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A Study of Linguistic References in *The Bible*

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Abstract

Linguistics is the scientific study of languages. There is a great difference between modern linguistics and traditional linguistics. Modern linguistics is called scientific because of its methods and philosophical orientations. Linguistics mainly deals with three aspects; form, content, and context. Linguistics not only deals with language but also with human communication. Linguistics is the science which studies the subject within its internal structure. The present paper investigates *The Bible* systematically with reference to its linguistics, background and implications.

Keywords

The Bible; Diglossia; Polyglotism; Linguistics.

Linguistics is often called as the “scientific study of languages”. Earlier there were a lot of issues between scientific and non-scientific aspects of linguistics. In the early phase, linguistics was considered as unscientific but

in modern age linguistics is accepted as the science of languages. There is a great difference between modern linguistics and traditional linguistics. Modern linguistics is called scientific because of its methods and philosophical orientations. Linguistics mainly deals with three aspects; form, content, and context. Linguistics not only deals with language but also with human communication. Linguistics is the science which studies the subject within its internal structure.

Language is related to human life. Language can be studied from different points of view. Language is considered to be man's first invention. Language is a gift to human beings. No tribe was found without a language. Language is a perfect tool to express emotions, needs etc. Language is a set of phonetic symbols for communication. Language consists of spoken and written form. Language consists of words in a structural and conventional way.

Language can be different as verbal, physical, biologically innate, and a basic form of communication. Behaviorists often defined language as a learned behavior involving a stimulus and a response (Ormrod, 1995). Language not only includes spoken and written form but also symbols, gestures and motions etc. All human language shares some basic concepts. Humans can generate a number of sentences with a limited set of rules.

The word 'bible' came from the Latin word "biblia". *The Bible* is a religious text considered sacred among Jews and Christians. It consists of different books by different authors. It varies according to the denominations. *The Bible* of the Catholics consists of 73 books. The Bible of the Protestants consists of 66 books and and The Bible of Ethiopian Orthodox Church has 81 books. Even though there are similar incidents in *The Bibles*, the words are different. *Hebrew Bible* consists of 24 books. It is divided into three parts: Torah (Teachings); Neviim (Prophets); and Ketuvim (Writings).

The Bible is mainly divided into two parts: The Old Testament and The New Testament. Old Testament mainly deals with the stories related to the Israelites and their history. New Testament mainly deals with Jesus' birth and

other incidents until his death. In New Testament Jesus himself plays an important role. He was born as a man and plays the role of a man in New Testament. In Old Testament Jesus played the role of God.

In 2nd century BC Jews called the *Bible* “Holy” and then Christians started to call it as *The Holy Bible*. *Bible* is the bestselling book of all the time. It is not only a religious text but it also deals with the history, culture, rules etc. *Bible* was written in different languages like Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

Even though Bible deals with many incidents, these incidents can be related to different aspects of lives. Language has two forms, spoken form and written form. Examples of these forms can be seen from the Bible. There are so many examples which show the indication of speech form and the written form. One of the important examples is that of the creation of the world. “And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.” (*King James Bible*, Gen. 1:3). In the book of Exodus there is an example of the written form: “And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God” (*King James Bible*, Ex. 31:18). It is an indication of speech form and written form by God in *The Bible*.

The Tower of Babel is a good example for linguistic diversity in *The Bible*. Chapter eleven of Genesis clearly say that “And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech” (*King James Bible*, Gen. 11: 1). They tried to build the tower of Babel because they wanted to settle down. They constructed the tower to make a name for themselves. It was out of their pride that they tried to build the Tower. And God punished them by confounding their language. It has led to the creation of different languages. “Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.” (*King James Bible*, Gen. 11:9).

Bible also deals with animal communication. In Bible there is an interesting episode about animal communication. There is a conversation between the

snake and Eve. Here snake uses a language to communicate. “Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden” (*King James Bible*, Gen. 3: 1)? Here snake uses language as a tool to force Eve to commit sin. There is yet another incident which gives a record of animal communication using human language. “And the LORD opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times?” (*King James Bible*, Num. 22: 28).

The Bible speaks about the phenomenon called “polyglotism”. Polyglot is a person who speaks several languages. In *The Bible* the term ‘unknown tongue’ is used to denote the meaning of “polyglot”. “For he that speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God...” (*King James Bible*, I Cor. 14: 2). It shows that if a person has the ability to speak languages that he does not know, then it is a special gift of God. There is one more example of polyglotism in *The Bible*. “And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” (*King James Bible*, Acts 2: 4).

There is another incident that describes people from different countries coming together with no common language, but they hear everything in their native tongue at the same time. “And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.” (*King James Bible*, Acts 2: 9-11).

The languages that was predominant in the region during the times of Jesus Christ were Hebrew, Latin and Greek. There are also references to the languages spoken by the people during that time. “And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was, JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS. This title then read many of the Jews: for the place where Jesus

was crucified was nigh to the city: and it was written in Hebrew, and Greek, and Latin.” (*King James Bible*, John 19:19-20).

There is a reference to “Lycaonian” language in the Bible. “And when the people saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men” (*King James Bible*, Acts 14: 11).

Greek, Latin and Hebrew were the main languages used during that time. When Jesus was crucified they wrote a note which said “Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews” and this note was written in Hebrew, Latin and Greek. This is ample proof to the fact that these were the main languages predominantly spoken during that time.

There is a reference of Aramaic Language in Bible. “And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of his companions, wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the writing of the letter was written in Aramaic, and interpreted in Aramaic.” (*Darby Bible*, Ezra 4: 7). The references of Aramaic language is very few in Bible compared to Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. There is a Diglossic situation in Bible, which deals with Aramaic language and Hebrew language. In linguistics, diglossia refers to a situation in which two dialects or usually closely related languages are used by a single language community. In addition to the community's every day or vernacular language variety, a second, highly codified variety is used in certain situations such as literature, formal education, or other specific settings, but not used for ordinary conversation. “Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, and Shebnaah and Joah, said to Rabshakeh, “Speak now to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand {it;} and do not speak with us in Judean in the hearing of the people who are on the wall” (*New American Standard Bible*, II Kings 18: 26). Here also there is a reference of Aramaic language. These words show the diglossic situation existed during that time.

Even though Bible is a religious text it gives various information about language. It is a treasure trove for linguists to do research. Biblical language is

just only a small part of it. But within that small area, a lot of things can be discovered. In the Bible each book is unique and different. Each book was written in different times.

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