

A New Look At Tongues

A Linguistic Approach to the Understanding of “Other Tongues” in Acts 2

by Robert Zerhusen

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The Language Miracle Interpretation

The interpretation of Acts 2 most widely held throughout Christian history is the language miracle interpretation. According to this scenario, when the disciples used “other tongues” they were supernaturally speaking languages they had never learned. Proponents of this view assume (1) that the crowd of Acts 2 spoke many different native languages and (2) that the disciples were unable to speak these native languages (thus requiring a language miracle).

The narrative of Acts 2:1-13 makes no reference to any specific languages. The Acts 2:9-11 listing is of people-groups and geographical areas, not individual languages. In spite of this absence of reference to any particular language, some have conjectured that a dozen or more languages were spoken by the disciples. Stanley H. Horton claimed: “Some suppose that only the 12 apostles were filled [with the Spirit] (32). However, more than 12 languages were spoken.” Carl F H. Henry similarly wrote: “The sixteen or seventeen, perhaps more, Pentecost tongues were not ecstatic utterances but recognizable human languages” (377).

Neither Horton nor Henry arrived at these numbers by exegesis of the text. Nor did they derive these numbers from historical investigation (neither writer provided any historical evidence for these claims, and neither writer specified what languages were spoken). Apparently, both writers assumed that each item on the list represented a separate language. They then totaled up the people-groups and areas listed in Acts 2:9-11 (there are 15), concluding that there were 15 or more languages.

A careful examination of the list shows that 15 languages are not represented. “Visitors from Rome, both Judeans and proselytes (2:11) does not refer to people who spoke “Roman” (Judeans and proselytes from Rome most likely spoke Greek as their native tongue, possibly Latin). The term proselytes in Acts 2:11 probably refers to the Roman contingent rather than the entire 2:9-11 list for the following reasons: (1) the Acts 2:9-11 list is not yet complete when the phrase occurs — the reference occurs within the list, not at the end; (2) since in the first century a great

amount of Judean proselytizing was taking place in Rome, it makes sense for Luke to note this; (3) Luke's narrative was moving towards Rome, and so it is appropriate for him to emphasize the city of Rome; (4) as can be seen from an examination of Romans, the church at Rome was very mixed (Judeans and Gentiles are directly addressed).

Judeans who had come from "the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene" did not speak "Libyan" or "Cyrenian" (Cyrene was a Greek colony where the Judeans' native tongue was Greek). Judeans who were "residents of Mesopotamia" spoke, not "Mesopotamian," but Aramaic as their native tongue. Because both Horton and Henry believe that the Acts 2 narrative describes a language miracle, they assume that the Diaspora Judeans spoke dozens of native languages, which the disciples did not know.

For intelligible communication to take place between the speakers and hearers in Acts 2, were dozens of languages necessary? The apostle Peter spoke in one language (Acts 2:14ff), and all of the crowd apparently understood him without difficulty. Frank W Beare notes that "[t]aken literally, there was no need for so many languages; and Jews born abroad would not normally be taught the language of Elamites (if it still was spoken anywhere) or of Persians or Libyans and so forth. They would speak a dialect of Aramaic, or the common Greek, or perhaps both" (237). Ernst Haenchen quotes W L. Knox: "In reality it is most unlikely that any Jew of the Dispersion would have understood such native dialects as survived in the remoter regions of the Middle East, since the Jews of the dispersion were almost entirely city dwellers" (169). He then adds: "The Jews in the regions enumerated [the Acts 2:9-11 list] did in fact speak either Aramaic or Greek."

Some would suggest that Luke's purpose in providing the Acts 2:9-11 list is to emphasize linguistic diversity. This would be true if the Acts 2 narrative described a language miracle and if in fact the Judeans in the regions enumerated spoke multiple native languages besides Aramaic and Greek. But if Haenchen is correct and the Judeans of the first century spoke Aramaic and Greek as their native tongues, then there would be no linguistic diversity to emphasize. All of the areas listed were areas in which there was a concentration of Judeans. Although some areas are missing (e.g., Syria and Cyprus), perhaps the list is meant to be representative of "all Israel." If this is true, then Luke's purpose in presenting the list is not to emphasize linguistic diversity, but to suggest that the first apostolic testimony was to the Jewish nation.

Robert H. Gundry, a language miracle advocate, admits that Aramaic and Greek would have been sufficient for communication to have taken place between the disciples and their hearers:

Neither at Corinth nor on the Day of Pentecost is speaking in tongues presented as the overcoming of a communications barrier. Everyone spoke at least Greek at Corinth. At Pentecost the disciples and the Diaspora Jews and proselytes could have communicated in Greek, Aramaic, or Hebrew, all three of which we now know were regularly used in first century Palestine. The New Testament presents glossalalia primarily as a convincing miracle, only secondarily as the communication of a message; for communication alone could be accomplished more easily without "other tongues. (301-302).

Proponents of the language miracle view interpret the phrase "other tongues" to mean "other than what they normally spoke." Most would acknowledge that the disciples' ordinary languages

were Greek and Aramaic. John B. Poi hill is representative when he writes: “The miracle was a demonstration of the Spirit’s power and presence: these Diaspora Jews heard their own tongue spoken (not Aramaic or Greek) and realized that this should have been impossible for ‘Galileans’” (101). According to the logic of the language miracle view the “other tongues” were languages other than Aramaic and Greek, the ordinary languages of the disciples. For the language miracle view the contrast is:

Aramaic/ Greek	“other tongues”
Normal languages of speakers	Languages other than the normal languages of the speakers (i.e., languages other than Aramaic Greek)

But where are these native languages — other than Aramaic and Greek — to be found among first century Judeans? Simon J. Kistemaker says:

We presume that the God-fearing Jews were at least bilingual, if not trilingual. Living in Jerusalem, they conversed in Aramaic. And if they had come from the Roman Empire west and north of Israel, they would know Greek. But they also learned the languages of their native countries....When the alien residents of Jerusalem hear the languages they learned in the country where they were born and reared, they are utterly amazed [80-81].

I. H. Marshall echoes Kistemaker: “Although the audience was Jewish, the various groups of the Diaspora would still have had their own languages and the declaration of the gospel would have come to them more significantly in their own tongues” (361).

Both Kistemaker and Marshall (advocates of the language miracle view) are well aware that Greek and Aramaic were in widespread use among the Judeans in the first century. The logic of their theory, however dictates that the “other tongues” could not have been Aramaic or Greek. If a language miracle occurred, then by definition the speakers were speaking languages they had never learned, languages other than their ordinary languages. If the ordinary languages of the speakers (i.e., the disciples of Jesus in Acts 2) were Aramaic and Greek, and if the speakers were uttering languages they had never learned before (i.e., a linguistic miracle was occurring), then the speakers could not have been speaking in their ordinary languages (i.e., Aramaic and Greek).

Therefore, languages other than Aramaic and Greek must be found to serve as the “other tongues.” They posit “local languages,” indigenous languages other than Aramaic or Greek, languages the Diaspora may have spoken, yet languages unfamiliar to the disciples:

Aramaic/ Greek	“other tongues”
Normal languages of speakers	“Local languages of the Diaspora: languages the disciples did not know”

While it is true that local languages other than Aramaic and Greek existed in the first century, the text of Acts 2 presents the “other tongues” as the native languages of the Judean crowd

assembled in Acts 2. Advocates of the language miracle view must prove that the “Diaspora Judeans spoke these local languages as their native languages rather than Aramaic and Greek.”

The Composition of the Crowd

The crowd of Acts 2 may be divided into two groups: Palestinian Judeans, resident in the land of Israel; and Diaspora Judeans, who resided in areas outside of Israel. Proponents of the Language miracle view regularly assume, basing their conclusion on the Acts 2:9-11 list (14 of 15 items on the list refer to Diaspora areas) that the majority of the Judeans present in Acts 2 were Diaspora Judeans.

Regarding these two groups, Joachim Jeremias recognized that most of the Judeans present in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost would have been Palestinian. “The greatest number of visitors to Jerusalem have always come from within Palestine” (71). S. Safrai arrives at the same conclusion: “On each of the three festivals many tens of thousands went up from the land of Israel and the Diaspora. Most, of course, came from the Land of Israel, on whose inhabitants the precept was regarded as chiefly binding. Of these, moreover, the majority came from nearby Judea and Idumea” 1975: (326-27). In another place Safrai wrote: “of course the greatest number of pilgrims were from Palestine. Of these the largest number came from nearby Judea and Edom. The sundry testimonies and traditions which tell of whole cities going, refer primarily to Judea” (1976: 900).

Scholars (especially language miracle advocates) have sometimes been troubled by the presence of Judea in the Acts 2:9-11 list. If Jeremias and Safrai are correct, however, Judea represents not only a legitimate part of the crowd, but the largest portion of the crowd. Common sense should confirm this fact. If an international convention of theologians was held in the city of Los Angeles, even today most of the participants would come from nearby areas. More participants would come from California than from the Orient, Europe, South America, etc. People who live closest to the meeting place have the easiest access to the event. In the first century, when the Judeans gathered in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, most of those present would have been Palestinian.

If this observation, regularly overlooked in the discussion of Acts 2, is valid, then both the speakers of the “other tongues” and most of their hearers would have been Palestinian Judeans. The narrative of Acts 2 contains clear references to the presence of Palestinians in the crowd: “People of Judea” (2:14); “People of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested TO YOU by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him IN YOUR MIDST, JUST AS YOU YOURSELVES KNOW” (2:22). Presumably, if they saw these things they must have been Palestinian.

The text suggests that the speakers of the “other tongues” were speaking the native languages of the crowd (which primarily consisted of Palestinians). This means that the “other tongues” must have included Aramaic and Greek (the native languages of “Judea”/Palestine).

Native Languages of the Diaspora

Surprisingly, when we examine Diaspora Judean groups we find that most (if not all) of the Diaspora spoke either Aramaic or Greek as their native language. It is common among scholars to differentiate between the western and eastern Diaspora by their native languages. Elias J. Bickerman wrote:

Nevertheless the fact that the Law of Moses was universally valid from Cyrene to Ecbatana did not prevent a linguistic and cultural split between the two halves of ancient Jewry: the Jews in the Greek and Graecized lands in Africa and Asia Minor and the Jews in the Aramaic world, which reached from Jerusalem to Babylon and Ecbatana [93].

Shaye J. D. Cohen notes the same linguistic split:

We have no reason to assume that any of the Egyptian interpretations of Judaism would necessarily have found favor in the other communities of Greek-speaking Jews throughout the Roman world (for example in Rome, Asia Minor, North Africa, and parts of the land of Israel)...We have no reason to assume that any of the Palestinian interpretations of Judaism would necessarily have found favor in the other communities of Hebrew or Aramaic-speaking Jews throughout the east (for example, in Babylonia and parts of Syria) [24-25].

These statements are representative of a scholarly consensus, which recognizes that the western and eastern Diaspora may be classified linguistically according to native language (i.e., the western Diaspora were Greek-speaking, the eastern Diaspora were Aramaic-speaking).

The western Diaspora resided in areas that had been thoroughly Hellenized for centuries; hence their native language was Greek. J. N. Sevenster, after extensive work on the inscriptional evidence of first-century Judaism, describes the dominance of Greek among the western Diaspora:

For it is an established fact that, as a rule, the Jews outside Palestine spoke and wrote Greek and almost always thought in that language, particularly in the centuries around the beginning of the Christian era....The testimonials of the use of Greek among the Jews of the Diaspora are so clear and so numerous that one can only assume that by far the majority of the Diaspora Jews who went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem or settled in the Jewish land spoke Greek [82].

If Sevenster's conclusion is valid, then the language these Hellenistic Judeans would have heard in Acts 2 is Greek.

Because of the dominance of Greek among the western Diaspora, there was a need for a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures. The Septuagint, which became the standard text used in the synagogues of the western Diaspora, is evidence that Greek was the native language of these Judeans.

Knowing this, many scholars have argued that the "Hellenists" of Acts 6 were Judeans from the western Diaspora who spoke Greek as their native tongue. Kistemaker, writing about the "Hellenists" and "Hebrews" of Acts 6, says:

From the Pentecost account we learn that devout Jews had come from the dispersion to settle in Jerusalem (2:5-11)...Because they had formerly resided elsewhere, their native tongue was Greek, not Aramaic or Hebrew (which was spoken by the Jews in Jerusalem)...However, each group had its own synagogue before these people became Christians, and when they became disciples the Greek-speaking and the Aramaic-speaking believers continued to have their own assemblies [220].

Clearly, Kistemaker is asserting that the native tongue of Hellenistic Judeans was Greek. Where did Hellenistic Judeans come from? The likely answer is areas west of Palestine — the same areas as Luke mentions in Acts 2: “Cappadocia, Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans” (Acts 2:9-11).

Kistemaker is inconsistent. When discussing the “Hellenists” of Acts 6 (who had come from the western Diaspora), he unequivocally declares their native tongue to be Greek. When discussing the Hellenistic Judeans in Acts 2, however he says that, while they knew Greek, their native language was some “local language” other than Greek.

John MacArthur also misses the contradiction within the language miracle view. He proposes the language miracle view in Acts 2 and then, when discussing the “Hellenists” of Acts 6, states:

The Hellenistic Jews were those of the Diaspora. Unlike the native or Palestinian Hebrews, their native language was Greek, not Aramaic or Hebrew. They used the Septuagint instead of the Hebrew Scriptures....Many of the Hellenists had been in Jerusalem for Passover and Pentecost. After their conversion, they decided to remain there under the apostles’ teaching [178].

Proponents of the language miracle view, when discussing the Acts 2 narrative, ignore or minimize the well established fact that the native language of Hellenists/western Diaspora Judeans was Greek. This cannot be ignored when a scholar such as Martin Hengel writes: “The pilgrims who came to the feasts in Jerusalem from the West [Hellenistic Judeans] brought their Greek mother tongue to Jerusalem” (115).

The situation of Diaspora Judeans in Egypt may serve as a useful illustration of what was typical of the western Diaspora. It is a well established fact that the Judeans in Egypt spoke Greek as their native tongue. Some of the Egyptians spoke Demotic Egyptian as their native tongue. Discussing the use of Demotic by the Egyptian Judeans, Hengel states, “True, we have few references to Jewish illiterates, but even these will have understood and spoken Greek. By contrast, Jews will hardly have been interested in Demotic Egyptian. We have no clear evidence that they ever learnt it” (1980: 115). The point is, even though Judeans residing in Egypt may have learned the “local language,” Demotic Egyptian, in addition to Greek, the available evidence suggests that their native language was Greek. If a Judean from Egypt came to Jerusalem for Pentecost and heard his native tongue, he would have heard Greek spoken by a disciple. The text of Acts 2 requires that the Hellenistic Judeans were not merely hearing a “local language” from a country where they resided, but hearing their own native tongue (i.e., Greek for Hellenistic Judeans).

