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PhD dissertation abstract

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**A Linguistic Approach
to the Translation of „Sacred Languages”,
with Particular Regard to the New Testament**

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1. thesis

According to the achievements of the research of the history of religions every religion has its own language. This language can be a wholly different one from the ordinary language of the community without any genetic relation to it, or it may be a variation of the vernacular. The language of the Scriptures are usually so distant (or totally different) from the vernacular that an intermediary variation of the ordinary language (religious language) is needed to bridge the gap between the two. The religious language is the means of the interpretation of sacred texts, and the language of religious discourse referring to the transcendent.

The phenomenological research of religions has shown the extraordinary use of language in religions, different from the everyday use of language. This particular usage is rooted in the conviction in the divine, creating, healing power of the word, of the inseparable nature of word and thing. This magical belief may be faded, but is retraceable in religious language use and — according to some linguists — in the illocutory power of speech-acts. The other decisive feature of this language use is the presence of the transcendent as the speaker or the listener or the object of the speaking.

A “sacred language” is in a narrower sense the language of the sacred texts and of their prestigious, long-established translations. Hebrew, biblical Greek and the Latin of the Vulgata, can all be seen as a religious register of a former vernacular, with the addition that in the time of the fixation of these texts these language uses were estranged from the vernacular due to language shift or language development. The language of the rites, of the liturgy can be also referred to as a “sacred language”, belonging to the religious register of the vernacular, or being a different language, with or without a genetic relation.

The “sacred language” is, corresponding to the sacred space, cut out of the profane, in a complementary relation to it. The more it belongs to the holy, the less it is appropriate means to communicate the meanings of the everyday world, moreover, the less appropriate it is to communicate anything beyond the divine revelation. This contentlessness of language may appear in silence, or in the excrescent though meaningless texture of speech, even in the glossolalic sequences of sounds void of comprehension.

The use of the “sacred language” is not appropriate means to communicate the meanings of the here-and-now and to perform the unique and context-sensitive

task of communication in these new situations. Therefore, language-variations emerge bridging the “sacred language” to the vernacular containing the features of both, such as the language of the current translations of the sacred texts and of preaching, but the language of the religious discourse of the congregation, as well.

2. thesis

The essential function of the “sacred language” is the invocation and the self-disclosing of the “Wholly Other”. According to this function the universal characteristics of this language are being strange and the immutability that iconically represents eternity. This latter makes an appearance as archaism.

The essential function of the “sacred language” is the speaking of the “Wholly Other” and addressing Him. This is obvious from the extraneous nature of the language, extraneous to the communication of information and to comprehension. The main point of this kind of communication is participation.

The usual models of communication are inadequate to describe the behavior of the “sacred language”. The mediated presence of the speaker (or even its disappearance) in the act of communication, that is to say the shift from the position of the speaker to the position of message became the center of the Christian dogmas: the essence of the divine revelation is the incarnation of the Logos, and can be experienced again and again in the rite. The divine Word becomes audible, visible and tangible in the Communion.

In the “sacred language” communication is gradually effaced by expressing, addressing and participating. The speaker, what is being said and what kind of intentions lies behind it become irrelevant. It is not an “explanation of the world”, not a means of “successive fragmentation of the phenomena”, but a “form of life”, an “expressive action” “manifested through conventional intersubjective understandings”, the “performative efficacy of communicative acts” (Tambiah).

This different functionality can be perceived in the form of strangeness. The faraway, unnamed, unbeknown speaker, the loss of the natural frames of interpretation due to the split of the situation in which the communication takes place (ie. the dissimilar state and context of the speaker and the listener, such as the eternity of the transcendent and the always changing here-and-now of the human beings) rule out the possibility of communicating any new information.

The sacred language iconically signifies its eternal subject and object, and their otherness from the everyday world. On the level of language eternity appears as invariance, preservation of the archaic, primordial forms, or element that have the same effect. This language is the language of the ancestors like God is the God of the fathers in Jewish and Christian faith. The otherness mostly shows itself in the mediated nature of this communication: the “speaker” is different from the animator (who actually speaks), and speaks on a different tone, at a different speech rate, deputizing the intentions of other persons. Finally, the function of the utterance is different from the usual, it does not communicate, does not entertain, but substantiates, effectuates, distributes.

3. thesis

The religious language is the key of the religious identity. The more the religious language differs from the everyday language, the more the religious identity of the individual and of the community gains strength. If a community loses its language, it will also lose its identity, it is the way of assimilation into the larger society, this is the way of secularization.

Due to globalizing tendencies the local is losing its significance. Similarly to small languages which are under the threat of language death, the particular languages of weakening local communities are vanishing as well. It is common that the pressure of, and the assimilating influences coming from the majority of society determine the opinion that religious communities form of themselves, this was notably the case in western Christianity in the 20th century. Assimilation became the endeavor of these communities, and in a self-destructive gesture hastening their own devastation they accuse their “ghettotized” language for being the cause of the weakening of their community. While the advance of religious groups that are firmly distinguished linguistically seems to verify just the opposite.

