply don't occur elsewhere or which occur with different meanings. For example:

- (19) Difference in Category
- a "to disciple someone" = to train someone to be a disciple (= a competent Evangelical), i.e., to socialize them
  - b "to shepherd" = to serve as leader and teacher
  - c "to fellowship" = to take communion (Plymouth Brethren)
  - d "to purpose" = to intend
- (20) Difference in Meaning
- a "carnal" = worldly (used of Christians only)
  - b "partake" = take communion
  - c "uphold" = pray for (cf. "lift up")
  - d "wisdom" = advice ("I went to him for wisdom lots of times.")
- (21) Unique Evangelical Terms
- a "covet" (in "I/We covet your prayers") counts as a request for prayer
  - b "stewardship" = (good) management of money (time, talents)
  - c "remember the Lord" = take communion (Plymouth Brethren) = attend a service (other)

Many of these, e.g., (19)d, (20)a-c and (21)a and b, are clearly holdovers from King James English. (21)c is a partial quote from Luke 22:19, "this do in remembrance of me," and has the same distribution and meaning as "worship."

The competent Evangelical, then, must be able not only to recall obscure biblical information and recreate logical connections, but must also control a vocabulary which differs in many ways from that of standard English. As (15) shows, the line of demarcation between religious and non-religious contexts is not always clearly drawn, and so competence is displayed by knowledge

of when to use Evangelical language as well as how to use it.

My final example comes from the Plymouth Brethren, a group which refuses to use that name--or any other which cannot be applied to all born-again Christians. They call themselves therefore "believers," "Christians," "saints," etc., all terms which they use as well of all other Evangelicals, which makes things very confusing when they try to specify someone in their own group rather than, say, a Baptist. A "new meeting" announcement reads:

(22) . . . Evening meetings are held in homes of the believers. They welcome the Lord's servants and other believers who desire Christian fellowship. (Interest, Feb. 1980, p. 13)

Where we might expect "in the homes of believers" we find the definite article attached instead to the word "believers." This signals that this reference is to Plymouth Brethren. The second occurrence of "believers" in this text refers to non-Plymouth Brethren Christians. As another example, if a member says that he "met with" (= worshipped with) "some Christians" in a city, it is not clear whether he attended a Plymouth Brethren assembly or another Evangelical church. If, however, he says that he met with "the Christians" there, he can only be referring to the Plymouth Brethren. Informants agreed that this analysis was accurate, although they had been unaware that the signal lay in the definite article until I mentioned it. Many of them commented on the fact that, while it is possible either to specify Plymouth Brethren or to leave the matter ambiguous, there is no way to talk about "non-Plymouth Brethren Christians." Not only do they find the implication disturbing in itself, but some of them remarked that they frequently needed to refer to precisely that group of people but had found no way to do so and were forced to rely on very indirect cues at best to get their hearers to make the right identification.

Evangelicalism is a strongly proselytizing religion. Given the amount of biblical, social and linguistic information the hearer must control, however, we can ask why Evangelicals allow their language to remain so different from the standard and hence so opaque to the very people they are trying to reach. Part of the reason, of course, is simply that Evangelical language allows its users to say the sorts of things they want to say about how the world works. From a broader point of view, however, I suggest that there are three primary reasons, all closely interconnected.

1. Evangelical language functions as in-group speech. Evangelicals realize that they are a minority, holding a relatively unpopular view of the world, and so have a stake in maintaining solidarity as well as some degree of psychological, although not physical, separation from "the world."

2. Evangelicalism is a participatory religion--most of the work is done by laypersons, and giving new converts responsibility is considered a good way to start them off. However, the group needs to be able to keep track of the degree to which the new convert is socialized into the group in order to gauge the appropri-

ate amount of responsibility to give them. The convert's ability to handle these sorts of lexical, semantic and syntactic rules, as well as the pragmatic assumptions and obscure references in the jargon, provides a good, observable index of the extent to which they have accepted and understood the worldview which is tied in with these linguistic phenomena, and hence the degree to which they can be treated as a fully socialized, competent and responsible member of the group.

3. This, finally, is possible because the elements of Evangelical language reflect aspects of the worldview in a much broader way than merely allowing Evangelicals to talk about the sorts of things they want to talk about. What we see in Evangelical language, I suggest, is a sort of fallout from a particular worldview (which includes notions like the sovereignty of God, the depravity of humanity, the authority of the [King James] Bible, the special status of the Christian, an understanding of the Christian community, and so on) into the language use of the people who hold that worldview. Evangelical language, in other words, functions as a "worldviewlect," with influences from the worldview appearing in nearly every area of language use.

Not only does the language reflect the worldview, furthermore, but it can also apply it. "We must understand that there are different ways of talking that are appropriate to different realms of human experience, but we must also understand that different forms of speech (seen in their totality) contribute to making an event" (Samarin 1972:216). Evangelical language use not merely helps to create and sustain an already defined religious event, such as a church service, but can also be used to transform a basically secular situation, such as the messy house in (15), into a religious one by evoking the worldview.

#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup>In this case the standard form, with the problem, "X" as subject, implies more passivity than the Evangelical form, which puts X in an oblique case and has God (understood) as the affecting entity. This makes perfect sense from the Evangelical point of view where a problem is seen less as existing in itself than as a means by which God communicates with a cooperative human or teaches an uncooperative one (Borker 1974:78; II Cor. 2:12, 12:8-10).

<sup>2</sup>There are three areas where verbs are likely to be active in Evangelical language: (1) verbs referring to sin--"steal," "kill," "lie," etc.; (2) verbs associated with conversion--"repent," "confess," "accept Christ," "make a profession," etc., although forms like "get saved" and "be born again" are also associated with this event; (3) verbs expressing activities carried on towards God, especially in services--"pray," "thank," "worship," "praise," "offer," etc. (I am grateful to Ruth Borker [personal communication] for bringing this last group to my attention.) In worship services a great deal is made of the fact that the humans are carrying out God's instructions to perform precisely those actions; this holds for conversion also.

<sup>3</sup>Halliday comes close to making just such an observation, although he does not deal with current Christianity, when he points out the similarity between early Christian society and modern antisocieties (1978:171), i.e., societies "set up within another society as a conscious alternative to it" (164). Antisocieties use antilanguages--a classification which includes rhyming slang--which have as one of their functions the creation and maintenance of an alternative social reality (171).

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