Although Greek was used in Palestine and had penetrated parts of the eastern Diaspora, the Aramaic language continued to dominate in the east. Jacob Neusner says of the use of Aramaic and Greek among the eastern Diaspora: “Most Jews...did not speak Greek but Aramaic (this is inferred from Josephus’ writings, and from later literature), and in later periods produced literature in Hebrew and Aramaic” (10). F.F. Bruce, discussing the language situation of the eastern Diaspora listed in Acts 2:9-11, wrote: “Parthia, Media, Elam (Elymias) and Mesopotamia lay east of the Euphrates, the Jews in those areas spoke Aramaic. These were the lands of the earliest dispersion, to which exiles from the ten northern tribes of Israel had been deported by the Assyrians in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.” (55).

We may recall here (see 2 Kgs 18:19-28) that prior to the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests and exile of the Judeans, ordinary Judeans spoke Hebrew as their native tongue and were unfamiliar with Aramaic. This linguistic situation was completely reversed by the time the Judeans returned from their exile. When they returned to Palestine, Hebrew was no longer their native tongue, having been replaced by Aramaic. The most reasonable explanation for this linguistic shift is that the native language for the eastern Diaspora had become Aramaic.

While space does not permit full documentation here, we may conclude that as in Palestine, the “native languages” of the Diaspora Judeans were Aramaic and Greek. We have already seen that Aramaic and Greek would have been the native languages for most of the Acts 2 crowd (i.e., the Palestinian Judeans). When we combine this fact with the fact that the Diaspora also spoke Aramaic or Greek as their native tongues, we are forced to conclude that most (if not all) of the Judeans present in Acts 2, whether Palestinian or Diaspora, spoke Aramaic or Greek as their native tongue. In other words, the “other tongues” must have included Aramaic and Greek.

This creates an insurmountable problem for the language miracle view. The logic of the language miracle view must maintain that the “other tongues” were languages other than the normal languages of the speakers. Hence the “other tongues” had to be languages other than Aramaic and Greek. In reality, the native languages of the crowd (whether Palestinian or Diaspora) were Aramaic and Greek. Consider the contrast between what the logic of the language miracle view dictates and the language situation of first century Judaism:

Language Miracle View	First-century language situation of Judeans
“other tongues” could not have included Aramaic/Greek	“other tongues” had to include Aramaic/Greek

The Ecstatic Utterance Interpretation

In this view, the original event did not involve human languages. Instead, the disciples in a state of religious excitement engaged in “ecstatic utterances.” According to William Furneaux, Acts 2 involves two different traditions:

We are driven to the conclusion at Pentecost, one earlier and historical, the other later and containing unhistorical elements....The earlier tradition is contained in verses 1-4, 12, 13, and the

phenomena is then identified with that described by St. Paul. The later tradition is contained in verses 5-11, which state that foreign languages were spoken [28-29].

Most scholars who hold this view believe that the tongues at Corinth were also “ecstatic utterances.” Leaving aside the question of the nature of “tongues” at Corinth, Furneaux claims the original (and historical) event involved “ecstatic utterances.” Luke later redacted the event into a language miracle. Lisdemann also sees this redaction by Luke:

If we regard “other” (*hererai*) as redactional, then a language miracle would be speaking in tongues, i.e., glossalalia, which we know from 1Cor. 14. In that case the tradition contained in vv. 1-4 (and v. 13?) reports an ecstatic experience in a house of a group of disciples, and it was Luke who would first have interpreted this tradition as a language miracle in order to prepare for the idea of world mission...distinction needs to be made between glossalalia (1-4) and language miracle (5-13) in the framework of the analysis of the tradition [41].

These scholars contend that a language miracle never occurred because the original event did not involve the speaking of languages. If we assume that the tongues of Acts 2 and 1Corinthians 12-14 are of an identical nature (i.e., ecstatic utterances) and that Luke redacted the Acts 2 narrative, then the conclusion that the “tongues” were ecstatic utterances is plausible. It should be noted, however, that the text of Acts (as it stands) must be ignored or circumvented in order for someone to subscribe to the ecstatic utterances position. The difficulty with the ecstatic utterance view is that the text of Acts 2 clearly presents the “other tongues” as the native languages of the crowd.

A Hearing Miracle

Other scholars, desiring to retain the language miracle idea, have suggested variations that shift the focus to a hearing miracle. Perhaps the disciples were engaging in ecstatic utterances, which the Holy Spirit converted into the native languages of the Acts 2 crowd. The problem inherent in this proposal, a problem also present in the traditional language miracle view, is the assumption that the speakers (the disciples) could not speak the native languages of the crowd without divine enablement. As we have already seen, this assumption is without historical support. The speakers and hearers shared the same native languages (Aramaic and Greek).

Still other scholars suggest that the speakers were speaking their own languages, Aramaic and Greek, which the Holy Spirit transformed into the native languages of the hearers. Again, this suggestion ignores the fact that the speakers and hearers spoke the same languages. Put another way, if the speakers were speaking in Aramaic and Greek, they would have been speaking in the native languages of the crowd.

An Impasse

With all these suggestions we are left at an impasse. If the text is taken seriously (i.e., the native languages of the hearers were spoken by the disciples), all versions of the ecstatic utterances position should be rejected. If the language situation of first-century Judeans is taken seriously (i.e., the Judeans present in Acts 2 spoke Aramaic or Greek as their native languages), then the language miracle idea should be rejected. I propose that both the text and the language situation

be taken seriously and an additional element be added. This additional factor, though regularly overlooked by most scholars, yields a better explanation for the “other tongues” of Acts 2.

We already have the parameters of this alternative if we take the text and language situation of first-century Judeans seriously. From the text we know that the “other tongues” were human languages. We also know that these languages were the native languages of the Jewish crowd that had gathered for the feast of Pentecost. Historical investigation leads us to conclude that the native languages of first-century Judeans (whether Palestinian or Diaspora) would have been Aramaic or Greek. This means that the disciples, when speaking in “other tongues,” must have been speaking in Aramaic and Greek.

Two critical questions result from this reasoning. First, why would Luke describe the Aramaic and Greek languages (languages familiar to the disciples/speakers) as “other tongues”? Other than what language? Second, why would the crowd react with amazement (2:6-12) and ridicule (2:13) when they heard the speakers proclaiming in Aramaic and Greek (languages the disciples already knew)?

Proponents of the language miracle and ecstatic utterances interpretations ordinarily do not ask these questions. This is true because the logic of their presuppositions precludes these questions. The logic of the language miracle view leads one to believe that the “other tongues” could not have been Aramaic or Greek (languages the speakers already knew). If the “other tongues” could not have been Aramaic or Greek, then questions will never arise about whether Aramaic and Greek could be called “other tongues” and cause amazement and ridicule. The logic of the ecstatic utterance view leads one to believe that the original “tongues” were not languages. If this is true, then any questions regarding the speaking of Aramaic and Greek (which are languages) becomes irrelevant.

The Overlooked Factor: The Place of Hebrew in Jewish Culture

While most scholars are well aware of the dominance of Aramaic and Greek among first-century Judeans, few consider the function of Hebrew in Judean culture and its impact on the interpretation of Acts 2. Aramaic and Greek dominated as native languages of the Judeans; yet Hebrew was retained by the Judean people for a specific purpose. Jewish scholar Mortecai M. Kaplan describes the emerging role of the Hebrew language in Judean culture:

Despite the wishes of the Jewish zealots, Hebrew was unable to hold its own against Aramaic which, prior to the Greek conquest, seems to have become the official language of the entire western half of the Persian empire. At that time there began a unique procedure which has characterized Judaism ever since, that of retaining Hebrew as the language of worship, of the elementary school and the *bet ha-midrash*, while developing the foreign vernacular into a Jewish dialect for use in the home and in the street. When the competition of other languages was too strong to be withstood, Hebrew did not succumb, but retired to the inner sanctuaries of Jewish life, where it continued, not as the esoteric language of a few pedants, but as the medium in which the most vital interests of the people found expression [192].

According to Kaplan, Hebrew was retained as “the language of worship,” in contrast to the “foreign vernacular” used “in the home and in the street.” Hebrew had declined as the native

language of the Judeans but continued to serve as the religious language of Judaism. Philip Birnbaum describes Judean feelings about Hebrew:

The Mishnah refers to the Hebrew language as *leshon ha-kodesh* — the holy tongue — to distinguish it from the Aramaic vernacular or other “secular tongues” spoken by the Jewish people. . Others have affirmed that Hebrew is God’s language in which he gave us the Torah. It was the Hebrew language in which the prophets expressed their lofty ideas and our fathers breathed forth their sufferings and joys [316].

Geoffrey Wigdoer’s Encyclopedia of Judaism under the Hebrew language entry reads: “A Semitic language (ivrit) traditionally described as ‘the Holy Tongue’ (*leshon ha-kodesh*)....The Holy Tongue was the usual designation for Hebrew, and it was even seen as the language of the angels (Hag. 16a)” (330-31).

Throughout their history, Judeans have differentiated between Hebrew, the “Holy Tongue” (*leshon ha-kodesh*), and other languages (including Aramaic and Greek). Acts 2 is a thoroughly Judean setting; so we should attempt to view the meaning of the phrase “other tongues” from a Judean perspective.

Recall that in the Old Testament the Hebrew language is contrasted with the unintelligible languages of foreign invaders. The Hebrew people are warned that if they are disobedient to the Lord, he will bring a nation which speaks “another language” (Is. 28:11), “whose language you do not know” (Jer. 5:15). This warning of judgment through a nation which speaks “another language” is first expressed in the cursings section of Deut. 28:45-50. Paul makes reference to this in 1Cor. 14:21 with the phrase “by other tongues [*heteroglossais*] and other lips.” What should be noted is that in each case the contrast is between the unintelligible language of a foreign conqueror and Hebrew.

It is important to recognize that according to this Judean understanding, the phrase “other tongues” may connote languages “other than Hebrew.” In this Judean understanding there is one Holy Tongue, Hebrew, and all other languages are profane languages.

The *Diglossia* Concept

Chaim Rabin observes that in multilingual environments one or more linguistic patterns are common:

The first is common bilingualism (or multilingualism) caused by the personal circumstances of the individual: a man may pick up the language of his neighbors, a merchant that of his suppliers or customers, in a mixed marriage both parents and children may correctly use both languages, etc. The second pattern is that of the *lingua franca*: people with different home languages living within a certain area use for intercommunication one and the same language, which may be one of the home-languages of their area or a language from outside [1007].

Although most scholars are aware of these two linguistic patterns, the third, described as follows by Rabin, is not as well known:

The third pattern has in recent times come to be called “diglossia”; in it the same community uses two different languages in its inner-community activities, their use being regulated by social conventions. In most cases, one language is spoken in ordinary everyday life by everybody, and the other is employed in formal speech, on formal occasions, in writing, in religious activities, and the like. We refer to the more formal language as the upper language of the diglossia, to the less formal one as the lower. Diglossia situations are extremely common. They exist in many European countries as between local dialect and standard educated language. In a diglossia, too, not everyone is able to handle the upper language. In most cases, it is imparted by some process of formal education [1008].

The term “diglossia” was first used in English by Charles Ferguson: “In its original use, the term applied to cases where both the upper and lower language belong to the same historical language, e.g., literary and colloquial Arabic” (Rabin: 1007). The concept has since been extended by other linguists to situations where two different languages make up the diglossia (Fishman: 29-30).

Where a diglossia exists, different languages are used for very different purposes in the community. The upper (or H) language is reserved for special formal occasions, and the lower (or L) language is used in everyday life.

Ferguson (325-40) used nine categories to describe diglossia situations.

First, as to the function of the language in the community: “One of the most important features of a diglossia is the specialization of function for H and L. In one set of situations only H is appropriate and in another only L” (328). Since both languages have very specific functions, “The importance of using the right variety in the right situation can hardly be overestimated. An outsider who learns to speak fluent, accurate L and then uses it in a formal speech is an object of ridicule” (329).

Second, there is a distinction in prestige between the “higher” and “lower” languages:

In all defining languages the speakers regard H as superior to L in a number of respects....Even where the feeling of the reality and superiority of H is not so strong, there is usually a belief that H is somehow more beautiful, more logical, better able to express important thoughts and the like. And this belief is held by speakers whose command of H is quite limited. To those Americans who would like to evaluate speech in terms of effectiveness at communication it comes as a shock to discover that many speakers of a language involved in diglossia characteristically prefer to hear a political speech or an expository lecture or a recitation of poetry in H even though it may be less intelligible to them than it would be in L. In some cases the superiority of H is connected with religion [320-32].

Ferguson noted that diglossias usually involve strong loyalty to the H language. Proponents of the superiority of the H language use the following kinds of arguments:

H must be adopted because it connects the community with its glorious past or with the world community and because it is a unifying factor as opposed to the divisive nature of the L dialects. In addition to these two fundamentally sound arguments there are usually pleas based on the

beliefs of the community in the superiority of H that it is more beautiful, more expressive, more logical, that it has divine sanction, or whatever their specific beliefs may be [338-39].

First-century Judeans, who believed that Hebrew was the “Holy Tongue,” would have used these kinds of argument in support of Hebrew as the ‘Holy Tongue.’

Third, there is a literary heritage connected to the H language: “In every one of the defining languages there is a sizable body of written literature in H which is held in high esteem by the speech community, and contemporary literary production in H by members of the community is felt to be a part of this otherwise existing literature” (330). The Torah written in Hebrew has always been highly revered by the Judeans and their Jewish successors.

Fourth, there is the method of acquiring particular languages:

L is invariably learned by children in what may be regarded as the “normal” way of learning one’s mother tongue. H may be heard by children from time to time, but the actual learning of H is chiefly accomplished by means of formal education, whether this be traditional Qur’anic schools, modern government schools, or private tutors. This method in acquisition is very important. The speaker is at home in L to a degree he almost never achieves in H [332].

This is precisely where the Diaspora Judean found himself in regards to his familiarity with Hebrew. He was quite at home with his mother tongue, Aramaic or Greek, and Hebrew was reserved primarily for the more educated.

Religious Diglossias

William A. Stewart says that it is normal for religions to have particular languages for religious expression: “Classical Arabic, Hebrew, Latin, and Sanskrit are the religious languages of Moslems, Jews, Roman Catholics, and Hindus respectively” (545). The major religious diglossias appear thus:

Religion	H Language	L Language
Islam	Quaranic Arabic	other than Arabic
Judaism	Hebrew	Aramaic/Greek/etc.
Christianity	Latin	Germanic/French/etc.
Hinduism	Sanskrit	other than Sanskrit

The best known religious diglossia is probably the diglossia present in Roman Catholicism. The religious — and scholarly — language of Catholicism for centuries was Latin. Latin served as the H language of the diglossia, while German, French, etc., were the L languages. William Tyndale was killed for violating the ecclesiastical diglossia present in England.

