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Some Remarks on Linguistic Aspects of Religion

Religion is vitally bound to language in various and intricate ways. On the most obvious level, a number of religions have a sacred language – Hebrew for Judaism, Arabic for Islam, Vedic Sanskrit for Hinduism, Old Church Slavonic for Eastern Orthodoxy, Latin for Roman Catholicism (up until Vatican II), etc. – in which their sacred writings are recorded or in which religious rites are performed. The linguistic dimension of religion, however, extends far beyond the use of a particular natural language in liturgical contexts and it is the extent of this dimension that this paper attempts to outline (though, because of the vastness of the problem involved on the one hand and the unrelenting space limitations on the other, the following remarks shall be confined mostly to the Christian religion and based on predominantly Polish language data).

1. Spelling convention

Religious identity or confessional affiliation is often signaled linguistically. Starting from lower levels of text organization, even the spelling convention may be of religious significance – for example as a touchstone of the confessional profile of a Bible translation. Compare two popular Polish translations of Jesus' famous words over the bread and wine at the Last Supper (Matthew 26: 26–29):

Bierzcie i jedzcie, to jest Ciało moje ... to jest moja Krew ... (BT)¹

Bierzcie, jedzcie, to jest ciało moje ... to jest krew moja ... (BW)

¹ The following abbreviations are used for the respective Polish Bible versions: BP – Biblia oo. Paulistów (Częstochowa: Święty Paweł 2005); BT – Biblia Tysiąclecia (5th edition, Poznań: Pallottinum, 2002); BW – Biblia Warszawska (Warszawa: Towarzystwo Biblijne w Polsce, 1994); BWP – Biblia Warszawsko-Praska (Warszawa: Towarzystwo Biblijne w Polsce, 1998); PE – Przekład Ekumeniczny (Warszawa: Towarzystwo Biblijne w Polsce, 2001).

Biblia Tysiąclecia, the official version for liturgical use in the Roman Catholic church in Poland, by capitalizing the initial letters of the words *Ciało* ('body') and *Krew* ('blood') clearly indicates their sacramental value – which is hardly surprising when we recall the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation insisting on the real, and not merely symbolic, transformation of the eucharistic bread and wine into Christ's flesh and blood (resulting e.g. in the special reverence shown to the eucharistic elements after consecration). It is no more surprising that Protestants, who do not endorse this doctrine, have made it clear by refusing to capitalize these two words in their translation (BW) of this passage.

Indeed, capitalization seems a rather common instrument of indicating fine doctrinal emphases in Bible translations. Consider the following verse from John 19: 26–27 in five contemporary Polish versions:

Kiedy więc Jezus ujrzał Matkę i stojącego obok Niej ucznia ... rzekł do ucznia: "Oto Matka twoja". (BT)

Gdy Jezus zobaczył Matkę i stojącego obok ucznia ... rzekł do ucznia: "Oto twoja Matka". (BP)

Kiedy Jezus zobaczył swoją Matkę, a obok niej ucznia ... rzekł do ucznia: Oto Matka twoja! (BWP)

Gdy zobaczył matkę i stojącego obok ucznia ... powiedział do ucznia: Oto twoja matka. (PE)

A gdy Jezus ujrzał matkę i ucznia ... stojącego przy niej ... rzekł do ucznia: Oto matka twoja! (BW)

There is a clear line of demarcation between these versions, the first three of which consistently capitalize the word *Matka* ('mother'), both in this passage and elsewhere (cf. the account of the wedding in Cana in John 2: 1–12), whenever it refers to Mary, the mother of Jesus. The BT is even more emphatic doctrinally in capitalizing the personal and possessive pronouns referring to Mary throughout the New Testament, thus putting them on a par with pronouns referring to Jesus, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit (but not the apostles, including Peter, revered as a saint and the first pope). The last two versions, coming from non-Catholic confessional circles, do not indicate Mary's special (divine? saintly?) status, which corresponds to no special veneration reserved for her in their theology. (Interestingly, no such phenomenon was observed among contemporary English versions of the New Testament in which both the word *mother* as well as pronouns referring to Mary are printed in lowercase throughout.)

