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# Language and Religion: The Unspoken Analogy

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*By Mike Rios*

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A Christian, a Hindu, and a Jew walk into a bar. The three individuals discuss their day, their relationships, and their jobs, but never their religion. They work, talk, and play in a world where productive interreligious dialogue is undermined by intolerance, misunderstanding, and a lack of education. Understanding global religions is a daunting task, but—as with any multifaceted project—looking to principles by way of analogy may provide a helpful tool.

Human language can provide that analogy. Steven Pinker, a world-renown psycholinguist in his books, *The Language Instinct* and *The Stuff of Thought*, theorizes that language is simply a human instinct and an aspect of human nature. It is my proposal that Pinker's language theory is an effective tool for interreligious dialogue. I will show this by first outlining the theory and then, in a hopeful attempt to make religious bar talk just a bit easier, applying the theory to the project of interreligious dialogue.

Steven Pinker bases his work on the idea that, contrary to popular belief, language is not a human invention, but rather a human instinct—we learn and instinctively are drawn into language. It is only when you address the principles of language at its most basic level that one can use language as a window into human nature.

Pinker begins *The Language Instinct*, by addressing “The Instinct to Acquire an Art.” Everyone strives to be good at something. Human beings are constantly searching for what is fascinating and advantageous. As people living in community, we are continuously surrounded by the skills of others that inspire us to learn.

Pinker argues that language is one of humankind's most astounding and beautiful arts, and that is the case because of the myriad of advantages language provides.

One of the most interesting advantages of language, according to Pinker, is the phenomenon of understanding. To be able to put letters—these shapes human beings created long ago—together to make words and then sentences is a remarkable feat. It is not because words are astounding in themselves, rather when put together they have the ability to change someone's perspective. Pinker insists that to help someone understand is an art in and of itself, and it is no wonder we strive to achieve that communicative power. One becomes more aware of the importance of this gift when trying to relay information to someone who speaks another language. "Simply by making noises with our mouths, we can reliably cause precise new combinations of ideas to arise in each other's minds. The ability comes so naturally that we are apt to forget what a miracle it is."<sup>1</sup> By beginning with language as an art, an art with the power to communicate understanding, one can better recognize the natural attraction to the skill of language.

Another aspect of Pinker's language as human instinct is that language is a key component of why we are the way we are. "Language is so tightly woven into human experience that it is scarcely possible to imagine life without it. Chances are that if you find two or more people together anywhere on earth, they will soon be exchanging words."<sup>2</sup> Language is more ingrained into our everyday life than we can ever imagine. Taking away language would mean more than making humans mute.

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1994), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, 17.

It would mean taking away signs, books, and every method that humans use to communicate through the spoken word. When one looks at where language begins, even before the first *Homo sapiens*, in comparison to how it has evolved in our world, the explosive urgency and need for language seems unrivaled.

The underlying concept connecting the human instinct of language—among the beauty, importance, and necessity—is understanding. Language defines us as a person within the society of humankind. People do not gravitate towards language because they find it beautiful or necessary for the world to function, but because it “lays out the ground rules for how we understand our surroundings, how we assign credit and blame to our fellows, and how we negotiate our relationships with them.”<sup>3</sup> The true magic of language—once we understand that as humans we are drawn to it—lies within the things it can do and the things it can tell us.

Language allows one to relay information and stories to people, but even more so, “language is entwined with human life.” It “reflects the way we grasp reality, the image of ourselves we try to project to others, and the bonds that tie us to them.”<sup>4</sup> Language articulates our universe; it articulates things everywhere: little and big, monumental and trivial, concrete and abstract. The way we comprehend these things is through naming, description, and explanation. In order for a person to engage, truly engage, in his or her own life, they simply must understand.

It is here that we find one of the more fascinating aspects of how language works around and through human life. To know and understand is a task in and of itself, but how can one achieve this task? There is a worry, Pinker says, “that

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<sup>3</sup> Steven Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought* (New York: Penguin Group, 1994), vii.

<sup>4</sup> Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought*, viii.

language ensnares us in a self-contained web of symbols. In this worry, the meanings of words are ultimately circular, each defined in terms of the others.”<sup>5</sup> To illustrate this more concretely, Pinker offers the example of a hopelessly circular dictionary passage, “**endless loop**, n. See loop, endless. **loop, endless**, n. See endless loop.”<sup>6</sup> This concern is allayed by anchoring the web of meanings to events and objects in the real, experiential world; things we know, things that are familiar, ground language. It is kept personable by avoiding abstractions and utilizing real world examples and references. Although one might imagine language as incomprehensible and conceptual, in the real world, it is available to all.

Language is functional because it utilizes what we experience within the world. That is a fact. Without this realistic foundation, language assisting in “understanding our surroundings,”<sup>7</sup> would not be usable. Language invites us to pay attention to aspects of our world. One notices this particularly when studying sentence composition. An English speaker might worry about tense (*when* things happen relative to where and when they are currently); a Turkish speaker uses specific language to clarify whether they witnessed the event firsthand or learned about it through hearsay.<sup>8</sup> One’s thoughts and sophistication in understanding the world becomes subtler as one analyzes experiences, time, people, ideas, etc., during the course of ordinary speech.