Charles W Carter, though he does not make explicit use of the diglossia concept, nevertheless, in describing the Judean crowd of Acts 2, describes both the Jewish and the Muslim diglossias:

The objection that the “multitudes” of the dispersion would not have come to the Feast of Pentecost had they not known they would get much from a one-language observance can hardly be sustained. First, it was expected, if not actually legally required, of every Israelite to attend these feasts at Jerusalem and thus appear before the Lord, if such was within his ability. Second, religious worship is a greater influence on men than religious language, important as is the latter. Third, in like manner every faithful Moslem is required once in his lifetime, if at all possible, to make the Pilgrimage to Mecca (the Haj), and longs to do so....Certainly, a vast percentage do not understand intelligibly the Arabic language, even though they may have memorized sections of the Koran. And even a greater number have no knowledge of the Arabic language used in the religious services at Mecca [43].

Besides maintaining that the Feast of Pentecost involved “a one-language observance” (the liturgy in Hebrew). Carter thus also refutes the argument that the Diaspora Judeans — who for the most part did not know Hebrew — would not “get much from a one-language observance.” He does so (1) by pointing out that Judeans were required to attend the feasts, (2) by claiming that the validity of religious worship experiences does not necessarily depend on the intelligibility of the language used, and (3) by paralleling the Jewish pilgrimage to Jerusalem with the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca.

Without using the term, Carter is clearly referring to one diglossia situation and using another diglossia situation to answer an objection. Hebrew as the “Holy Tongue,” the religious language, was the language that the Diaspora Judeans didn’t understand. Using the right language (i.e., the “Holy Tongue,” Hebrew) for the liturgy at the feast was more important than intelligibility. Carter then refers to the Muslim diglossia, where the religious language was Arabic. Observe the parallels in the Judean and Muslim diglossias:

	Muslim Diglossia	Judean Diglossia
1. Location	Mecca	Jerusalem
2. H Language	Arabic	Hebrew (leshon ha-kodesh)
3. L Language	Languages other than Arabic	Languages other than Hebrew
4. Intelligibility	Arabic = Low other languages = High	Hebrew = Low other languages = High

A Judean Diglossia Present in the First Century

Other scholars besides Carter, while not using the term diglossia, nevertheless have concluded that a Judean diglossia existed in the first century. Gustaf Dalman, discussing the persistence of Hebrew among the Judeans, stated:

Sure as it is that Aramaic was the common language of the Jews in the time of our Lord, it is also a fact that Hebrew did not entirely drop out of the life of the Jewish people. As the “holy tongue” (*leshon ha-kodesh*), “God’s language” since the creation of the world, the language of Adam, of Abraham, of Joseph, and of the Law, Hebrew was still held to be the real language of Israel [27].

Dalman thus recognized that although Aramaic had superseded Hebrew as the common (L) language of the Judeans, the people continued to believe that Hebrew was the H language (“the real language of Israel”).

Martin Hengel recognized that Hebrew was the H language, with Aramaic and Greek as the L languages: “While Aramaic was the vernacular of ordinary people, and Hebrew the sacred language of religious worship and of scribal discussion, Greek had largely become established as the linguistic medium for trade, commerce, and administration” (1989: 8).

Henri Daniel-Rops saw a parallel between the use of Hebrew in Judean culture and the use of Latin in Roman Catholicism:

But after the return from Babylon the old national language fell slowly into disuse, being ousted for everyday purposes [L language function] by another dialect [Aramaic]. And since at the same time this was just the time at which the groups of learned men of Ezra’s day were setting down the Scriptures in writing, Hebrew becomes “the language of holiness,” *leshon ha-kodesh* or *leshon shakamim*, “the language of the learned,” exactly like Latin of our time. The Law was read in Hebrew in the synagogues; prayers were said in Hebrew, both privately and in the Temple. The doctors of the Law taught in Hebrew [305].

If a diglossia existed among first-century Judeans, we may have a major clue about the interpretation of the phrase other tongues in Acts 2:4. Among first-century Judeans the religious language, *leshon ha-kodesh*, Hebrew, was the language that both Palestinian and Diaspora Judeans expected to hear in the Temple liturgy during the feast of Pentecost.

Although some would suggest that the speaking in “other tongues” occurred at a private home somewhere in Jerusalem, the available evidence suggests that it occurred at or very near the Temple: (1) according to Acts 2:1 the events of Acts 2 occurred during or while the feast was being fulfilled; (2) where would a large crowd of “devout men” (2:5) be while the feast was in progress?; (3) Peter said that it was 9:00a.m. (2:15), which was one of two prime times of Temple prayer and worship (the other was 2:00 p.m.); (4) as Luke himself indicates, the early church met regularly at the Temple (“And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the Temple praising God” — Lk. 24:52-53 NASB); (5) within the Acts 2 narrative Luke reiterates the practice of the early church: (“And day by day continuing with one mind in the Temple” — 2 :46 NASB); (6) the streets of Jerusalem were very narrow (as personal travel or pictures will attest) with little room for a crowd of thousands, whereas the location of the speaking must have been large enough to accommodate not only the 120 disciples of Jesus, but a crowd of thousands; (7) after Peter preached 3,000 were converted (2:41). Not all of the crowd was converted; so the crowd was probably much larger than 3,000. The most likely place for thousands of “devout men” to be gathered during the fulfillment of Pentecost would have been the Temple area.

Instead of *leshon ha-kodesh*, the disciples of Jesus, inspired by the Holy Spirit, began speaking in “other tongues” (i.e., languages other than Hebrew). The speakers spoke Aramaic and Greek, languages they knew, languages that were simultaneously the native languages of the crowd assembled in Acts 2.

The Holy Spirit Kept Giving *Apophtheggesthai*

It is seldom observed that the Greek text of Acts 2:4 does not say the speakers were given “other tongues” to speak. Rather, it says “They began to speak in other tongues as the Holy Spirit “was giving” (*eididou*) “utterance” (*apophtheggesthai*) to them.” *Eididou* is the imperfect, signifying ongoing, continuing action in the past; the infinitive of the verb in question is *apophtheggesthai*. It refers to the kind of authoritative, weighty, important speech characteristic of a prophet or similarly inspired person. As Marshall points out, “it indicates a solemn, weighty, or oracular utterance” (357). The word occurs only three times in the New Testament: Acts 2:4,14; 26:25. In Acts 2:14 Peter stands up and speaks out to the crowd (“raised his voice and ‘declared’ [*apophtheggzato*] to them”). Peter is not given a new language in 2:14; instead, his speech is described as bold, authoritative, and inspired by the Spirit. In Acts 26:1-32 Paul gives his defense before Agrippa. Agrippa, while hearing Paul’s defense, says in v. 24: “Paul. you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you mad.” Paul responds: “I am not out of my mind . . .but I ‘utter’ [*apophtheggomai*] words of sober truth.” The emphasis is on Paul’s manner of speaking.

Apophtheggomai refers, not to the content of the speech, but to “the manner of speaking.” In each instance, the person’s speech is bold, authoritative, and inspired. Acts 2:4 could be translated: “They began to speak in other languages [than Hebrew] as the Spirit kept giving bold, authoritative, inspired speech to them.” This meaning of *apophtheggomai* ties in well with Peter’s answer to the charge of drunkenness.

First, Peter says it’s too early for the speakers to be drunk. Second, he cites the prophecy of Joel, which indicates a time would come when the Spirit would be poured out on God’s people irrespective of their age, gender, or social class. Ordinary people would have extraordinary experiences of the Spirit. Peter adds (v.18) an additional phrase (probably for emphasis) not present in Joel: “and they shall prophesy.” In other words, the Holy Spirit would come upon ordinary people and they would speak out (i.e., prophesy) with bold, authoritative, inspired speech. Some may object that by denying the language miracle interpretation the miraculous is being denied in Acts 2. This is not true because the prophesying by the 120 disciples of Jesus is inspired speech.

Jesus had predicted that the coming of the Holy Spirit would result in ordinary people (the disciples of Jesus) speaking out powerfully (Lk 24:45-49; Acts 1:4-8) under the influence of the Spirit. The bold, authoritative speech by ordinary people (predicted by Jesus) begins in Acts 2 and continues throughout the book of Acts.

The Judean leaders in Jerusalem were amazed at the boldness of the disciples: “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus” (Acts 4:13 NRSV). The Judean

leaders commanded the disciples not to speak in the name of Jesus any more. After further threats, the apostles were released and joined their companions.

The early church gathered and prayed: “And grant to your servants to speak your word with boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:29-30 NRSV). The result is a work of the Spirit strikingly parallel to the events of Acts 2: “When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness” (v 31). Note the sequence and elements involved in both Acts 2 and 4:

Acts 2:1-4	Acts 4:31
1. Disciples gather together (2:1)	1. Disciples gather together
2. Supernatural phenomena: “wind” and “fire” (2:2-3)	2. Supernatural phenomena: “place was shaken”
3. All of the disciples filled with the Spirit	3. All of the disciples filled with the Spirit
4. as the Spirit was giving them utterance (<i>apophthegges thai</i>)	4. and spoke the word of God with boldness (<i>metaparresias</i>)

Bold Witness in “Other Tongues”

When a Gentile interprets the phrase “other tongues” in Acts 2:4, the phrase is usually interpreted to mean “languages other than what they normally spoke.” This interpretation, however, is contradicted by the language situation of first century Judeans, where both the speakers of the “other tongues” and the hearers of the “other tongues” shared the same native languages (Aramaic and Greek). If we approach the phrase from a Judean perspective, the phrase may be interpreted to mean “languages other than Hebrew.”

The crowd (the holy people of God/”devout men” v 5) had gathered in Palestine (the holy land) in Jerusalem (the holy city), at the Temple (the holiest place on earth), expecting trained priests (the holy men) to be conducting the liturgy in Hebrew (*leshon ha-kodesh*) on a holy day. Instead, the disciples of Jesus began to prophesy in “other tongues” with a boldness and authority given by the Holy Spirit. Other than what tongue? In this thoroughly Judean context, the place where a Judean diglossia would most likely exist, a reasonable conclusion is “other than Hebrew” (the “Holy Tongue”).

Emil Schurer said of the use of Hebrew at this time: “Even on the basis of the evidence available prior to the archaeological finds of this century, a limited survival of Hebrew was admitted, but it was confined to the sphere of worship in the Temple...the *leshon ha-kodesh* was primarily the language used in the sanctuary”(10). M. H. Segal expressed shock that someone would suggest that a language other than Hebrew would be used for the Temple liturgy:

The view has also been expressed that the usual language in the Temple was Aramaic, and that it was only in the last few years of its existence that the Pharisees replaced Aramaic in the Temple by MH [Mishnaic Hebrew]. This view is based chiefly on the report that on two occasions High

Priests heard in the Temple *Bath Qol* speaking Aramaic. But surely the evidence of such an isolated legendary report cannot outweigh the evidence or innumerable passages in MH literature which prove that the Temple ritual was carried out in MH...it is incredible that in the Temple of all places, with all its reverence for tradition, Hebrew would have been banished in favor of a new and un-Jewish tongue. Hebrew has remained the exclusive language of the Synagogue to this very day. Even if we had not the evidence of Rabbinic tradition, we should conclude that such was also the case in the ancient Temple [18].

For Judean people to call Hebrew *leshon ha-kodesh* is to designate it as sacred. Bruce J. Malina defines the sacred as “that which is set apart to or for some person. It includes persons, places, things, and times that are symbolized or filled with some sort of set-apartness which we and others recognize. The sacred is what is mine as opposed to what is yours or theirs” [124].

Aramaic and Greek had replaced Hebrew as the native languages for most first-century Judeans. Hebrew was retained, however as the sacred or religious language, in contrast to which Aramaic, Greek, etc., were the languages of everyday life.

The Jewish crowd expected to be hearing the priests conducting the liturgy in *leshon ha-kodesh*, Hebrew, the Temple language, the H language. They had this expectation in spite of the fact that *leshon ha-kodesh* was unintelligible for most of them at that time. Nevertheless, it was the cultural expectation of the entire crowd. They were not expecting to hear ordinary people boldly prophesying in the L languages (Aramaic and Greek) in this situation.

When the disciples began prophesying in the profane “other tongues” (the native tongues of the crowd) with a boldness and authority given by the Spirit (*apophtheggesthai*), some reacted in amazement (2:6-12), while others, angered by the violation of the diglossia, ridiculed the disciples as drunks (2:13). Drunkenness does not impart the ability to speak unlearned languages; it decreases verbal ability and frequently causes speech to become slurred. On the other hand, inebriated persons usually lose their inhibitions. People in an inebriated state engage in behavior they would not dream of doing while sober. Only an inebriated person would be so uninhibited as to ignore the sacred/profane distinction inherent in the Jewish diglossia. Peter answered the charge of drunkenness by citing the prophecy of Joel: the time had come when ordinary people would receive the Spirit and prophesy about Jesus with a boldness, authority, and inspiration given by the same Spirit. Luke describes the commencement of the Spirit-empowered witness of the early church — a witness that violated Judean expectations and norms connected to the Judean diglossia.

The first-century Judean diglossia and its application to Acts 2 may be seen in the following diagram:

H Language	L language
Sacred tongue	Profane tongue
Religious language	Everyday language
HOLY TONGUE	OTHER TONGUES
Hebrew	Aramaic/Greek, etc.

Conclusion

Sometimes approaching a biblical narrative is like being in a foreign land among strangers. Their actions, their language, everything they do seems strange. In short, they are a total mystery. This is analogous to the mystery of what “other tongues” meant in Acts 2.

To the twentieth-century American, the narrative in Acts 2 appears to be a description of a language miracle. From this perspective, what else could “other tongues” mean? Others, aware of Hellenistic settings where ecstatic utterance were routinely practiced, would guess that other tongues refers to disciples being filled with joy, engaging in ecstatic utterances.

Scripture says that “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). God could have produced a language miracle in Acts 2. He also could have produced so much joy in his disciples that they broke forth in ecstatic praise. The question is not, “What is possible with God?” The question is, “What do the Scriptures mean, or what happened when the disciples spoke in ‘other tongues’?”

Examination of the text alone cannot settle this mystery. The text does not define what other tongues meant, nor does the text explain the language situation of first-century Judeans. Without this definition or explanation, several questions have to be answered in order to resolve the mystery. What were the language capacities of the Jewish people at this time? What would the phrase “other tongues” mean to persons living in the first century? The answers to these questions provide the necessary background to understand the context of the narrative in Acts 2.