Examples of doctrinally sensitive spelling in Polish Bible translations abound, including certain theological key words and notions such as *Królestwo Boże* ('Kingdom of God'), *Pan* ('Lord'), *Prawo* ('Law'), *Przymierze* ('Covenant') or *Słowo [Boże]* ('Word [of God]'). While a meaningful discussion of their respective theological implications is not possible here and merits a separate treatment, two things must be stressed. First, although the Polish spelling convention is rather rigid in this regard, it still permits the use of initial capitals under special circumstances – in particular with words such as e.g. *Ojczyzna* ('Motherland'), *Orzeł Biały* ('White Eagle'), *Naród* ('Nation') or *Państwo* ('State'), etc. – "for emotional and honorific

reasons”² (*Zasady pisowni i interpunkcji* Wielkiego słownika ortograficznego PWN; IV.19.4). Secondly, since the oldest extant witnesses of the New Testament are recorded in majuscule, there is obviously no textual basis for capitalizing some words and not others in translation. Doing so in order to stress their exegetical significance as perceived by the translator or publisher must therefore be considered a purely interpretative decision, most likely informed by belief. The capitalization of selected words, subtle as it seems, is a reliable indicator of the doctrinal profile of a given Bible version, as well as a powerful, though clearly biased, interpretative aid for the reader while evading the charge of manipulating the sacred text on the linguistic level (after all, the spelling convention belongs to paralanguage rather than language proper).

2. Lexis and phraseology

Lexical determinants of confessional affiliation are perhaps the most plain and plentiful. Depending on their theological and historical tradition, the respective denominations use distinctive designations for essentially corresponding entities. To mention just a few examples: *priest* vs. *minister* vs. *pastor*, *bishop* vs. *elder*, *parish* vs. *congregation* vs. *fellowship*, *Holy Communion* vs. *Lord’s Supper*, *Mass* vs. *service*, etc. The choice of any of these terms is hardly accidental; on the contrary, each of them contributes into a specific linguistic image reflecting religious doctrine. The words *priest* in English and *kapłan* in Polish evoke his official role as intermediary between God and the community as well as the sacrificial aspect of the Mass, while *pastor* emphasizes the spiritual (literally, pastoral) care extended to the flock – which corresponds, respectively, to the hierarchical organization of the Roman Catholic church (including the division into clergy and laity) and the Protestant idea of universal priesthood manifested in its emphasis on leadership rather than authority. Consequently, it is customary in Polish Roman Catholicism, particularly in official contexts, to refer to the church building as *świątynia* (‘temple/sanctuary’) – a designation derived from sacramental and sacrificial imagery and, therefore, highly congruent with Catholic theology. By contrast, Polish Protestants often refer to the church building metonymically as *zór* (‘congregation/fellowship’), thus stressing the collective perspective and egalitarian status of all believers.

This tendency to establish a linguistic profile of one’s confessional affiliation by using specific terms associated, either conceptually or connotatively, with particular ecclesiastical traditions and their doctrinal teaching is counterbalanced by a common trend to cling to certain terms and notions viewed as indispensable in the description of the religious reality. Among the names of 154 churches and confessional organizations officially registered in Poland as of 26 November 2009, as many as 68 use the word *kościół* (‘church’), 56 make a reference to Christ or

² All citations from non-English sources translated by the present author.

describe themselves as *chrześcijański* ('Christian'), and 18 use the word *Ewangelia* ('Gospel') or one of its adjectival derivatives – while at the same time maintaining a doctrinal and organizational profile distinct enough to substantiate listing under separate entries in the Register of Churches and Other Confessional Organizations. Evidently, founders of these organizations (all registered after 1990) were determined to prevent this vocabulary from being assigned only to established ecclesiastical bodies and were eager to employ it in order to create a desirable linguistic image of their own confessional setting. Moreover, at least three entities officially registered as *kościół* profess polytheistic, pantheistic or ethnic beliefs,³ regardless of semantic restrictions which, based on its definition as “a fellowship of people united by shared belief; particularly a Christian fellowship” (*Słownik języka polskiego PWN*), seem to prohibit this noun from collocating with adjectives designating non-Christian faiths (e.g. *kościół *muzułmański* ['Muslim church']; *kościół *żydowski* ['Jewish church']; *kościół *pogański* ['pagan church']). With the growing religious plurality of the Polish society, however, the collocational range of *kościół* is likely to broaden in the foreseeable future, as evidenced by the aforementioned entries in the official register kept by the Polish government.

