



IF I SPEAK IN THE TONGUE OF ANGELS

*Has language done irreparable damage
to African Americans?*

Arlene Wallace Gordon

The world has more languages than any human could ever learn in a lifetime. Ralph Waldo Emerson once described language as “the archives of history.” Is there any wonder that different groups as well as generations of people struggle to understand each other even when they think they are communicating intelligently?

Language is one of the controversial issues confronting the church today. The controversy is about power and manipulation. How can we speak of an omnipotent God and limit God to a male, white image? How can men and women communicate and share power in a system



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that has traditionally ascribed the power to men? How can we eliminate feelings of powerlessness by being sensitive to the language we use? An African proverb says,

Those who ask questions cannot avoid the answers.

The English language has undergone tremendous changes over the years. It changed for my parents and it will change for my children, as old words are replaced with new ones and language grows with societal needs. In recent years we have experienced increasing problems related to language, social realities, and changing contexts. David Ng, who was my Christian education professor at San Francisco Theological Seminary, observed this, stating that the time for multiculturalism had come, along with a consciousness of a new way to interpret tradition, texts, and contexts. If we are serious about being in dialog and striving to understand each other, it stands to reason that new words and meanings will be added to our vocabularies. Technology, culture, and diversity will also add words and images. As media campaigns become more aggressive and permeate our minds, our daily language will be affected. Cultural groups will add their own familiar words. Our language will become an even more complex and confused issue if we do not address the changes with a welcoming and positive attitude.

Western culture, in particular, faces a new and challenging dilemma as the influx of cultural groups brings new and different language patterns. In order to grow and learn together and to live together in harmony, Western culture must begin to look at language from a different perspective. Language has the power to fascinate and impress, or to hurt and demean, depending on how we use it. Standard English provides the basics of communication; however, jargon and slang communication have been virtually unacceptable to dominant Western culture. Cultural groups who express themselves through their own brand of jargon are frequently misunderstood or frowned upon.

Westerners tend to be critical of anyone whose language and behavior differs from theirs. We are quick to judge another's viewpoint, assuming that our way is the only way. Controlling modes and difficulty in sharing power are also common in Western culture. Such behavior has led to mistrust and misunderstandings between cultural groups as Western culture lays claim to enormous power and influence over others. As the various cultures communicate, abbreviations, acronyms, in-language, and foreign words may also cause a flaw in communication, fostering a sense of exclusion for anyone who isn't

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white. This is damaging to those seeking understanding and acceptance as valuable contributors to Western culture.

The challenge confronting the church is one that will require a serious questioning of old and deeply embedded patterns of tradition and control. This will require that we acknowledge the deeper problem—racism—where healing needs to take place. It is time for open and honest review and examination now and here. The church is the place where the healing process should begin, but first we must admit that there is a problem. Many are still reluctant to do so despite the dire need.

The controversy over language and power is not a new issue for the church. The Scriptures clearly dispel any ideas we have concerning our own power and remind us that all power comes from God. When we recall the Pentecost event as recorded in Acts, we remember the historical adventure in which all the Jews who had gathered for the Pentecost holiday heard the disciples in languages that all could understand.

How do we begin the process of sharing the power and understanding the language? We may begin by looking at the ways in which Western culture, including the church, has projected messages of white superiority and inferiority of other groups. Racism is a serious problem in ethnic communities. Racism and classism have impeded efforts to communicate by the prejudicial demand that all speak fluently in standard English and conform to a Western culture that grants no value to ethnic culture or life perspective outside that of the European. This inherent bias has exposed the simplest frailties and encouraged powerlessness among ethnic people.

For example, history records the unique experience of African Americans as they communicated their existence in captivity. The only English they understood was, "Get to work!" As in the game of Monopoly when you draw the "Go to Jail" card, it is clear you do not pass Go, do not collect \$200, but go directly to jail. No excuse is accepted, no excuse heard. There is only one-way communication. Many African Americans were taught English by their slave owners, or they managed to listen and learn to communicate on their own. Even then, they were powerless in a system that limited how much they learned and what they did with what they had learned.