All biblical scholars agree that biblical texts have contexts. An enhanced understanding of the context aids in illuminating the meaning of the text. When this text is carefully examined in light of the Judean cultural context, a fascinating language differentiation emerges: *leshon ha-kodesh*. This is the premise that one language is more holy, better suited for religious expression, than all other languages. In the minds of Judeans and many of their Jewish descendants, Hebrew, the “Holy Tongue,” is set apart from all other languages. What was the common, ordinary language of the earliest Judeans, evolved into *leshon ha-kodesh*, the sacred language.

Most Americans have not experienced, nor ever will experience, such an extreme differentiation of languages — a differentiation described by linguists as a diglossia. An example of where Americans could have had such an experience would have been attending a Roman Catholic Mass conducted exclusively in Latin. Others could have had the experience in travels to foreign countries. It should not come as a surprise, at any rate, that most contemporary readers, confronted with the phrase “other tongues,” would interpret it to mean “other than their ordinary languages.” Most have never even heard of the term diglossia. They have no idea that the Judeans differentiated between *leshon ha-kodesh*, the “Holy Tongue,” Hebrew, and all “other tongues”.

To know what really happened in Acts 2, it is necessary to ask what this mysterious term “other tongues,” meant in that Judean perspective. The answer to this question results in the surprising discovery of a diglossia in which Hebrew was *leshon ha-kodesh*. Now there is a meaning for “other tongues” that most would never have imagined. Clearly the phrase takes on a new but simple meaning — “other than Hebrew.”

This possibility is intriguing in its simplicity and explanatory power. No longer is it necessary to invent meanings for the phrase “other tongues.” It is no longer necessary to posit an earlier tradition behind the narrative in Acts 2. Nor is there need to be perplexed by the widespread use of the Aramaic and Greek languages as the native tongues of first-century Judeans (both Palestinian and Diaspora). This explanation provides a third alternative, one that fits what is known given the language context of the first century Judeans.

This explanation is equally and immediately applicable today. Most do not believe that they will speak languages they have never learned. They fear the loss of control involved in ecstatic utterances. This third alternative clearly implies that when the Holy Spirit comes upon ordinary people they become bold, effective witnesses for Jesus. The bold witnessing began in Acts 2, “turned the world upside down,” and can still ignite hearts today. This work of the Spirit is desperately needed by the church today.

Some of the most fruitful discoveries in biblical studies resulted from application of the social-science approach to exegesis. This article is an example of the usefulness of such an approach. It appears that the Judean diglossia explanation has been overlooked precisely because a social-science approach was not used in the exegesis of the “other tongues” phrase. The combined insights of linguists, historians, theologians, and experts in Judaica provides this third alternative, which merits further consideration. Perhaps this article will stimulate a reinterpretation of the narrative in Acts 2 and reaffirm the importance of a social-science approach to biblical exegesis.

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The Problem Tongues of 1 Corinthians: *A Re-examination*

by Robert Zerhusen

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In a previous article I suggested an alternative explanation for the “other tongues” of Acts 2:4 (see [A New Look at Tongues](#)). Historical evidence demonstrates that both the Judeans from Palestine and the Diaspora Judeans shared the same native languages (i.e. Aramaic and Greek). The Judean crowd of Acts 2 had expected to be hearing the “holy tongue” (i.e., Hebrew) the proper language of the temple liturgy, the upper language of the Jewish diglossia. Instead the disciples of Jesus when filled with the Spirit prophesied in their own native languages (i.e., Aramaic and Greek) and violated the Jewish diglossia. Luke designates these languages as “other tongues” (i.e., languages other than Hebrew). A natural response after exposure to this alternative explanation is to ask: “That makes sense in the context of Acts 2; how though does it make sense of the ‘tongues’ of 1 Corinthians 14?” This article provides an explanation for the “problem tongues” of 1 Corinthians 12-14.

Because of its geographical location and its commercial prosperity, the city of Corinth in Paul’s time was a highly multilingual environment. This is admitted by scholars of all persuasions; as Gordon Fee puts it, “the phenomenon of different languages would also have been commonplace in a cosmopolitan center such as Corinth” (664). From the opposite end of the theological spectrum, Robert Thomas writes:

“Barbarians” was a general designation for those of the first-century world who were ignorant of the Greek languages. The city of Corinth abounded with such visitors. Thus the illustration was full of meaning for these residents. Most of them doubtless were familiar with the frustration of encountering another intelligent person with whom it was impossible to converse. Visitors from other linguistic backgrounds could not comprehend the Corinthian speech any more than the Corinthians understood theirs [128].

This means that for many in Corinth, Greek was not their first or native language. Instead, they spoke a non-Greek language as their first or native language, and Greek was a second language for them. Vern Poythress also sees this possibility: “A Corinthian tongue-speaker might speak in a human language unknown to the whole assembly, but known somewhere in the world” (133). A. Robertson and A. Plummer point out the frustration that Corinthians may have experienced:

All kinds of languages met at commercial Corinth with its harbors on two seas, and difference of language was a frequent barrier to common action. Moreover, it was well known how exasperating it could be for two intelligent persons to be unintelligible to one another [310].

Surprisingly, Robert H. Gundry claims:

The other presupposition underlying Paul's words about the unintelligibility of tongues is that in the ordinary church meeting at Corinth there would not be numbers of people with varied linguistic backgrounds [303].

A church tends to reflect its environment. As the city of Corinth was a highly multilingual environment, we would expect to see this reflected in the church.

As a major seaport city, Corinth would have a constant influx and varied mix of visitors, travelers, temporary residents, freedmen, and slaves. Jerome Murphy O'Connor says of the Corinthian population:

In a highly developed commercial city such as Corinth it has been calculated that the population was made up of one third free full citizens, one-third freedmen (ex-slaves whose freedom was restricted by commitments to their former owners), and one-third slaves [xi].

These groups of people provided sources for many human languages. Visitors, travelers, and temporary residents would come from all over the Roman Empire bringing their non-Greek native languages with them. Freedmen and slaves would also come from areas where Greek was not the native language and another language would be their native or first language.

The Text of 1 Corinthians 14: Some Observations

Careful observation of the text provides clues about the nature of the "problem tongues" at Corinth. Consider the following inferences derived either from common knowledge about Corinth or directly from the text of 1 Corinthians 14. These inferences are stated as propositions, below, with the source of each indicated in parentheses.

1. The native language of the city of Corinth was Greek (common knowledge).
2. Prophesying would have been in the Greek language (common knowledge).
3. Prophesying (being in Greek) was understood by all who were present at the service (common knowledge).
4. Prophesying was edifying to all (14:3) because it was understood by all (proposition 3).
5. The "problem tongue" at Corinth was not the Greek language (common knowledge).
6. The problem tongue(s) were spoken primarily to God (14:2).
7. The problem tongue(s) were not known or understood by most of the Corinthian congregation (14:2,14,16).

8. The problem tongue when interpreted was interpreted into the Greek Language (common knowledge).
9. The problem tongue (even when not interpreted into Greek) built up the tongue-speaker (14:4,16-17).
10. Paul desired that all of the Corinthians have the freedom to engage in problem tongues (14:5, 39).
11. Paul preferred prophesying in Greek to uninterpreted tongues (14:5).
12. Prophesying in Greek was superior to speaking in uninterpreted tongues (14:5).
13. The problem tongues could be interpreted (14:5, 13, 27).
14. If the problem tongue was interpreted, it was no longer inferior to prophesying (14:5).
15. The problem tongue could sometimes be interpreted by the tongue-speaker himself (14:5,13, 27).
16. Sometimes the tongue-speaker could not interpret the problem tongue (14:28).
17. Once interpreted the problem tongue ceased to be a problem tongue (common knowledge).
18. An uninterpreted problem tongue consisted of words (14:19).
19. An uninterpreted tongue could not convey revelation, knowledge, prophecy, or teaching (14:6).
20. When a problem tongue was uttered (without interpretation), the tongue-speaker's Spirit acts, but his Mind does not produce fruit (14:14).
21. The problem tongue was used by the tongue-speaker for worship or devotional purposes: for prayer (14:14, 15, 16, 17); for singing (14:15); for blessing/praising God (14:16); and for giving thanks to God (14: 16-17).
22. Paul spoke in tongues outside of the church meetings (14:18).
23. Paul preferred "five intelligible words" to "countless, myriads of words" in an uninterpreted tongue (14:19).
24. Paul told the Corinthians that they must use their physical organ of speech (i.e., tongue) to produce intelligible speech. If they do not, they will be speaking uselessly into the air (14:9).
25. Paul asserts that there are many voices in the world, and yet none is meaningless in itself (14:10).
26. Paul asserts that if people do not understand each other's voices, they become "barbarians" to each other (14:11).
27. If all of the Corinthians engage in problem tongues simultaneously (without interpretation), this leads the unlearned and unbelieving visitors to conclude that they are just "raving" (14:23).
28. If all of the Corinthians prophesy, the unlearned and unbelievers overhear and could possibly be converted to the Christian faith (14:24-25).
29. Multiple individuals at the Corinthian worship service brought multiple problem tongues (14:26).

30. If someone speaks in a particular problem tongue (singular), this should be limited to two or at most three per meeting (14:27).
31. One tongue-speaker should speak at a time; many should not speak simultaneously (14:27).
32. One of the tongue-speakers must interpret the particular problem tongue that is used (14:27).
33. If there is no person capable of competently interpreting a problem tongue (neither among the tongue-speakers nor among the interpreters), the tongue-speaker should keep this particular tongue out of the public service (14:28).
34. The word tongue is used in 1 Corinthians 14 sometimes in the singular (14:2, 4, 13, 14, 19, 26, 27), and sometimes in the plural (14:5, 6, 18, 21, 22, 23, 39).
35. The problem tongues carried cognitive information (e.g., “giving thanks:” 14:16-17; lyrics of a song: 14:15; and words: 14:19).

These inferences provide parameters in the interpretation of 1 Cor 14. Three key questions need to be answered: (1) was the problem tongue a language of some sort? (2) If it is established that the tongues were languages, were they heavenly/angelic languages or human languages? (3) Did the tongue-speaker know or understand the tongue in which he was speaking?

Languages or Non-cognitive, Non-languages?

A common position among scholars is to view the problem tongues of Corinth as “ecstatic utterances.” William Barclay provides an example: “What happened was this — at a church service someone would fall into an ecstasy and pour out a torrent of unintelligible sounds in no known language” (111). A. C. Thiselton describes these utterances in a similar fashion: “Speaking in tongues denotes a kind of non-conceptual, pre-rational outlet for a powerful welling up of emotions and experiences” (30).

“Ecstatic utterances” is a misnomer for these utterances, however, as Poythress observes: “But the label ‘ecstatic utterance’ describes the psychological state of the speaker, whereas the description in terms of ‘a human language foreign to the speaker’ deals with the scientific classification of the utterance (the speech product). This is mixing apples and oranges” (130). Since Paul says nothing about the emotional or mental state of the tongue-speaker, we should restrict ourselves to analysis of the speech product. I suggest that rather than label these as “ecstatic utterances,” we should designate them “non-cognitive, non-language utterances” (henceforth “NC-NLU’s”). Non-cognitive because the mind is not involved in the production of these utterances. Non-language utterances because they are not any form of language (angelic, heavenly, or human).

There are some major difficulties with the “NCNLU’s” view. First, there is no reference in the text of 1 Corinthians 14 to the emotional or mental state of the tongue-speaker. Paul’s emphasis throughout the chapter seems to be on whether or not the problem tongue is interpreted. Fee recognizes this emphasis when he writes: “The problem is not speaking in tongues per se but speaking in tongues without interpretation — which from the context seems very likely what the

Corinthians were doing (659). Second, the Greek word *ekstatikos* does not appear anywhere in the Greek text of 1 Corinthians 14. The regulations Paul lays down in 1 Corinthians 14:27-28 presuppose that the tongue-speaker is completely in control of himself and his utterances. Third, in 1 Corinthians 12:10 Paul says some have ability in “kinds [gene] of tongues.” If NC-NLU’s are not languages of any kind and have no cognitive structure, how can they be differentiated into “kinds” or “classes”? Differentiation into individual, particular tongues seems to imply languages of some kind.

Fourth, when Paul says “tongues of men and even of angels” (1 Cor 13:1), he cannot be referring to the “NCNLU’s of men and even of angels”; in this verse “tongues” clearly means “languages.” Similarly, when Paul cites Old Testament precedent in 1 Corinthians 14:21-22 he appeals to past experience of the unintelligible human languages of Israel’s conquerors (i.e., “by men of other tongues”). The Old Testament context prophesying in the intelligible human language (i.e., Hebrew) was intended for believers (“prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers” — 1 Cor 14:22b). When this was rejected by Israel’s unbelief, they received unintelligible languages (“and tongues is not a sign for believers but for unbelievers — 1 Cor 14:22a) as a sign of God’s judgment. Throughout 1 Corinthians 14 Paul argues for the superiority of prophesying over uninterpreted problem tongues. So it makes sense for him to cite Old Testament precedent in support of this argument. It should be noted that both in the actual Old Testament context and in Paul’s choice of words (“other tongues”), he is referring to human languages, not NC-NLU’s.

Fifth, although some scholars (most notably Johannes Behm) attempt to argue that Hellenistic parallels demonstrate the problem tongues to be NC-NLU’s, Christopher Forbes in his book *Prophecy and Inspired Speech: In Early Christianity and its Hellenistic Environment* convincingly argues against this theory. D. A. Carson says of Behm’s argument:

More careful word studies have shown that in none of the texts adduced by Behm or the standard lexica does *glossa* ever denote non-cognitive utterance. The utterance may be enigmatic and incomprehensible, but not non-cognitive. The ecstatic utterances of the pagan religions prove less suitable a set of parallels than was once thought [80-81].

Sixth, as noted above, sometimes *tongue* is singular, and sometimes plural: *tongues*. Can there be singular or plural NC-NLU’s? Did Paul engage in multiple NC-NLU’s (1 Cor. 14:18)? References to singular (“tongue”) and plural (“tongues”) fit the hypothesis of language (singular) versus languages (plural) much better.

Seventh, NC-NLU’s would involve random, arbitrary sounds or syllables, which would not bear any cognitive content. The text of 1 Corinthians 14 says precisely the opposite. The problem tongue(s) of 1 Corinthians 14 involve the lyrics of songs (1 Cor 14:15) and expressions of prayer, praise, and “giving thanks.” The problem tongue(s) also involve *words*. In 1 Corinthians 14:19 Paul says that he prefers “five intelligible words” to “myriads, countless words in a tongue.” This reference to “myriads, countless words in a tongue (singular/*glossa*) is clearly a reference to a language of some kind. Words bear cognitive content and serve as the building blocks of all spoken languages.