3. Grammar

“Grammar is the principal matter from which people build barriers separating them from one another,” claims Elżbieta Tabakowska (2002: 33) in her insightful paper on the linguistic dimension of cultural barriers. It is noteworthy that the first area to which she turns in order to substantiate this claim is religion. She specifically focuses on “the role of the Polish grammar in the service of Polish Marian piety,” as evidenced by diminutives applied to the Virgin Mary, e.g. *Najświętsza Panienska* ('the holiest Lady_[dim]'), *Mateczka* ('Mother_[dim]'), which she interprets in terms of the conceptual metaphor SMALL IS HARMLESS and its numerous extensions in which small is viewed as familiar, safe, friendly and benevolent (Tabakowska 2002: 28). Needless to say, this morphological tendency is clearly in line with the Roman Catholic doctrine presenting Mary as a unique, approachable and compassionate mediator between man and God.

Another grammatical phenomenon contributing into the linguistic image of Polish Catholicism is its extensive use of the “super-superlative,” particularly as regards the adjective *święty* ('holy'), resulting in forms such as e.g. *Przenajświętszy Sakrament* ('the most holiest sacrament'), *Przenajświętsza Trójca* ('the most holiest Trinity'), *przenajświętsza ofiara* ('the most holiest offering') (Tabakowska 2002: 28). This device, deemed unacceptable in contemporary Polish usage except

³ Rodzimy Kościół Polski (no. 94 in Rejestr kościołów i innych związków wyznaniowych); Polski Kościół Słowiański (no. 98); Kościół Panteistyczny “Pneuma” (no. 117).

in the religious realm, is again not found in Protestantism, hence it becomes an identifying factor of [a certain part of] Roman Catholic piety and discourse.

On a higher level, associated with the entire Christian tradition rather than any particular confessional group, there is a broad spectrum of grammatical devices that have shaped the distinctive biblical style in a number of languages with a long history of Bible translation. Polish, characterized by a highly flexible word order, has preserved a particularly rich inventory of syntactic constructions directly traceable to the Vulgate as well as, through its largely formal equivalence, ultimately to the Hebrew and Greek originals. Among these, perhaps the most apparent are:

- (a) the paratactic *kai* style, manifested in the overabundance of coordinating conjunctions, as illustrated by the following passage (Mark 1: 9–13):

I stało się w owe dni, że przyszedł Jezus ... i został ochrzczony przez Jana w Jordanie. I zaraz, kiedy wychodził z wody ... i rozległ się głos z nieba ... i zaraz powiódł go Duch na pustynię. I był na pustyni czterdzieści dni ... i przebywał wśród zwierząt, a aniołowie służyli mu (BW)

- (b) the possessive attribute in postposition, e.g. *Ojczyzna nasza, Syna swego, Matka twoja, Ciało moje*, etc.

- (c) the distinctly Semitic constructions containing a participle that refers to an immediately preceding or accompanying activity (*participium graphicum*), e.g. *wstawszy wyszedł i odszedł, wyjechawszy zostawił, otworzywszy usta swoje nauczał mówiąc*, etc.⁴

While the extent of the actual contribution of these elements into the distinctively Christian language at large calls for a deeper analysis than is possible here, suffice it to say that because of their high stylistic markedness they successfully build a (socio)linguistic barrier between Christian and non-Christian religious discourse as well as between various Christian factions distinguished by the degree of adherence to formally equivalent translations, closely correlated to their belief in the verbal inspiration of the Scripture.