Although many, through their own sacrifices and determination for linguistic competence, have succeeded in mastering the English language, they cannot avoid unique patterns of grammar and pronuncia-

tion distinctive to their enslavement. African Americans are criticized for their use of verbal rituals from oral tradition,¹ although at one time it was their only means of communication. They have likewise been criticized for a certain practice of sound patterns connected to West African languages that they knew before enslavement. In *Black Talk*, Geneva Smitherman gives several examples:

- dropping sound endings (“your” is “yo”)
- reducing words to a vowel sound or a single consonant (“cold” is “coal”)
- stressing the first syllable (po-LICE is PO-lice)
- using “be” to indicate continuous action (“he be dressed”)
- the “th” sounds become “t” or “f” (“death” is “deaf,” “with” is “wit”).²

Another example is the use of jargon like “Whats up?” These phrases are allowable because it is not necessary to use “is” and “are” in sentences. These are only a few examples of verbal communication that is often misunderstood.

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A large segment of the African-American population has been so severely damaged by the African-American experience that they may never speak standard English. More devastating is the realization that they may never discern the unique gift of simply being who God created them to be. These individuals find their own words to express themselves. Often their only means of asserting their power is to use the technique of shock value. This is demonstrated by the use of curse words, which endows them with power for the moment. This is highly detectable in rap music, where words and phrases that seem vulgar to our ears are successful in driving the point home. Singing, talking, rapping, playing in rhythmic movements, and producing creative sounds are coping techniques. Used effectively, they ease the pain from the contradictions of life. More importantly, they are used to rejoice in the triumphs of humanity as created by God.

The subject of language opens to reflection and discussion many debates that will continue into the next century. One example is the

recent debate that grew out of California's Oakland Unified School District and its announcement that Ebonics—African-American vernacular English—would be used as a tool to teach African-American children language proficiency. While this raised eyebrows for many, others debate the validity of the African-American vernacular as a legitimate language. As United States society struggles with initiatives, programs, and issues, we must continue to raise questions and look for appropriate answers. This is crucial to help disempowered groups communicate in a society where they feel they are living in a hopeless situation.

The widespread use of technology has created another challenge in the linguistic educational process. As our schools, homes, and workplaces become centers of transferring information, one is required to learn yet another language, the language of technology. How will this affect ethnic minorities who have already been damaged by an unjust system that has impacted their learning opportunities and even their desire to learn? Much of the language of the emerging technological and politically driven age is a matter of individual access and affordability; thus, the gap will continue to widen as individuals and groups find themselves left out simply because they cannot afford the technical equipment needed to keep up. This will have an impact on powerless groups' ability to communicate effectively.

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Bilingual education, now banned by legislation in California, allowed groups to continue speaking their native languages while also learning English. This particularly affects immigrants who have no prior knowledge of English and who are having difficulty adjusting to a strange environment.

While there have been pivotal advances in our understanding of linguistic competence, many assumptions are still being made. It is time that we begin to listen to those prophetic voices demanding that we examine our assumptions about language. We must not allow old habits and beliefs, technological advances, and outright stubbornness

and resistance to reinforce past beliefs that everything will be fine if we just keep things the way they are. Otherwise, our future will simply be déjà vu. Molefi Kete Asante, Professor of African Studies at Temple University, in *The Afrocentric Idea* argues that

persons have the right to see things from the integrity of the perspective of their own ethnic group.³

We must not continue to promote assimilation but rather encourage recognition of the uniqueness and value each culture brings to the whole, so that voices are no longer silenced and may regain the power they deserve.

These voices come from women, children, gays, lesbians, from immigrants, refugees, and homeless people, from ordinary people, Black and white, rich, poor, and middle class, regardless of their place of origin. These are the voices that make up our churches and our communities. These are the voices that make up the whole universe created by God. Cain Hope Felder, Professor of New Testament Language and Literature at the School of Divinity, Howard University, Washington, D.C., writes in *Stony the Road We Trod*,

Only a few decades ago white Bible scholars, who held exclusive prerogatives as the academic elite, would have found it unthinkable that African Americans could be bona fide Bible scholars.⁴

Likewise, it is difficult for some to accept the reality that women reflect the voice and message of God. The desire of women to become pastors has been frowned upon as not being biblical. Are we forgetting the Acts passage, quoting Joel:

In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. (Acts 2:17, emphasis added)

As women have demanded social equality and opportunities, there have been constant reminders that a woman's place is not one of power but one of the submissive role of wife, mother, and subordinate. Our shared understanding of Scripture allows women to explore God in other than male images. Male power and authority have dominated women for many centuries. Male power has also contributed to the abuse of women for far too long.