Eighth, NC-NLU's cannot be interpreted or translated. An utterance that is non-cognitive (not consisting of words or conventional structure of any kind) cannot be translated. Ernest Best cites a famous example of a NC-NLU when he cites Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*: "'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimbe in the wabe: All mimsy were the borogroves, and the mome raths ootigrabe" (57). This is incapable of translation as it contains no cognitive information or meaning and is not a language. It cannot be translated into any language (including Greek). As W. F. Orr and J. A. Walther observed regarding the interpretation of tongues: "If the reference is to 'languages,' this should be rendered 'translation'" (280). If the reference is to genuine NC-NLU's, then interpretation or translation cannot take place.

Gundry notes: "The term interpretation (*dierneneuo*), used frequently in connexion with glossolalia in 1 Corinthians, normally refers to translating a language when used in such a context" (300). J. G. Davies, discussing interpretation in the Septuagint and the New Testament, writes:

Thus of the twenty-one instances of the use of *hermeneuein* and its cognates in the LXX and the New Testament, apart from the seven occurrences in 1 Cor. 12 and 14, one refers to a satire or figurative saying, two to an explanation or exposition, and eighteen have the primary meaning of translation...the evidence is such as to warrant the assertion that the word used by Paul of interpreting glossolalia carries with it the strong suggestion of translating a foreign language [230].

Robertson and Plummer add: "The *dia* in *dierneneuein* may indicate either 'being a go-between' or 'thoroughness.' One who interprets his own words intervenes between unintelligible utterance and the hearers" (307). Isn't a "go-between" in the interpretation of a source language (i.e., the problem tongue at Corinth) into the target language (i.e., Greek) a translator?

Thiselton, to maintain his NC-NLU's position, attempts to argue that "interpretation" in 1 Cor 14 does not mean interpretation or translation, but "to put into words" (15-36). But what occurred when a problem tongue at Corinth was "interpreted" into Greek, the language of the congregation? If we diagram this process, it appears to be an exact description of translation:

problem tongue — >	"interpretation" — >	into Greek language
source language — >	translation — >	into target language

Thiselton also seems to be unaware that there are levels of translation, as David Crystal observes:

Word-for-word. Each word...in the source language is translated by a word (or morpheme) in the target language. The result often makes no sense, especially when idiomatic constructions are used....*Literal translation.* The linguistic structure of the source text is followed, but is normalized according to the rules of the target language....*Free translation.* The linguistic structure of the source language is ignored, and an equivalent is found based on the meaning it conveys [344].

Thus if the problem tongue is “put into words,” it may not be a word-for-word translation or even a literal translation — it may be *free* translation.

Crystal, a linguist, defines translation as “conversion from one language into another” (432). The conversion of the problem tongue into the target language (Greek) by means of interpretation fits this definition of translation well because the evidence suggests that the problem tongues were not NC-NLU’s, but were languages of some sort — languages that could be translated into Greek. For the remainder of this article, therefore, I will use *language(s)* instead of *problem tongue(s)*, and *translation* instead of *interpretation*.

Angelic/Heavenly Languages or Human Languages?

The very strong arguments that can be brought to bear against the NC-NLU’s view lead me to conclude that the problem tongues of Corinth were languages of some sort. The two major contenders here are angelic or heavenly languages versus human languages. Fee, a proponent of the heavenly language view, is quite certain the problem languages were not human languages: Paul’s whole argument is predicated on its unintelligibility to both speaker and hearer, he certainly does not envisage someone’s being present who would be able to understand it because it was also an earthly language” (598). Dale B. Martin, another scholar who maintains this view, likewise asserts: “There is no indication that Paul viewed glossolalia as human language” (267). This view like the NC-NLU’s view, also suffers from major problems.

First, careful examination of 1 Corinthians 14 reveals no references to “heaven” or “angels.” We would expect some reference to such a fantastic ability of it were being practiced by the Corinthian language-speakers. All we have, however-and we shall examine it shortly — is a reference to angelic languages in 1 Corinthians 13:1.

Because there is no explicit reference (apart from 1 Corinthians 13:1), some have tried to argue against human languages based upon the Greek word *phōnōn*, which is translated as “languages” (NIV, NASB), “voices” (KJV) in 1 Corinthians 14:10-11. Robert Saucy states this argument when he writes:

Several things, however, make it difficult to see the tongues of 1 Corinthians as human languages....Most importantly, Paul uses foreign ‘languages’ (a different word than used for ‘tongues’) as an analogy for tongues (1 Cor. 14: 1-13). Something is not usually identical to that with which it is said to be analogous [131].

Fee concurs with Saucy: “Moreover, his rise of earthly languages as an analogy in 14:10-12 implies that it is not a known earthly language, since a thing is not usually identical with that to which it is analogous” (598).

Does *phōnōn*, however, mean “languages”? Paul writes: “There are I don’t know how many [Barrett, 319] *gene phōnōn* [kinds of voices], there are in the world and yet none is voiceless” (a play on words in the Greek text meaning “none is meaningless”). “Therefore if I do not know the power of the voice” (Gordon Clark defines this well: “The ‘power’ of speech is intelligibility” [231]), “I will be a barbarian [*barbaros* -Hans Conzelmann says of this word:

“the basic meaning of *barbaros*, ‘foreigner,’ lit. ‘gibberish talker’”[-236] to the one speaking, and the speaking in me a Barbarian.” R. C. H. Lenski sees that *pliolton* does not mean language here in 1 Corinthians 14:10-11:

While it is true that in the classics *phonai* at times means “languages,” and some interpreters think that this word has that meaning here, even they pause before *gene phonon* “kinds of languages.” We might be inclined to accept “languages” as the meaning in the present connection because this rendering would support the fact that “tongues” signify all kinds of foreign languages. But *aphonon* which occurs in the next clause does not suit the idea of “languages.”...We are obliged to translate “There are so many kinds of voices,” sounds made by the throat and the mouth. And not a single kind is ‘voiceless’ or soundless so that it cannot be heard.” This proposition is self-evident....But unless Paul comprehends the meaning of what this voice communicates, he will be a barbarian (a foreigner) to the man who is speaking with that voice. Paul, too, on his part will consider the man a barbarian (foreigner) [587-88].

John Calvin also saw 1 Corinthians 14:10-11 as a reference to “kinds of voices”:

Paul now speaks more generally; for he now brings in the natural sounds of all the animal kingdom. Here he uses the word for unintelligible, i.e., as opposed to a clear, distinct sound. For the barking of dogs is different from the neighing of horses; the roaring of lions, from the braying of asses. Every single type of bird has its own particular way of singing or chirping. The whole of the natural order, which God has ordained, therefore calls for the making of distinguishable sounds [289].

Whether Paul is referring merely to human voices (Lenski) or to the whole natural world (Calvin), he is not referring to human languages as an analogy to the problem languages. Rather, Paul is making assertions that all voices are inherently intelligible, but if we do not understand the voice of another human being, we become “gibberish talkers” to each other. The Greeks prided themselves on their language and thought others had inferior languages. Paul appeals to this pride, arguing that when untranslated languages are used people become barbarians to each other.

A second problem with the heavenly language view is the reference to “kinds of languages” in 1 Corinthians 12:10. Is this a reference to multiple angelic languages? In the multilingual setting of the city of Corinth multiple human languages and translators would have been much more advantageous than angelic languages.

Third, if someone should counter that the angelic or heavenly languages were given for devotional purposes, this leads to some questions. According to the Greek construction of 1 Corinthians 12:30 not everyone at Corinth could engage in multiple languages or translate. Why would some believers (and not all) receive a greater capacity to worship the Lord? Furthermore, 1 Corinthians 13:8 says that languages will cease at the coming of the *eschaton*. Does this mean that multiple human languages will cease, a true reversal of the tower of Babel incident? Or will angelic languages cease? In answer someone may claim that this does not refer to the cessation of angelic languages; it means, rather, that human beings will no longer be able to use angelic

languages with the coming of the eschaton. But why would an ability in angelic languages be present with the church before the eschaton and then cease when it would be most advantageous?

Fourth, proponents of this view may appeal to Judean sources such as the *Testament of Job* as evidence that the problem languages of Corinth were angelic languages. Forbes observes that this work may have been redacted by Montanists, Christians, or Gnostics (183-87). There is another problem with appeals to Judean tradition and belief about angelic language. In Judean tradition there is also a belief that as the “holy tongue,” Hebrew is the language (singular) of heaven. Harry M. Orlinsky provides an example of this mentality:

The idea that God and the angels spoke Hebrew is, of course, biblically derived...what other language was employed in the Garden of Eden, and before the Fall and Dispersion of Man?...and reference to this fact is found also, e.g., in the book of Jubilees, one of the oldest books in the Jewish apocryphal literature. So that we should not be surprised when we learn that an 11th century monk, who was getting old enough to realize that his days on earth were numbered, began hurriedly to study Hebrew, for he knew that after he died and went to heaven, he would have to speak and understand Hebrew, Biblical Hebrew, if he wanted to converse with the angels and with the notable worthies who had preceded him from this earth [426].

Why should the *Testament of Job* be determinative rather than the Hebrew as the language of heaven tradition? Thiselton says of the angelic language view: “The suggestion is purely speculative, since with the possible exception of xiii:1, there seem to be no traces in these chapters of any explicit claim by the Corinthians that they were actually speaking the language of heaven itself” (32).

Fifth, consideration of the only reference in all of scripture to angelic languages (1 Cor 13:1) is also problematic for the angelic language view. Martin says of 1 Corinthians 13:1:

Paul’s statement about “tongues of men” in 1 Corinthians 13:1 is in opposition to “tongues of angels.” The latter refers to “glossolalia,” the former to normal speech. The construction is the rhetorical commonplace “from the lesser to the greater” and may be paraphrased as follows: “Even if I have power to speak all human languages...or, to mention something more impressive, even angelic languages...I am nothing.” The first refers to human (normal) language, the latter to heavenly (esoteric) — that is, glossolalic – language [267].

According to Martin, the “tongues of men” is hypothetical, while the “tongues of angels” is actual. It seems Martin has reversed the Greek construction. In the Greek of 1 Corinthians 13:1 “*ean*” is followed by the subjunctive mood (i.e., 3rd class conditional). Gundry, recognizing this construction in the Greek, wrote:

Even more to the point, if one reads further it becomes apparent that the speaking in tongues of angels does not at all have to indicate factual reality in Paul’s mind (Paul uses *ean* with the subjunctive throughout verses 1-3) and indeed probably does not: “And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith,...if I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned...(1 Cor 13:2f.). As matters of fact, Paul does not claim to possess all prophetic insight and knowledge or to have all faith or to have given up all his possessions or to have delivered his body to be burned obviously not, since he is writing a letter!). These are “suppose-so” statements only partially true of Paul’s experience. By the same

token, although Paul claims to speak in tongues, it is not necessary to infer that he claims to speak in the tongues of angels. In fact, the analogy of the following parallel expressions indicates that he does not here claim to do so. Speaking with the tongues of angels corresponds to the unreal “all’s” in the succeeding statements [301].

H. A. W. Meyer says of the contrast between “languages of men” and “languages of angels” that this “is only supposed as an imaginary case to heighten the contrast” (368). Meyer’s and Gundry’s comments are in direct contradiction to Martin’s analysis. Martin ignores the *ean* followed by the subjunctive mood construction found in 1 Corinthians 13:13, and claims that the “tongues of men” is hypothetical while the “tongues of angels” is actual. In reality, the construction says the opposite: namely, that the speaking in the “languages of men” was actual, and the speaking in the “languages of angels” was hypothetical.

Careful examination of 1 Corinthians 13:13 indicates a clear pattern found in all three verses. Paul begins with an actual ability or action (“speaking in the languages of men,” “prophesying,” “having faith,” “giving possessions”), which he then takes to the extreme (“speaking the languages of angels,” “knowing all mysteries and having all knowledge,” “moving mountains,” “giving my body to be burned”) to make the rhetorical and practical point that even at the zenith of the spectrum, without love these things are profitless. If this is a valid analysis of the Greek construction of 1 Corinthians 13:13, we also have a major clue about the gift of languages and translation (1 Cor 12:10, 28, 30): these were abilities that involved human languages. Again, as was said earlier, considering the highly multilingual setting of Corinth, we should not be surprised that persons with abilities in multiple human languages and translation should be important in Paul’s mind and in the workings of the Corinthian church.

Languages Known and Understood by the Tongue-Speakers?

From the analysis so far we know that the problem tongues of Corinth were (1) non-Greek human languages; (2) languages that, when translated into Greek, would cease to be a problem; and (3) non-Greek languages that were used for the purpose of worship by the language-speaker: prayer (14:14), singing (14:15), giving thanks (14:16-17), and blessing/praising God (14:16).

Some scholars believe that a language miracle was occurring in which the speaker was speaking a human language that he had never learned before and did not know or understand. They often appeal to Acts 2 to demonstrate miraculous language speaking. As I pointed out in my [earlier article](#), however, the language situation of first-century Judeans and the Judean diglossia connected with the temple liturgy in Jerusalem, shows the language miracle view to be unsupported by historical or linguistic evidence.

The miraculous element in Acts 2 was the prophesying by Jesus’ followers, not the speaking of native languages familiar to both the speakers (the disciples of Jesus) and the hearers (the Judean crowd gathered for the feast of Pentecost) .

If the appeal to Acts 2 fails, proponents of the language miracle attempt to prove that the language-speakers in 1 Corinthians 14 did not know or understand the language they were using. As in Acts 2 it is assumed that the language-speakers were speaking languages with which they were not familiar.

Careful examination of the text of 1 Corinthians 14 reveals that Paul never explicitly states whether or not the language-speaker knew or understood the language that he was using. In fact, Paul's emphasis throughout the chapter is, as Antoinette C. Wire observes, on the hearer of the problem languages, not the speakers: "He takes the hearer rather than the speaker as his touchstone, rejecting tongues because the hearers do not understand them" (144).

Before we conclude that the language-speaker did know and understand the language he was using, let's consider some of the "proof texts" often used to suggest that the language-speaker did not know or understand his language (i.e., 1 Cor 14:2,13, 14, 15-19, 28).