4. “Religiolect” and its social implications

As we continue to draw on the useful metaphor of sociolinguistic barriers, it should be noted that any barrier can be viewed from two vantage points: either that of the potential intruder (i.e. from the outside) or that of the builder (i.e. from the inside). In this latter perspective, a barrier becomes a fence or a wall whose function, in addition to keeping out outsiders, is to integrate insiders by giving them a sense of security and belonging. Consequently, linguistic markers not only enable outward indication of one’s confessional affiliation but also establish an inward, i.e. intra-communal validation framework. Thus, the religious language – which we could

⁴ For a thorough discussion of syntactic aspects of contemporary Polish biblical style, see Szczepińska 2005: 108–162.

tentatively term *religiolect* (or, to do justice to Greek morphology, *threskeiolect*) – plays a vital social function: those who have mastered it become accepted members of the community and gain otherwise unavailable credibility.

This phenomenon is exemplified – somewhat negatively – by incidents in which individuals presenting themselves as priests for quite some time successfully deceive a community by excellent performance of verbally complex tasks, such as celebrating the Mass or preaching. A brief and by no means systematic survey of press reports on “fake priests” based on an Internet query has revealed that in addition to external indicators, such as wearing a cassock and clerical collar, it was the linguistic markers that had typically led the victims to assume the clergy status of the pretender. In traditional churches, such as the Roman Catholic church, deceptions of this sort are facilitated by the highly formulaic and fixed character of the liturgy. While individuals unfamiliar with some canonical texts (e.g. *Pater noster*, *Ave Maria*, *Credo*, etc.) are immediately spotted as “outsiders,” those who are conversant in them are just as readily assumed to be “insiders.”

5. Imagery

In Protestant churches, particularly those in the congregational tradition (stressing the organizational and doctrinal autonomy of particular communities) – here referred to by the cover term “Evangelical” – a similar identifying function operates at the level of imagery. The principle *sola fide*, insisting on the sufficiency of faith to salvation and rejecting the salvific power of baptism, leaves no visible criteria for assessing one’s (including one’s own) spiritual condition. From the theological perspective, the only valid criterion is undergoing a profound spiritual change whereby the sinner accepts God’s forgiveness – it is therefore little wonder that Evangelicals tend to describe their religious experience using metaphors highlighting the radical and instantaneous character of this change. Consequently, the two most popular images are conversion (i.e. ‘turning around’) and regeneration (i.e. ‘new birth’),⁵ regularly found in doctrinal statements of Evangelical churches, organizations and institutions, as illustrated by the following typical excerpts:

We believe ... that the **new birth** and personal confession of Christ are essentials of church membership (Christian Family Church in Knoxville, TN).⁶

Every man is in need of **regeneration** and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Campus Crusade for Christ).⁷

We believe that all who receive the Lord Jesus Christ by faith are **born again** of the Holy Spirit (Wheaton College).⁸

⁵ It should be noted that in the Roman Catholic theology the idea of new birth or regeneration is closely connected to baptism rather than to some special spiritual experience.

⁶ <http://www.cfcknoxville.com/statement.php>. Access date: 29 Nov. 2009.

⁷ <http://www.ccci.org/about-us/ministry-profile/statement-of-faith.aspx>. Access date: 29 Nov. 2009.

⁸ http://www.wheaton.edu/welcome/aboutus_mission.html. Access date: 29 Nov. 2009.

While the image of a new birth is easily traced to the well-known conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus (John 3: 1–21), the element of personal (and necessarily verbal!) confession comes from Paul’s Epistle to the Romans: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (10: 9, Revised Standard Version) – and the mention of it along with belief in the heart yields another popular metaphorical image, that of “receiving Christ (into one’s heart).” This imagery is very common in proselytism, providing conceptual grounds for the so-called “altar calls” in which those who wish to make a spiritual commitment are invited to come forward publicly and recite a prayer of repentance. All these Evangelical images – experiencing conversion, being born again, confessing Christ and receiving Him into one’s heart – emphasize the personal and individual dimension of the religious experience as well as conscious and volitional action cherished by fundamentalist Evangelical theology, sometimes labeled “decision theology.” The following is a typical conversion account which illustrates the precise positioning of this experience in both time and space:

In 1974, 22-year-old [Franklin] Graham became a Christian in a hotel room while on a trip to Jerusalem.⁹

In Evangelical communities these “key words” often become “passwords” that work in much the same way as some liturgical formulae in Catholic communities. By the same token, describing one’s religious experience through images profiling the gradual, evolutionary or prolonged character of the spiritual transformation (e.g. the idea of metamorphosis exemplified in the image of chrysalization/pupation or the “ugly duckling” motif) often arouses suspicion regarding its theological authenticity and relegates the person to a social periphery of the community. Why? Because it is conceptually incongruous with the linguistic image of this particular religious experience and the world it is a part of.