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I must admit that there was opposition on my part to the initial argument for inclusive language. Having been brought up in an environment in which men were in power and women in the kitchen, pious, pure, domestic, and submissive, it was difficult to adhere to such a paradigm shift. It was years before the perspective of women in culture and society became an interest and influence in my life. My images of God had been limited by structures of patriarchy. I had accepted the stereotypical image of being Black and female without question. Experiences in seminary and in the church allowed me to listen to the voices of women who had been abused, and I began to share their pain and understand their concerns. Prayer helped me become comfortable with change and then I began to see the whole issue differently. The Spirit provided me with compassion and discernment. I suddenly heard in the gospel message in a new and clearer way. I can understand the discomfort some feel in a worship setting where there is no consideration of the inclusive language issue. It is confrontation time, and that means that there must be engagement in dialog with acceptance of differences and diversity. We must open ourselves to change and listen for the voice of God in these times. In *Inward Journey* Howard Thurman wrote,

Often even before the full awareness of what has taken place can be felt, the realignment of one's powers begins to work and recovery is on the way.⁵

No one cultural perspective or one experience should dominate, but rather each culture should be seen as contributing beliefs, values, practices, and achievements that are equally valuable. The time has come when all voices need to be heard. It is a time for different viewpoints to be freely expressed; after all, we do claim to be the land of the free. The time is upon us to begin to decode the language of enslavement so that all persons can be empowered. In this way we can stake claim to the many valuable contributions to the English language rooted in other cultures and experiences. The voices are yearning to be heard. It is high time that we look for the evidence of God in each human being and be open to the voice of God in the midst of us.

If we can begin to see through our own desires for power, perhaps we will be better able to hear all the languages that contribute to the whole church and society.

The issue really becomes whether one understands what is intended and whether it is acceptable to be who you are. James H. Cone, in *The*

Spirituals and the Blues, describes it as

a *somebodiness* that is guaranteed by God who alone is the ultimate sovereign of the universe.⁶

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has embarked upon the challenge of increasing diversity in the church. Gayraud S. Wilmore, in his new and revised edition of *Black and Presbyterian: The Heritage and the Hope*, writes,

Indeed, the long-range future of the church and the world is obviously not separatism but increasing unity and integration.⁷

The challenge before the church is open discussion, honest explanations, and a desire for understanding. This will not be easy for many. It is risky and will require patience and perseverance. It will require carefully listening and carefully choosing our words before we speak. For some this will be new and challenging, while for others it will register as a normal way of life. Even with all our efforts, the issue is far from being resolved. It cannot be until the collective voices can be heard, across color, class, and culture. The power will become evident when we can laugh, play, and work together with understanding and appreciation for each other. The power will come when the powerless began to feel powerful. The power will come with the freedom to be one's self. 

——— Notes ———

1. Oral tradition refers to the ways in which songs, stories, and other communication by word of mouth was passed down from one generation to the next. During the institution of slavery in America it was the only way, since slaves were forbidden to learn to read or write.
2. Geneva Smitherman, *Black Talk* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), pp. 6–7.
3. Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), pp. 180–181.
4. Cain Hope Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 1.
5. Howard Thurman, *Inward Journey* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1961), p. 129.
6. James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), p. 91.
7. Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black and Presbyterian: The Heritage and the Hope*, Revised and Enlarged (Louisville: Witherspoon Press, 1998), p. 110.

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—— For Reflection and Discussion ——

- When—or did—Western culture stop appreciating the depth and creativity added to its language by new cultures within it?
- Why are we threatened when language changes?
- Would absorbing the traditions of non-European cultures seem appropriate in your particular congregation? Why or why not?
- How have “controlling modes and difficulty in sharing power” (page 29) contributed to the American establishment? How do we see new groups sharing in power and decision making?
- How and why do familiar words add power to the worship experience?
- Recall a situation in which you may have had difficulty explaining your language, for any reason (such as a different language, jargon, idioms, dialect, accent, other reasons). What was the experience like? What were, and are, the implications of your discomfort and, perhaps, their options for resolution?



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