1 Corinthians 14:2

Some will claim that when Paul says: "If anyone speaks in a language, he does not speak to men but to God, for no one hears (i.e., hears with understanding), he speaks mysteries with [his] spirit," this proves the language-speaker doesn't know the language. As has already been noted,, however, the primary function of the problem languages in 1 Corinthians 14 is to worship God (i.e., "does not speak to men but to God") Benny C. Aker disagrees but makes some good points:

Specifically, what does it mean to say that when one speaks in a tongue, he speaks to God? In the view which looks somewhat negatively upon the gift of tongues, speaking to God assumes a unidirectional meaning; thus tongues-speech is addressed to God, and prophecy to people I submit, then, that "does not speak to people but to God" (14:2) has reference to understanding instead of direction. In fact, in verse 2 the clause "but speaks mysteries by the Spirit says that very thing. The reason is that God in his omniscience knows/understands but people do not....One really does not speak, then, unless it is understood by others, which is the social dynamic in a Mediterranean society . Something has to be said about the sociological significance of tongues and the lack of understanding that results when tongue speaking is not interpreted. For one person to do something which relates only to an individual such as being personally edified and not being concerned about interpreting the tongues and thus edifying the group — is quite shameful in a kinship oriented society [20-21].

Aker is mistakenly arguing for an "either/or" situation, when it was a "both/and" situation. Yes, the problem language was unidirectional (directed to God), but Paul is also discussing the lack of understanding on the part of the hearers of the problem language.

Dyadic or individualistic Personality?

Recall Wire's observation that for Paul throughout the discussion in 1 Corinthians 14 "the hearer is the touchstone." Aker is correct that in a Mediterranean culture (which is dyadic), it would be shameful to speak only in your language (thus edifying yourself), while being unconcerned about translating for the sake of others.

Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey explain the differences between dyadic and individualistic persons:

The personal, individualistic, self-centered focus typical of contemporary American experience was simply not of concern to first-century Mediterraneans. Given their cultural experience such

self-concerned individualism would appear quite boring and inconsequential. For group survival it would be dysfunctional. And it would not be selectively unattended to. To understand the persons who populate the pages of the New Testament, then, it is important not to consider them as individualistic. They did not seek a personal, individualistic savior or anything else of a personal, individualistic sort. If those people were not individualistic, what or how were they? We submit that what characterized first-century Mediterranean people was not individualistic, but “dyadic” or group-oriented personality. For people of that time and place, the basic most elementary unit of social analysis is not the individual person but the “dyad,” a person in relation with and connected to at least one other social unit, in particular, the family [73].

Paul’s interest throughout 1 Corinthians is constantly the effects upon the group. Neyrey uses 1 Corinthians as an example of dyadic concerns:

Group orientation indicates that individuals should always “seek the good of the neighbor” (1 Cor 10:24) and not pursue individualistic objectives. Strong individualists at Corinth seem to have bucked the sense of accountability to the group either by an unseemly marriage (5:12) or by eating proscribed foods (1 Cor 8:1-2, 7:11). Paul points out how the incestuous marriage harmed the group as leaven pollutes flour (1 Cor 5:6-8); the unscrupulous eating of meats sacrificed to idols causes scandal to some, destroying the weak person for whom Christ died (1 Cor 8:11) Promoting one’s interests, then, offends the group, and so comes under censure....Prophecy is better than tongues, for it “builds up the group whereas the speakers in tongues “edify” only themselves (1 Cor 14:1-3). Yet both prophecy and tongues should be regulated and subjected to controls for the sake of the group’s “edification” (1 Cor 14:26-33). Evidently individualism is the nemesis of group orientation [190].

We know that Corinth was a highly multilingual seaport city with a transient mixed population. If people began to freely worship God in the language with which they were most familiar (without translation in a non-Greek language), what would happen?

When a person is most freely worshipping God, he will use his first language, his native language (i.e., the language of the heart, the language with which he is most familiar), rather than a second language, a language with which he is much less familiar. There were many people at Corinth whose second language was Greek but whose heart language was some other language. When one of these people spoke out in his or her heart language (a language from a more remote area, say Lycaonian or Demotic Egyptian), the speaker would certainly know his or her own language, but unfortunately, the group or congregation would not know or understand that language.

How would Paul describe this from the perspective of the hearers of this unintelligible language? From their perspective “no one would hear” (with understanding) the language speaker would be “speaking mysteries from the heart” (cf. Paul’s description of the spirit of man in 1 Corinthians 2:11: “For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit [*pneuma*] of the man which is in him?” (NASB).

The phrase “for no one hears” should not be taken absolutely, as Boyce W. Blackwelder notes: “‘No one’ is not to be taken in the absolute sense. The speaker would understand and give the interpretation (cf. vv 5, 6, 13-17), or someone else conversant with the particular language could do so (cf. vv 27-28; 12:30)” (65). Charles Hodge said the same thing: “The meaning is, not that no man living, but that no man present, could understand” (157). Thomas correctly defines the

phrase: “It means that ‘no one in the local gathering was of the particular linguistic background represented by the tongues message’ (118).

Native Languages

We can now state the nature of the languages problem at Corinth: Corinth was a highly multilingual seaport city in which people would sometimes speak out in the Corinthian church service, worshiping God in the language with which they were most familiar (their native language, first language, language of the heart) without translation.

This explanation (1) fits the multilingual setting (which all acknowledge); (2) fits all 35 Scriptural observations listed above; (3) explains why the language-speaker is using a problem language to worship God; (4) explains how the language-speaker can be edified even when the language is not translated; (5) explains why Paul would say: “I want you all to speak in [your] languages” (1 Cor 14:5); “Do not forbid to speak in languages” (1 Cor 14:39). In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul as a dyadic personality must reconcile two competing values. On the one hand, everything must be done in such a way that the benefit of the group is maintained (thus he says: “Seek to build up the church that you may abound” (1 Cor 14:12); “Let all things be for building up” (1 Cor 14:26). Yet, on the other hand, Paul wants people whose native languages are not Greek to be able to freely worship God in the language most familiar to them (as long as they translate).

It should be noted that in 1 Corinthians 14:5, 13, and 27 Paul tells the language-speakers to translate their own languages (“unless he translates” — 14:5; “that he may translate” — 14:13 ; and “let two or at most three and let one [of them] translate” — 14:27). In 1 Corinthians 14:28, however, Paul says that in a situation in which there is no “translator” (notice that *diermeneueto* is a noun), the language speaker should “keep silent in the church and speak to himself and to God.” If speaking in languages and translation were miraculous (as some say) then the situation described in 1 Corinthians 14:28 could never occur. The language-speaker is instructed to “pray that he might translate” (1 Cor 14:13). If translation is a supernatural ability that the language-speaker or others with this supernatural ability could practice, then the situation of 1 Corinthians 14:28 could never arise! Either the language-speaker would translate, or one of the supernaturally gifted translators could translate. But in fact the situation of 14:28 could arise, according to Paul. How do we explain this?

First of all, some misunderstand Paul’s meaning in 14:13. They assume that language-speaking and translation were supernatural abilities practiced by members of the Corinthian church. Not all the manifestations of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12 are miraculous abilities. In fact, according to Paul something can be a manifestation of the Spirit and not be a miraculous ability. Even Fee, a staunch charismatic scholar says of the “gifts” of “administration,” (literally, “steersmanship” — Mitchell: 163) and “helps”:

“The sixth and seventh items (lit. ‘helps’ and ‘guidances’), which are deeds of service, are noteworthy in three ways: (a) they are the only two not mentioned again in the rhetoric of vv 29-30; (b) they are not mentioned again in the NT; (c) they do not appear to be of the same kind, that is, supernatural endowments” (618-19).

Carson notes the same reality: “It is at any rate very clear that these spiritual gifts are not among those frequently regarded today as ‘charismatic,’ even though Paul is happy to think of them that way” (41). Discussing the “gift” lists in the New Testament Carson writes:

The lists as a whole contain an impressive mixture of what some might label “natural” and “supernatural” endowments, or “spectacular” and “more ordinary” gifts. This is in line with what we have gleaned from Paul’s argument in 12:1-7. The intriguing thing is that Paul himself makes no such distinctions: it is the same God who works all things in all men. Paul’s overarching doctrine of divine sovereignty is precisely what can prompt him to ask the Corinthians elsewhere: “For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” This suggests in turn that Paul would not have been uncomfortable with spiritual gifts made up of some mix of so-called natural talent what he would consider still to be God’s gift and of specific, Spirit-energized endowment [37].

Watson makes the same point: “Paul makes it clear that the gracious gifts of the Spirit need in no way be striking, spectacular, ‘out of this world’” (131). Discussing “helps” and “steersmanship,” Watson says these were “gifts which are in no way striking or extraordinary, such as ability to help others or power to guide them. The Corinthians need to be reminded that the latter are every bit as much the work of the Spirit of God as the former” (137).

This leads to an important conclusion. If some of the manifestations of the Spirit (or “gifts”) are not miraculous abilities (e.g., “steersmanship” and “helps”), then abilities in multiple languages and translations of multiple languages (1 Cor 12:10, 28, 30) could also be non-miraculous manifestations of the Spirit. This conclusion follows directly from observation of the text and cannot be refuted on exegetical grounds. We should not be surprised that in multilingual Corinth of all places, Paul would consider those with natural abilities in languages and translation to be essential persons in the local church. While I would maintain that these particular abilities were not miraculous, I do nevertheless believe that miraculous abilities (e.g., “workings of power” and “healings”) were also present.

Once we see the possibility that ability in languages and translation was not miraculous, we can return to the 1 Corinthians 14:13, 28 dilemma. Since many assume that the language-speaker does not know or understand the language he is using, they ask: “If the tongue-speaker understands and knows the language, why does Paul tell him to ask God for help in translating his own language in 14:13?” This question shows linguistic naiveté, because as Crystal observes, translating is one of the most difficult tasks imaginable:

It is sometimes said that there is no task more complex than translation — a claim that can be readily believed when all the variables involved are taken into account. Translators not only need to know their source language well; they must also have a thorough understanding of the field of knowledge covered by the source text, and of any social, cultural, or emotional connotations that need to be specified in the target language if the intended effect is to be conveyed. The same special awareness needs to be present for the target language so that points of special phrasing, contemporary fashions of taboos in expression, local (e.g., regional) expectations, and so on, can all be taken into account [344].

Since translation involves the factors that Crystal refers to here, wouldn't it make sense for Paul to tell the language-speaker to ask God for help in translating into Greek — his second language, one that he may not know nearly as well as he knows his own native language?

This also helps to explain the relationship between 1 Corinthians 14:13 and 14:28. If the language-speaker is competent to translate his language into Greek, he should do so, or one of the translators (who knows both the language of the language-speaker and Greek) ought to translate. If none of the translators present knows the particular language however, and if the language-speaker engages in a local language from some distant part of the Roman Empire, and he is not very familiar with Greek (or competent in Greek), he should “keep silent in the church” (i.e., keep that particular language out of the service for the sake of the group). Blackwelder notes:

This implies that a person needing an interpreter is able to ascertain in advance whether or not an interpreter is present. This could not be done if nonhuman or heavenly languages were involved; for if that were the case the interpretation would have to come as a special disclosure in each instance, hence a speaker could never be certain that he should present a message [67].

Paul advocates this strategy in 14:18-19. Although he engages in multiple languages outside the church, in the church meeting he would rather speak “five intelligible words in order that I might instruct you” than “innumerable words in a language” (singular) that they don't know.

Some mistakenly believe that Paul in 14:18 refers to “private-prayer languages.” For example, Craig S. Keener writes: “Paul himself prayed in tongues privately more than all the Corinthians, though he did not make a big deal about it (1 Cor 14:18)” (99). Carson goes further and claims: “The only possible conclusion is that Paul exercised his remarkable tongues gift in private” (105).

Calvin saw another possibility, as he explained the meaning of Paul's words:

You should realize that what I am saying ought not to give you grounds for suspicion, as if I would deprecate something that I personally lack, for if we had a contest about languages not one of you would be able to hold a candle to me. But while I could make a good showing in that sort of thing, I am more concerned about upbuilding” (294).

Where did Paul use these multiple human languages? Thomas answers: “He instead refers to his public ministry with various linguistic groups encountered in connection with missionary travels” (219). Gerhard F. Hasel concurs: “Paul speaks in tongues more than all the Corinthians, and thus as a missionary to Gentile peoples and nations” (149).

While there is no evidence that Paul used multiple languages for private prayer purposes, he did so as missionary to the Gentiles. Even in Jerusalem, Paul switched back and forth between languages. In Acts 21-22 he speaks to a Judean crowd in Aramaic at first; then, when the crowd becomes hostile, he speaks in Greek to a Roman Chiliarch (Acts 21:37). Finally, to establish himself as Judean, he addresses them in the “holy tongue,” Hebrew (Acts 21:40, 22:2).

Some attempt to read the private-prayer language concept into 14:28. They claim that when the language-speaker is told to “keep silent in the church and (*de*) let him speak to himself and to God,” Paul is saying: “Go engage in your language in private.” As Thomas explains, however, it is better to take the “and” (*de*) in an explanatory sense:

The question of whether the *de* in 14:28b is adversative...or explanatory...is significant. In the former case it would contrast public tongues with private tongues, whereas in the latter it would introduce an explanation of how the tongues speaker is to keep silent in the church....The other explanation of verse 28b is that *laleito* refers to inaudible utterances; “Let him keep silent in church [and let him do this by means of] speaking to himself and to God only.” The greater plausibility of this view is seen by the way *en ekklesiai* (“in the church”) continues its force from verse 28a. Wherever the silence is located is the same place where the speaking to oneself and to God is to transpire....Since the context of 11:2-14:40 has public surroundings in view and makes no clear reference to private activities, *de* in an explanatory sense is the preferable interpretation [226].

Hodge interprets this phrase to mean: “And let him speak to himself, and to God, or *for* himself, and for God. That is, let him commune silently with God” (169). Thus, the phrase is not a suggestion to use languages in private. Instead, it means the language-speaker ought to keep a particular language to himself. The language is to be used inaudibly during the service so that it does not become a problem language.

1 Corinthians 14:14 is probably the main text used to argue that the language-speaker did not understand his language. Paul says that if he should speak in a language (without translation), “my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful [*akarpos*].” Lenski takes *akarpos* as passive: “my *nous* or understanding” is inactive and thus *akarpos* — “barren,” “unfruitful,” producing no distinct thoughts” (592).

Paul could also be using *akarpos* in the active sense:

A decision upon its meaning centers in *akarpos* (“unfruitful”) whether the adjective is passive in sense, meaning the speaker himself receives no benefit, or active in sense, meaning his *nous* provides no benefit to others...The view that assigns *akarpos* a meaning of “produces nothing, contributes nothing to the process”... is not convincing, because *akarpos* does not mean “inactive.” It is a word for results and does not apply to the process through which the results are obtained. The present discussion does not center on the activity or non-activity of the tongues speaker’s mind, but rather on potential benefit derived by listeners [Thomas, 214-15].