The loss of identity is universal, and unconfined to the domain of religion. A general, loosening of social roles, even national identity or gender can be observed. In this context religious identity can easily become a substitute for usual now lost identities, and radical religious streams are ready to take advantage of this. The significance of this cannot be overestimated in regard to language planning or language maintenance. A speech community that gives up its own language gives up its existence.

4. thesis

The “sacred language” resists translation (untranslatable), and even in the case of successful translations the language of its translation due to its object, and with the passage of time becomes more and more distant from the standard language and gains a newly sanctified status: the language of the translation becomes a sacred language (functional untranslatability).

According to the paradox of Benjaminian translation theory the sacred text is translatability itself and for this reason is untranslatable. It is translatability itself because its essence is revelation, the self-disclosure of the divine that is beyond any language (prior to the diffusion of the languages in Babel). Otherwise it is untranslatable (as text), because the language into which it should be translated does not exist yet, it must be created in the course of the translation, and there is no message (that is no signified matter) of the sentences what should be translated, but the power of the word disclosed by the very text.

The practice of religions are quite different. In those that place holiness in the text (that is into the language) translation is essentially not allowed (such as in Islam and in Hinduism), but it is possible to use occasional or written translations to help the comprehension of the sacred text while preserving the sacred texts in the original (as in Judaism). Those that place holiness in the “effect” of the text, which is accepted as an accidental feature, open the door to the adoption of translation for sacred purposes (as in Christianity and in Buddhism).

The sacred language is a symbolic language, its symbols — similarly to material symbols — act on their own account and cannot be exchanged due to their participation in what they symbolize. This symbolic characteristic implies strong formal determination. The words are not only vessels of meanings but powerful words whose performative action does not result in comprehension but can be described as fulfillment (realization). The primary question in the functioning of the sacred language is not understanding but accessibility.

The sentences and statements of a sacred text can be translated (transposed), but the holiness of the translation, or rather the holiness manifesting itself in the translation is bound to some formal characteristic of the text (discussed more in detail in the final thesis). A translation that ignores the transcendental orientation of the text and its — at least partially — transcendent origin is only a compendary of the sacred text.

Every endeavor to adopt these unearthly, eternal matters to provisional, earth-bound businesses, that is to say, to adopt the eternal Word of God to one point of time is frustrating work. When words of eternity seem to be translated, to words that are anchored to our mutable language, the holiness saves these words from all further mutations, they become holy as well. This process may be called functional untranslatability.

A translation partaken in the immutability of its object becomes more and more distant from the everyday language, and if worthy of age-long use, its language becomes a sacred language in need of a transmitting language.

5. thesis

The essential function of the translation of holy texts is the mediation and not the replacement of the text. This is unquestionable in some religions, e.g. in the case of Islam or Judaism, but in the case of Christianity translations have a near substituting role. They are read as holy texts, but are somehow in a subordinate position to the "original" ones. The vernacular translation is read but the Hebrew or the Greek text is interpreted.

The normative texts (the Vulgata and the Hebrew and the Greek "originals") — alongside the acceptance of the translations — still hold true in western Christianity concerning the dogmatic, institutional or other matters pertaining to the whole church. The translations are only authoritative in matters of piety, still more individual piety. In liturgical or scientific (theological) contexts the authoritative text is the "original".

In the use of occasional or written translations to help the comprehension of the sacred text — while the original is preserved — the mediating role of the translation is unambiguous, but the inequality between the translation and the normative text remains until the former becomes sacred, too.

The translations of sacred texts bridge the reader to the sacred texts (which also have a transmittory role), between the transcendent and the human world.

6. thesis

The religious language adjusts to its bridge function. The religious language adjusts on the one hand to the strangeness and immutability of the holy texts, and on the other hand to the demand of accessibility to the members of the religious community.

The intermediation takes place between the strangeness and immutability of the sacred text and the everyday language of the members of the community. The holy texts are about the transcendent reality, everyday languages are used to express, to conduct, to perform everyday businesses. These two languages are always in a supplementary relation with each other.

The linguistic means that signify the strangeness of this language can be found in other registers of the language as well, hence it is not using them that makes a text holy, but they assure it the possibility to fulfill its proper function.

One of the most elementary characteristics of sacred language that reveal its being strange is the reduced use of linguistic means. This is most obvious in speech: reduced intonation is an audible sign of the abnegation of private intentions, as is the abnegation of pauses that articulate and elucidate the speech. This tendency is also observable in writing, in the restriction of lexica and syntax (even as an absolute dismissal of certain words or grammatical forms, or as a restriction of free choice in a certain context).

The increased use of mediation in this language heightens the feeling of strangeness. On the one hand the usual speaker-listener pattern of communication becomes more complex the message is gained through several mediators. In some cases this mediation happens over time, the text reaches the descendants through the words or language or spirits of their ancestors, or through a long tradition as in Christianity. This can appear linguistically as archaism or loan-words. The proper medium of the sacred texts, the viva vox, relieves this intensified mediation. On the other hand mediation affects the production of meaning as well. The individual parts of the text do not hold their meaning in themselves, but gain meaning through other texts. The texts, which are obscure in themselves demand further contexts to obtain a more emphatic, more distinct meaning.

The phenomenon of mediation can also be seen in parallelism, when a phrase of the sacred language is accompanied by a phrase from the everyday language as an apposition.