6. Are religious metaphors rooted in experience?

An interesting question – somewhat reminiscent of the debate between linguistic universalism and relativism or primacy of speech over thought or *vice versa* – concerns the relationship between religious language and experience. Ralph Bisshops in his paper *Are Religious Metaphors Rooted in Experience?* rightly observes that

... not only experiences generate metaphors but ... metaphors also generate experiences ... Religious experience rarely conflicts with the theological framework of those affected by this experience ... In the so-called religious ‘experience’ we see, feel and hear what we already know. Those experiences do not generate the words describing this knowledge, but the words we know generate that which we hear, see, feel and smell. Consequently, the experiential grounding hypothesis should possibly be completed by another hypothesis, namely that religious metaphors also can shape and construct that which we typically feel as being our most intimate experiences (2003: 114).

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franklin_Graham. Access date: 29 Nov. 2009.

Precisely because of the differences in religious metaphor and experience, the favorite evangelistic question of fundamentalist Evangelicals: *Have you received Jesus?* (found e.g. on the main page of Billy Graham's website, referring to the conversion experience), if posed out of context could possibly be understood by a Catholic in metonymic rather than metaphorical terms, i.e. with reference to receiving communion: *Yes, already four times this month!*

7. Linguistic aids of religious dialog

Having indicated that the same linguistic expressions and images are used by different religious groups with reference to different experience, let us take the reverse perspective: could it be that different expressions and images refer to essentially the same religious experience? Of course, this is no more a strictly linguistic question but one that also verges on psychology, sociology, philosophy, and theology.

Some observations of the language of ecumenical dialogue are illuminating in this respect. Let us consider just one example concerning the first doctrinal issue mentioned in this paper, namely the Eucharist. This rite in various confessional settings is described by different terms that shape its linguistic image in accordance with the respective theological emphases, e.g. *The Lord's Supper*, *The Sacrament of the Altar*, *The Breaking of Bread and Sharing the Cup*, *The Holiest Sacrament*, *The Holy Communion*, etc. The doctrine of the Eucharist as taught by the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Lutheran church is noticeably different in theological and philosophical terms; the extent of this discrepancy is revealed by the fact that the Council of Trent in 1551 cast anathemas upon heretics who denied the Eucharistic transubstantiation which until this day remains the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁰ Yet, both in the pronouncements of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s and in contemporary ecumenical documents regarding the Eucharist, the word *transubstantiation* is carefully avoided and replaced by more general descriptions acceptable from the perspective of Orthodox and Lutheran teaching (see Blumczyński 2008: 262–263). Clearly, adequate linguistic description can greatly facilitate interdenominational and cross-religious understanding (and perhaps the subsequent process of reconciliation).

8. Conclusion

Religion, being one of the strongest determinants of one's cultural and social identity, is strongly bound to language in several ways. (1) There is often a significant difference between religions, denominations, and confessional groups in how they

¹⁰ See e.g. the encyclical letters *Mysterium fidei* (1965) of Paul VI and *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003) of John Paul II.

verbalize their beliefs and religious experience. This results in the emergence of distinctive “religiolects” operating on multiple levels (orthographic, lexical, grammatical, conceptual, etc.) and building certain sociolinguistic barriers that serve as external and internal identity markers. (2) Fluency in a confessional language may be an important criterion of one’s admission into a religious community and, consequently, may be correlated to one’s status within it. This seems particularly true of imagery which reveals the conceptualization of religious experience. (3) Over time, the language used within and by a certain confessional group may change significantly in order to achieve hitherto neglected aims (e.g. evangelistic, didactic, polemical, conciliatory, etc.), thus becoming both an instrument and evidence of religious change.

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