The whole context of 1 Corinthians 14 is the effect upon the hearers of untranslated languages. Paul is also writing as a dyadic personality and, as Malina and Neyrey remind us, dyadic persons are not concerned about individual psychology: “In contrast, the Mediterranean person, in the past and present, is anti-introspective. In modern direct terms, the Mediterranean is simply not psychologically minded at all” (78). Modern scholars who ignore the dyadic personality of Paul come to 1 Corinthians 14:14 looking for Paul’s description of the language speaker’s psychological state in modern categories. Paul isn’t concerned about this anywhere in the chapter; his concern is the edification of the group. Therefore, 14:14 should be taken as “My spirit prays but my mind does not produce fruit [in others].” This says nothing about whether or not the speaker understood his own utterance.

We should also discuss 1 Cor 14 verses 15-19 here. After telling the language-speaker to ask God for help in translating his native language (14:13), Paul says that should he speak in one of these non-Greek languages (without translation) his spirit will be praying (i.e., he will be speaking from the “heart”), but his mind will not be producing fruit in others (they will not be edified by speech which is unintelligible to them).

Paul begins with the words “What should be done then?” “He answers his own question, replying that all worship activities (which he represents with two examples: “prayer” and “singing”) be done “with the Spirit and with the mind.” Again, modern scholars read in modern psychological categories that were completely foreign to Paul’s dyadic-oriented thinking. Paul is saying in v 15 that all worship activities should be “from the heart” (i.e., “with the spirit”) and also “intelligibly” (i.e., “with the mind”). Paul then shifts to another negative example in vv 16-17. If someone praises God from the heart (“with the spirit”) unintelligibly (i.e., “without the mind” [implied]), “the one occupying the place of the unlearned” (i.e., the person not knowing the particular language) cannot even assent to the prayer of the language-speaker (“how will he say the ‘Amen’ at your giving of thanks, since he does not know [what you are saying]”). Paul says the language-speaker may give thanks well (“For you truly give thanks well”), but because the language is unintelligible to the other person, that individual is not edified (“but the other is not built up”).

Paul, as cross-cultural missionary to the Gentiles, is thankful for his own linguistic abilities (14:18: “I thank God that I speak in languages more often than all of you”). But in the Corinthian church meeting, Paul would rather speak “five intelligible words” (i.e., literally “five words with my mind”) than “innumerable, countless words in a language” (that they don’t know and hence is unintelligible, “without the mind,” “unfruitful.” Paul’s concern in vv 15-19 is again the edification of the group, which can occur only when the speaking is intelligible, i.e., “with the mind.”

Mitchell’s “Deliberative Rhetoric” Argument Applied to the Language Problem

Margaret M. Mitchell provides an extremely helpful discussion of “deliberative rhetoric” as an explanation for the language and composition of 1 Corinthians. Her discussion can be fruitfully applied to the language problem of Corinth. Mitchell cogently argues that 1 Corinthians exhibits the four elements of deliberative argumentation:

- (1) a focus on future time as the subject of deliberation; (2) employment of a determined set of appeals or ends, the most distinctive of which is the advantageous...(3) proof by example...and (4) appropriate subjects for deliberation, of which factionalism and concord are especially common [23].

All four of these elements are present throughout 1 Corinthians and are prominent in 1 Corinthians 12-14. Paul as a dyadic personality seeks to convince the Corinthians to pursue what is advantageous for the group and to avoid what is not advantageous (Mitchell: 25).

According to Mitchell “the single most pervasive deliberative example employed throughout the letter [is] Paul’s use of himself as the example of proper behavior” (49). This leads Paul to

“explicit appeal to imitate the illustrious example or avoid the negative example” (42). Paul’s use of himself as a positive example in 1 Corinthians 14 occurs in 14:18-19. In 14:6, 14, 16-17, 21-22, and 23-25 he uses negative examples to demonstrate the superiority of prophesying (in Greek) over uninterpreted languages (in non-Greek). Rather than being zealous of individual experiences (i.e., “negative zealotry”), the Corinthians ought to seek the advantage of all/edification of all (i.e., “positive zealotry”) (Mitchell: 97,171).

The problem with the Corinthians is that individual expression (shown by the word *ekstatos* (“each one...” — 14:26) has taken priority over group advantage/concord/edification (Mitchell: 156, 172). What the Corinthians need is “unity in diversity of language” (Mitchell: 185).

Mitchell states the language problem thus: “The concord of the church community at Corinth ironically is threatened in its common worship, which should bring it together but there instead different languages divide those who should be united” (279).

Paul’s advice is repeated several times in the argument: tongues are acceptable, but not the best course of action church members should seek. Best of all is to prophesy, because prophecy unifies the church while tongues divide it (14:6-17). The predominant appeal by which Paul argues for this course of action is thus the appeal to the common advantage here again named as that which builds up...the church...synonymous with love” [279-80].

Mitchell correctly recognizes that “the common advantage in liturgical speech...Paul advises, is measured by its intelligibility....Language which no one can understand is not advantageous but rather fruitless, and causes fellow church members, one’s brothers and sisters, to be actually estranged from one another” (280).

While Mitchell believes the problem languages to be NC-NLU’s (281), I maintain the problem was the use of non-Greek, native languages spoken without translation. How would the Corinthians find peace, concord, edification? Mitchell’s answer is: “personal compromise for the sake of harmony” (280). Paul in fact argues for the superiority of prophecy (in Greek) over untranslated languages (non-Greek) unless they are translated (14:5). If there are no competent translators of a particular language (or the language-speaker cannot competently translate his own language into Greek), the “personal compromise” is to “keep silent in the church and to speak to himself and to God” (i.e., keep that particular language out of the service and speak it inaudibly).

Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 14: Similarities and Differences

With the correct explanation of the language problem at Corinth in mind we can now explain the similarities and differences between the “other tongues” of Acts 2 and the language problem in 1 Corinthians 14.

Similarities

In both situations the speakers of the problem languages spoke languages with which they were most familiar (Acts 2: Aramaic and Greek, languages known and understood by the disciples; 1

Corinthians 14: the native languages/first languages/languages of the heart, known and understood by the language-speaker. In both situations the speaking of languages most familiar to the speakers caused problems (Acts 2: by speaking in Aramaic and Greek the disciples violated the Jewish diglossia; 1 Corinthians 14: by speaking in their native languages (without translation) the language-speakers edified themselves but not the group).

Differences

The cultural-geographical contexts for Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 were very different. The language-speakers in Acts 2 (the disciples of Jesus) found themselves in a thoroughly Judean cultural context in Jerusalem. The setting for the 1 Corinthians 14 language-speakers was Greek culture at the major seaport city of Corinth. Since everyone in Acts 2 shared the same native languages (i.e., Aramaic, Greek, possibly Latin), translation (i.e., interpretation) was not necessary. In contrast, at Corinth where multiple languages converged, Greek was the *lingua franca* and people do not share the same native languages. In the city of Corinth (including the church) translation was necessary and became a major issue in Paul's discussion (1 Corinthians 14).

The Judean crowd of Acts 2 learned and spoke Aramaic and Greek as their native languages, rather than the "local languages" (e.g., Lycaonian, Demotic Egyptian, etc.), that persisted in more remote areas of the Roman Empire. The situation in Corinth, with regard to the more remote "local languages," was exactly the opposite of the Acts 2 setting. At Corinth, while everyone knew the *lingua franca* (i.e., Greek), people came from all over the Roman Empire bringing their non-Greek native languages with them. These languages ranged from widely spoken languages such as Aramaic to more remote "local" languages like Lycaonian or Demotic Egyptian. An important difference is also the intended direction of the languages. In Acts 2 Luke describes the language-speaking as prophesying, which is directed not towards God but to people; in 1 Corinthians 14 Paul says the language-speaking was worship, which is directed not to man but to God. We can see the similarities and differences of Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 in the following diagram:

ITEM	ACTS 2	1 COR 14
1. Language known and understood by language-speaker	Yes	Yes
2. Problem caused by languages?	Violation of diglossia	Untranslated languages
3. Cultural geographical context	Judean crowd in Jerusalem	Greek seaport city
4. Necessity of language translation?	Not necessary	Absolutely necessary
5. Language speakers/hearers shared the same native languages?	Yes	No
6. Spoke “local languages” as native languages?	No	Yes
7. Problem languages?	Languages other than Hebrew	Languages other than Greek (Left untranslated)
8. Languages directed towards whom?	Men (i.e., prophesying function)	God (i.e., worship function)
9. Group norm violated by problem languages	Violation of Judean Diglossia	Violation of group edification

Here we should also briefly discuss the languages of Acts 10 and 19 (note: the Mark 16:17 reference to “new languages” is part of a highly suspect text (Mk 16:9-20) and will not be discussed here). In both Acts 10 and Acts 19 we have new converts (viz., Cornelius and his household in Acts 10, and John’s disciples in Acts 19), who spontaneously begin to “speak in languages.” In neither situation is there a language barrier. All present when the languages are spoken are believers; so the languages do not serve an evangelistic purpose. The languages were also not spoken for the purpose of private prayer.

An important question here is, “With what language would a new convert spontaneously begin to praise God?” The answer (which lines up well with 1 Corinthians 14) is that the language-speakers would spontaneously praise God in the languages with which they were most familiar (i.e., native or first languages).

It should be observed that in neither passage is any amazement or ridicule (as in Acts 2) expressed in reference to the language speaking. Only in Acts 10 is amazement mentioned, and the amazement is in reference to Gentiles receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit: “And the faithful of the circumcision were amazed, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles also” (Acts 10:45). The reception of the Spirit, not the language-speaking, was the cause of the amazement. So we can conclude that in Acts 10 and Acts 19 (as in 1 Corinthians 14), people felt moved to praise God from the heart in languages with which they were most familiar.

Conclusion

If the reader has read the earlier article on the violation of the Judean diglossia in Acts 2 and now has read about the language problem of 1 Corinthians 14, he will note that four assumptions have been challenged: (1) that the language-speaker spoke a language he had never learned before, (2) that the language-speaker did not know or understand the language that he was speaking, (3) that the language-speaking was miraculous, and (4) that this miraculous ability in languages was one of the manifestations of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:7).

The cultural, historical, linguistic, and exegetical evidence presented in these two articles demonstrates these assumptions to be false. In both Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 the language-speakers knew and understood exactly what they were saying because they were speaking the languages with which they were most familiar (i.e., their native or first languages).

In neither Acts 2 nor 1 Corinthians 14 was the language speaking miraculous. In both Acts 2 and the Corinthian church, miraculous elements were present (in Acts 2 the miraculous element was the bold prophesying; and the Corinthian church manifestations of the Spirit such as “working of miracles” and “gifts of healings” were supernatural). Speaking and translating multiple languages (1 Cor 12:10, 28, 30) were considered by Paul to be manifestations of the Spirit to be used for the purpose of group edification (i.e., “for the common advantage” — 1 Cor 12:7). Like the gifts of “steersmanship” and “helps,” these were essential to the upbuilding of the Corinthian church and were not miraculous abilities. Even the gifted translator did not know every native language that might be spoken at Corinth. And if the language-speaker could not competently translate his native language into Greek, Paul advised such an individual to “keep silent in the church and speak to himself and to God” (14:28).

Ironically, Spiros Zodhiates relates a modern example of precisely what Paul had hoped would be happening in the Corinthian church meetings:

It is quite probable that all the people in Corinth knew at least two languages, the one native to them and the one native to Corinth. I lived in Egypt for twelve years, during which time I associated with non-Arabic speaking people; but all of us — Greeks, Armenians, Frenchmen, Americans, and other foreigners usually spoke our own particular native language and also Arabic, the language of the land. The same thing is true in America among the foreigners dwelling within its borders. In Corinth, the foreigners must have spoken in their own native languages and also in Greek, the language of Corinth. This is highly desirable and useful, and when consecrated to God’s service can make His word widely known [59].

This article was made available on the internet via **REFORMATION INK** (www.markers.com/ink). Refer any correspondence to Shane Rosenthal: Rosenthal2000@aol.com

Detective Columbo As Theologian

By Robert Zerhusen

Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, Inc -

To dig deeper into this subject, you can order Zerhusen's three lecture series, "A New Look At Tongues" (available on cassette in the Alliance on-line resource catalog here on this website). In these three tapes, Zerhusen presents his thesis of the meaning of tongues in the Book of Acts, as well as in 1 Corinthians. The final lecture is a presentation of the history and practice of tongues throughout church history.

One of the most popular fictional characters is Television Detective Columbo. Columbo uses the "scientific method" (i.e., asking questions, gathering data, testing theories) to arrive at solutions. Columbo episodes usually follow a set pattern. First, there is a murder, leading to a police investigation. The initial explanations of the crime make sense but are invariably wrong.

Columbo begins by making observations and asking questions. His questions are innocuous at first. The questions then become irritating as he brings out problems with the initial explanations. For the person who has committed the crime, Columbo becomes a nuisance. Towards the end of the episode our beloved detective always brings out some "forgotten factor", an overlooked detail which clearly points to the correct explanation of the crime.

Our story begins in the office of Dr. Trevor Hancock, world renowned Biblical scholar. Dr. Hancock is an aloof, temperamental man. The faculty secretary Mrs. Perkins, pages him: "Professor Hancock, a Detective Columbo is here to see you."

"Detective who?" Hancock replies. The professor has forgotten about the special program. The University has arranged for people in the police department to meet people in the University. The goal is to build better relations between the Department and the University. In this case, Columbo has been paired with Professor Hancock and the research topic is the meaning of the "other tongues" of Acts 2.

Columbo is shown into the office by Mrs. Perkins. "Hello Dr. Hancock, my pleasure to meet you! Have you really read all of these books?"

"Yes I have."

"I have to tell you Sir, I've never done serious research on the Bible before."

The professor hands Columbo a Bible and opens it to Acts chapter 2 for him. He then opens his own Greek New Testament. Columbo notices the difference: "Sir, the Bible I have here is in English, but yours looks different."

"Oh yes, this is in Greek."

Surprised, Columbo asks: "So why are you looking at a Greek Bible Sir?"

“Well Detective, the first versions of the New Testament were written in Koine Greek.”

“What’s that Sir, *Coney Greek*?”

“No, Koine (coy-nay-a) means common, it was the Greek used throughout the Roman Empire at that time. Dr. Hancock reads Acts 2:1-36 in English, making observations and comments about the text to help Columbo understand the proper meaning of “other tongues.” “So we see that the ‘other tongues’ obviously were human languages supernaturally spoken by people who had never learned these languages. This language miracle caused intense amazement and ridicule in the hearers who heard the languages.”

