

## Language Instinct?

We once had to learn it, but we never forget it. We use it every day and often we take its simplicity for granted, though others devote a lifetime to exploring its complexity. It can unite or divide, encourage or abuse. It is an art form or a science, as you wish.

Language, surely, is God's gift to us, setting us apart from all other creatures on earth. Steven Pinker in his excellent and highly accessible book *The Language Instinct* explores this ability, unique to humans and totally indispensable to all our interactions. No people, no tribe on earth, however remote, however simple their lifestyle, communicates in gestures and grunts. All people groups share our facility for fully-formed, fully-functional language, able to express our needs, emotions and ideas, to reminisce over the past and to look ahead to the future.

'God said, "Let us make man in our own image, in our likeness"' (Genesis 1:26). It should not be surprising, then, that we possess the faculty of language, for creation itself - our very existence - was spoken into being by God and it was not long before Adam became the first human being to have a dialogue with his creator.

However, language is a powerful tool, and like all of God's gifts it can be marred and distorted by our sinfulness. The serpent in the garden twisted the words of the Lord God to deceive Eve into disobeying him, "Did God *really* say...?" (Genesis 3:1). Ever since, the words we utter have possessed the capacity to edify or tear down. We are exhorted by Paul to 'Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs' (Ephesians 5:19). Meanwhile, James warns that 'no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.' (James 3:8).

Yet God's word in our mouths brings strength to the weary (Psalm 119:28), freedom to the captives (Isaiah 61:11) and light to the path before us (Psalm 119:105). It is 'living and active...sharper than any double-edged sword' (Hebrews 4:12).

The 'language instinct', then, is written into our genes because language is fundamental to our relationships with our creator God and with one another. Without it, how could we praise the Lord? How could we pray to him? How could we proclaim the good news of our salvation to our fellow man? As Christians, we could do worse than be known as people who value and cherish the gift of language, who choose and use our words wisely.

Warwick Danks

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### Day 1

Genesis 1: 1-5

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and He separated the light from the darkness. God called the light 'day,' and the darkness he called 'night.' And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day."

Lord God, at your voice all creation came to be. Help us to know that your Word still has power

today, that you still speak into darkness and bring light. In you we live and move and have our being – may we be listening for your voice today.

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## Day 2

Ecclesiastes 5:2-3

“Do not be quick with your mouth,  
do not be hasty in your heart  
to utter anything before God.  
God is in heaven  
and you are on earth,  
so let your words be few.  
As a dream comes when there are many cares,  
so the speech of a fool when there are many words.”

Lord God, may my words today be carefully chosen. May I come to you in sincerity and humbleness of heart and may the way I live my life bear out the words that I speak and the promises I make before you and before your people.

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## Day 3

2 Corinthians 1:17-20

“Do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say, 'Yes, yes' and 'No, no'?  
But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not 'Yes' and 'No.' For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not 'Yes' and 'No,' but in him it has always been 'Yes.' For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God.”

Heavenly Father, thank you that you are faithful and that the promises you make are firm and trustworthy. May I be whole-hearted in my commitment to follow you, not double-minded but holding unswervingly to your truth. May my words today reflect the confidence I have in Jesus.

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## Day 4

James 3:7-12

“All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.”

Father, I thank you that you have given me words to praise you, to bring my worship and my petitions to you. As I talk with others, I pray that words of blessing and encouragement would be on

my lips, that you would keep me from carelessly uttering words which tear down and destroy and that all the words I speak throughout the day would be to your praise and glory.

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## Day 5

### Acts 2:5-12

“Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: 'Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!' Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, 'What does this mean?'"

Lord God, thank you for making your gospel of salvation known to me, giving me understanding and making it real in my life. Thank you that the good news of Jesus Christ is for all nations and for all time. May I go into the world and share this precious message with others, bringing your Word faithfully and relevantly to them, that each one might come to know you as Father.

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All Bible quotations from the New International Version (NIV)

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