While the process of putting together a sentence encourages human beings to define and ponder their world, one can gather a more personal insight into a

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<sup>5</sup> Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought*, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought*, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought*, vii.

<sup>8</sup> Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought*, 131-132.

speaker based on their self-expression. What people decide to learn, remember, and articulate reflects the types of things they deal with in their lives and the mysteries they ponder.<sup>9</sup> No person knows every word or understands every concept, so one's individual focus reflects choices that correlate directly with one's perception of the world.

Identity is Pinker's final concept within the language-human relationship. Language, especially the particular language, dialect, or accent that we use to communicate, portrays much about who we are. An American who accentuates their "o's" as long, soft "o's" might be associated with Minnesota or northern Wisconsin. A German-speaking woman, by merely speaking a particular dialect, tells others something about her life and culture. Language is cultural, and by simply speaking a language, one necessarily provides insight into part of one's story and life.

So what does Pinker's linguistic analysis have to do with interreligious dialogue? As I said before, the underlying purpose of all language is understanding. Dialogue, of course, *requires* understanding.

To address the comparison between Pinker's theory and the project of interreligious dialogue, I will work backwards, in a way, from Pinker's linguistic schema. Right away, language and religion have two very important elements in common—they are both cultural and personal identifiers. Being a young, practicing Hindu male may identify you as a person from Mumbai, India. Claiming to be a part of a small Druze community may place your origins somewhere in Lebanon. Although many times a person's religion is not specific to place, it still makes up a

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<sup>9</sup> Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought*, 127.

part of their story. Religious identity is sensitive, and expressing our religious beliefs and sentiments is an intimate exercise. As mentioned earlier, a particular language may come with a variety of dialects or accents. Major religions throughout the world have a variety of people and cultures within them. Catholics in America and Catholics in China express their Catholicism with cultural specificity despite the aim for “one, holy, Catholic and apostolic church.”

To be human is to be a communal being. We live in an interconnected world, where we sit, breathe, work, and sleep next to each another. We are born into a family, who is part of a neighborhood, village, city, or larger family, and as we age we begin to learn language. Pinker argues that this process is instinctual, and that even if we were not taught language, we would seek it out. To communicate is to be part of something bigger, and to speak is to understand what is happening in one’s world.

Although one’s instinct to seek out religion would require more time than the need to pursue language, I propose that they are both inevitable. This is not to say that everyone will inevitably become religious, but rather that everyone will inevitably think about the questions that religious systems explore. As social beings, we have the urge to be a part of something; we have the “instinct to acquire an art,” as Pinker puts it. The questions religions attempt to answer are, some would say, the most profound questions on earth: “Why am I here?” “What is my ultimate purpose?” “What’s next?” Addressing and *giving understanding* to these questions in everyday life is an art. Even maturing, young persons inevitably ask these ultimate questions simply because they have a rational instinct to inquire.

Whether or not one personally chooses to believe in a God, human persons live in a world imbued with religion. If one can agree that we are sentient beings, that is, we possess the ability to question our own existence, one may be inclined to understand that religiousness is a natural path of inquiry. Those who reject religion still live in a religious world, and in their very rejection, often explain themselves by making use of religious language and categories. The very act of rejection implies that one is rejecting *something*, admitting the existence of that “something.”

With the possible exceptions of a silent monk or protesting citizen, it is rare for someone to reject language. But, as with religion, some people worry about the circular definition of linguistic terms. This is a worry with religion as well. Because religion asks profound questions—questions about life, the afterlife, and the reason for life—some say to seek answers would amount to an “endless loop.” However religion, like language, is anchored in the real world. While it transcends life on earth, religious persons are constantly referred back to their everyday lives. Religious principles are applied to our actions and experiences, discerned in our relationships, and experienced in our communities. This conceptual yet practical experience of religion is universal, and is critical to the understanding of how religion works in human life.

Lastly, one cannot understand where someone is coming from if you are not somewhat educated in his or her field. I cannot expect to have a productive conversation about communication with someone who speaks another language if we both have not put effort in understanding the other’s language, history, and culture. In the same sense, one cannot have successful dialogue if one or both sides



have not put work into *learning*, even if it is from an objective standpoint. The mere task of taking time to learn is something that is far underestimated and is a necessity for language and religion alike.

I began by stating that language theory is an effective tool for interreligious dialogue. It is through the aforementioned key to dialogue, understanding religion, that this tool is truly effective. To fully embrace interreligious dialogue, one must understand why someone would be religious, seeing that it is a universal instinct to look towards religion, which is undeniably influenced by culture and geography. They must recognize that we naturally gravitate towards what we know, and something every person wants to know is how to understand and how to be more fully immersed in a community and in life. They must admit to the necessity of putting effort towards education. These are “musts” for interreligious dialogue, and they are principles derived by way of a theory of language.

Whether one believes the truth of the others’ religion or not, it is in understanding the other that allows one to find a punch line that could radically change the modern world: “A Christian, a Hindu, and a Jew walk into a bar. They dialogue.”