Columbo hears this explanation and asks: “Is this the most popular interpretation among scholars today?”

“Actually it’s not the view most scholars hold today, but it has been the dominant interpretation throughout church history.”

“So what’s the view of most of the scholars today Sir?”

“The other interpretation is often called the ‘ecstatic utterance’ interpretation. Those who hold this interpretation do not think that the ‘other tongues’ were human languages. Instead, they claim that the speakers uttered non-language utterances while in a state of religious excitement.”

“Sir, I’m no Bible scholar but the ‘other tongues’ seem to be human languages according to the text that we just read. So how do these other scholars come up with their view?”

Dr. Hancock smiles: “You are correct Detective, the text clearly presents ‘the other tongues’ as human languages; but they have their reasons.

Columbo scratches his head and says: “I have some questions about your view Sir.”

Taken back by the question Dr. Hancock responds: “Isn’t it obvious to you Detective? The disciples of Jesus were speaking languages they had never learned before.”

“Well that may be, Dr. Hancock, but I’m wondering about some things Sir.”

“Go ahead Detective ask your questions.” Dr. Hancock begins to laugh.

“Sir, where in these verses does it *explicitly* say that the speakers were speaking languages they had never learned before?”

“That’s easy Detective, it says in Acts 2:4 that the speakers were speaking ‘other tongues’.”

“I saw that Sir, but it seems that you are interpreting the words ‘other tongues’ to mean languages that the speakers had never learned before.”

With a look of consternation the professor continues: “Detective, besides the phrase ‘other tongues’ in Acts 2:4, we also have the amazement of the hearers. These people were amazed that the uneducated disciples of Jesus were speaking in their native languages. Obviously the speakers could not have spoken all of the languages of the people listed in Acts 2:9-11.”

Pointing at the text Columbo asks: “This list in verses 9-11, what is this a list of Sir?”

“The list is a list of people-groups and areas where the hearers had come from.”

“So it’s not a list of languages Sir?”

“No Detective, no languages are listed in Acts 2:9-11.”

“No specific languages are mentioned in Acts 2 then?”

“Yes Detective, no specific languages are mentioned.” Columbo scribbles in his notebook.

“Well Dr. Hancock, if no languages are mentioned anywhere in these verses and if no verse explicitly says the speakers were speaking in languages they had never learned before, then how can we be sure that the speakers were speaking languages they had never learned before?”

“What kind of foolish question is that Detective? How else would you interpret the words ‘other tongues’? Other than what, Detective? It must mean other than what they ordinarily were able to speak.”

“Sir I could not go into court with only assumptions, I’d need facts.” Amazed, the professor responds: “Facts, Detective, what other facts do you need?”

“Well Sir, what languages were the speakers capable of speaking without God’s help?”

“That’s easy Detective, the four primary languages of Palestine were Latin, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. And the primary native languages of the disciples would have been Aramaic and Greek.”

“So what you’re saying then Sir, is that the ‘other tongues’ must have been languages other than Aramaic and Greek. Is that right?”

“Yes, the ‘other tongues’ were languages the speakers had never learned. The speakers had learned Aramaic and Greek so the ‘other tongues’ had to be languages other than Aramaic and Greek. These ‘other tongues’ were the native languages of the amazed hearers.”

“About these hearers Sir, who were they?”

“Well they were predominately Jews who had come to Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Pentecost.”

“So they were all Jews from outside of Palestine?”

“No, Detective, at Jewish festivals most of the Jews present would have been Palestinian Jews from areas surrounding Jerusalem and some would have come from the Diaspora.”

“Those who came from areas surrounding Jerusalem, what were their native tongues?”

“As residents of Palestine, their native languages would have been Aramaic and Greek. Any more questions Detective?”

“That’s enough for now Dr. Hancock, thank-you for your time.” Columbo stands and begins to walk out of the office. “Just one more question Sir. Did the crowd understand Peter when he began to speak to them?”

“Of course!”

“Peter was using one language that everyone understood?”

“Apparently so Detective.”

“Sir could we gather Jews from around the world bring them to Jerusalem today, speak in one language and have them all understand?”

“Probably not Detective, what are you getting at?”

“It seems odd to me Sir that the speakers would need a miracle to speak the languages of the crowd and yet Peter could speak to them all and be understood in one language.”

“Good-day Detective” said the professor with a frustrated look.

“As Columbo leaves he stops at the desk of Mrs. Perkins: “He’s a very smart man.” She replies: “Oh Yes, that’s why he was selected to do the book.”

“What book?” Colombo asks.

“Oh he was given a large contract and some grants to do a book on Acts 2. I believe the title will be *The Miraculous Languages of Acts 2.*”

“So Dr. Hancock will receive a large sum of money for doing this book?”

“He will receive the money we need to buy a new and better computer system.”

Columbo next visited Professor Hans Becker. Dr. Becker, a kind and gentle man, is well respected by the faculty and popular with the students. Professor Becker is an authority on first century Judaism. “Dr. Becker I found out from Dr. Hancock that the primary languages of Jews in Palestine in the first century were Aramaic and Greek.”

“That’s correct Detective Columbo.”

“My question Dr. Becker is about the Jews outside of Israel. What native languages did they speak?”

“Well Detective that depends upon where they resided. If they resided east of Palestine the dominant native language for most of the Jews would have been Aramaic. If they resided in areas west of Palestine the dominant native language for most of them would have been Greek.”

“You mean their native language wasn’t Hebrew?”

“Oh no Detective. Hebrew as a native tongue had been replaced by Aramaic in the east and Greek in the west. Many factors caused this change.” Columbo fascinated with this description of the language situation of first century Judaism asked Dr. Becker many questions about the extent of the use of Aramaic and Greek among the Jews.

Near the end of their conversation, Columbo asked: “You’re familiar with the Acts 2 narrative about the ‘other tongues’?”

“Yes Detective, why do you ask?”

“Well Dr. Becker, I have heard that Acts 2 describes a language miracle and that this is the majority opinion throughout church history.”

“Yes, it is the most popular view.”

“So then why do many scholars today not hold the language miracle view Dr. Becker?”

“Using myself as an example Detective. I am thoroughly familiar with the language situation of first century Judaism. We know that the speakers were able to speak the Aramaic and Greek languages without divine help. We also know that for the vast majority of Jew’s living outside of Palestine, their native languages were Aramaic or Greek. Therefore, if the speakers were speaking the native languages of the audience in Acts 2. The ‘other tongues’ would have included Aramaic and Greek. Languages the speakers already knew.”

“Something bothers me Dr. Becker.” The professor smiles: “What bothers you Detective.

“If the native languages were Aramaic and Greek as you say. And if the ‘other tongues’ would have included Aramaic and Greek, why would the speaking of the Aramaic and Greek languages by people who already knew these languages, have caused reactions of amazement and ridicule?”

“I don’t know Detective, but I don’t think the ‘other tongues’ were languages.” “Thank-you Sir” Columbo smiles as he shakes hands with Dr. Becker. With that answer Columbo left to go speak with a graduate student. The student’s name was Bob Hultberg. An excellent student, his idea for

a thesis project had been rejected by Dr. Hancock. The professor had also used his authority to make sure no other professor helped Bob with the thesis project. “Bob what was your thesis project?”

“My thesis project would have been an alternative explanation for the ‘other tongues’ of Acts 2.”

“An alternative, were you attempting to establish the ‘ecstatic utterance’ interpretation?”

“No, the problem with the ‘ecstatic utterance’ interpretation is that the text presents the ‘other tongues’ as *human languages*.”

“And you don’t hold the language miracle interpretation either?”

“No, the problem with that interpretation is that it is never actually stated by the text. It is an assumption based on a particular interpretation of the phrase ‘other tongues. Furthermore, if we examine the language situation of first century Judaism we find that the vast majority of Jews, both Palestinian and Diaspora, spoke Aramaic and Greek as their native languages.”

“So how is that a problem for the language miracle interpretation Bob?”

“Well the logic of the language miracle view goes like this. First, if a miracle of languages occurred in Acts 2. The speakers had to be speaking languages they had never learned. We know that the speakers, as Palestinian Jews, had learned Aramaic and Greek. Therefore, by the logic of the language miracle view the ‘other tongues’ of Acts 2 *could not have included Aramaic and Greek*. Here’s the rub Detective Columbo. The historical facts tell us that the ‘other tongues’ had to include Aramaic and Greek. The language miracle interpretation tells us the ‘other tongues’ could not have included Aramaic and Greek. If we choose to accept the historical facts we must reject the language miracle view and vice-versa.”

Columbo was curious now: “So what’s your alternative interpretation Bob?”

“I don’t know yet, I never fully researched the subject. But the text forces us to reject the ecstatic utterance interpretation. And the language situation forces us to reject the language miracle interpretation. I presented these things to Dr. Hancock and he refused to be my thesis advisor. I asked other professors and they all turned me down.”

“That’s too bad Bob, I think that you should get the chance.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence Detective Columbo.”

“Sure Bob. I’m still bothered by the fact the ‘other tongues’ must have included Aramaic and Greek. I keep asking myself: why would Luke describe Aramaic and Greek as ‘other tongues’? And why would the speaking of Aramaic and Greek by people who knew these languages cause amazement and ridicule? Somehow I think I’m missing something here!”

“There must be a rational alternative Detective, I just wish I could help you.”

Columbo continued to work the problem by investigating two overlooked sources. First, he wondered: Is it possible that the Jewish people make a differentiation of languages of some sort? Second, he began questioning Linguists seeking to explain why Aramaic and Greek could be described as “other tongues” and how the speaking of these languages could cause amazement and ridicule. Armed with this new information he was ready to meet with Dr. Hancock again. Columbo laid it all out for the professor.

“Do you remember our first talk Dr. Hancock? You admitted that no specific languages were mentioned in Acts 2. You also made a statement that the ecstatic utterances proponents ‘have their reasons.’ Well, I checked out those ‘reasons’ Sir. For example, Dr. Becker showed me that the vast majority of the Jews outside of Palestine spoke Aramaic or Greek as their native languages. Do you remember that you also told me that most of the crowd in Acts 2 would have been Palestinian Jews?”

“Yes, so!” Dr. Hancock’s eyebrows lowered.

“You said that the Jews of Palestine spoke Aramaic and Greek as their native tongues.”

“Everybody knows that Columbo!”

“Maybe so Sir. But do you realize what that means? If that’s true Sir, then for most of the Jew’s present in Acts 2, whether they were Palestinian Jews or Diaspora Jews, their native languages would have been Aramaic and Greek. You told me that the people in the Acts 2 crowd were hearing their own native languages. That means the ‘other tongues’ of Acts 2 had to include the Aramaic and Greek languages. Your view Sir does not allow for the ‘other tongues’ to have included Aramaic and Greek. Yet well established historical facts show that the ‘other tongues’ *must have included Aramaic and Greek. Languages the speakers already knew.*”

“No, Columbo the speakers were speaking in languages they didn’t know!”

“Your interpretation is an assumption contradicted by the historical facts Sir. Bob Hultberg told you that didn’t he? But you couldn’t allow him to research it further because your interpretation would have been discredited. And if your interpretation were discredited you wouldn’t receive the money for the new computer system. Getting money for the computer system was more important to you than the right interpretation.”

The professor was angry now: “So what is the correct interpretation Detective?”

“At first I wasn’t sure Dr. Hancock. My investigating led me to believe that Aramaic and Greek had to be included in the ‘other tongues’ of Acts 2. That was enough to refute your view but I still couldn’t understand why Luke would call Aramaic and Greek ‘other tongues’ And why would the speaking of Aramaic and Greek by people who knew those languages cause amazement and ridicule? Those questions bothered me Dr. Hancock.”

Sarcastically the professor replied: “They should bother you Detective.”

“So I talked with some Jewish rabbis and scholars. You know what I found out?”

“No, but I’m sure your going to tell me, aren’t you Detective?”

“Throughout their history the Jews have made a differentiation between the Hebrew language and other languages. Even when Hebrew was no longer the native language, the Jews often retained it as their religious language. They sometimes called it the ‘Holy Tongue’ as opposed to the other languages that they used for everyday purposes. What if ‘other tongues’ in Acts 2 means *languages other than Hebrew*? This would explain why Luke describes Aramaic and Greek as ‘other tongues.’ They were languages other than Hebrew. After talking with some Linguists I found out that they have developed a concept they call “*Diglossia*” to describe what happens in some situations. A Diglossia exists when a community uses different languages for different purposes. Where a Diglossia exists, there is one language which is reserved for formal occasions, important occasions, religious occasions.

Linguists call this language the upper or ‘H language’ of the Diglossia. The language used for common, everyday purposes is called the lower or ‘L language’ of the Diglossia Here’s a chart to show how it’s diagrammed Dr. Hancock.” Columbo holds up a diagram which looks like this:

Upper Language: “H language” - Hebrew - “Holy Tongue”
Lower Language: “L language” - Aramaic/Greek - “other tongues”

The Linguists also told me that in a Diglossia situation intelligibility is less important than using the right language in the right situation. I think I know what they mean. Sometimes I go with my wife to Mass and the Mass is in Latin and I can’t understand it. But that’s the way they do it there. Maybe that’s a ‘Catholic Diglossia’, Dr. Hancock; I’m no expert. Anyway, it occurred to me after talking with the Linguists, maybe Acts 2 is describing the violation of a Jewish Diglossia.

Amazed, Dr. Hancock asks: “How could someone like you ever come up with this Detective?”

“The setting of Acts 2 also seems to be thoroughly Jewish. The Jews have sometimes considered themselves to be the chosen, holy people of God. They had gathered in their holy land Palestine. They were in Jerusalem, their Holy city, for a festival. Near the temple, the place they considered to be the holiest place on earth. Dr. Hancock, what language do you think they were expecting to hear in this situation?”

“Well, er, um, probably Hebrew. This doesn’t make sense!” The professor felt trapped.

“Instead of hearing their ‘Holy Tongue,’ Hebrew, the speakers in Acts 2 began to speak out in the lower languages of the Jewish Diglossia, Aramaic and Greek. Jews from the Diaspora, who for the most part didn’t know Hebrew, were amazed to be hearing their native languages being spoken in this situation. They had expected the H language of the Jewish Diglossia, Hebrew. Instead, they were hearing the L languages, Aramaic and Greek, their native languages.”

“What about the ridicule Detective?”

“Others were angered by the speaking of profane languages when the sacred language was proper for the situation. For these Jews the speaking of ‘other languages’ than Hebrew was a violation of the sacred. From their perspective, only a drunk could ignore cultural expectations in this way. So you see Dr. Hancock, there is an alternative explanation for the ‘other tongues’ of Acts 2. I’m no theologian so I think you should have Bob Hultberg research this further.”

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