



Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium

Volume 17 | Issue 1

Article 2

3-8-1991

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Luthy, Melvin J. (1991) "Linguistic Argumentation in Gospel Doctrine," *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol17/iss1/2>

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Linguistic Argumentation in Gospel Doctrine

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In my early years I remember being taught that in Greek the name Peter meant rock. I was told that Catholics, therefore, argued that Christ was to build his church on Peter, because he said "...thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church." I also became aware of the counterargument that called attention to the context of the verbal exchange, and that since Christ was addressing Peter, if he had meant for the church to be built on Peter, He would have said "upon you" I will build my Church, but since the Savior spoke in the 3rd person "this rock," surely he intended another antecedent, and that antecedent would be the fact that the Spirit revealed the knowledge that Christ was the son of God to Peter; in other words, the antecedent was the process of revelation (Matt. 16:14-18). These discussions were my first initiation to gospel doctrine being supported by linguistic argumentation. Since then, I have been intrigued by the way we use language to explain gospel concepts.

In this discussion, I am not concerned with this particular type of syntactic argument, but rather with another type: the use and analysis of words to make doctrinal points. The way teachers and writers sometimes define words, including the arguments they make about them, have interesting implications for how the membership of the Church understands and believes.

To gain a view of what is involved, I believe I can list the ways we use words to support gospel teaching in four categories: 1) **foreign language insights**, 2) **English language distinctions**, 3) **fanciful etymologies**, and 4) **ex post facto etymologies**. While I will discuss each of these uses, my primary concern is with types 2 and 4, because in them I find potential problems. Because of time constraints, I will only address the problems inherent in type 4.

FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSIGHTS

The first use is that of foreign language insights. Excellent examples of this use are found in the newsletter of the BYU Religious Studies Center under the heading "Word Study." In this column John Welch and his associates discuss the historical meanings and usages of terms found in the scriptures. For example, in the September 1988 issue, they discuss the early meanings of the word *amen* in both the Hebrew and Greek usages, pointing out that, among other things, the word was "used to certify the accuracy of something said or written." Referring to statements containing this meaning they comment:

Matthew, Mark, and Luke record many such statements, and such statements in the Gospel of John always have a double *amen*, [translated] 'verily, verily.' Nowhere else in the Bible or Book of Mormon except Mosiah 26:31 (where the Lord is speaking directly to Alma) or Alma 48:17 (where Mormon is affirming the greatness of captain Moroni), do statements begin with 'verily.' Thus, it is interesting that Jesus would call himself 'the Amen, the faithful and true witness' (Revelation 3:14), 'the God of Amen' translated as 'God of Truth' in KJV Isaiah 5:16).

Explanations of the word *baptize* provide another case in point. To support the doctrine of baptism by immersion, it is not uncommon in gospel doctrine discussions to hear reference to the early Greek term *baptein*, meaning "to dip in water, or immerse," from which we get the modern English term *baptize*.

These foreign language insights appear very useful in that they attempt to get at the original meanings in source documents and, they provide perspectives that complement our English language understandings. A similar benefit accrues when we learn foreign language vocabulary. Although such

insights and etymologies are interesting, they must generally be viewed as giving new insights and evidence rather than being finally definitive.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE DISTINCTIONS

The second type of use may be classified as English language distinctions. We observe this use in discussions of such ideas as the difference between *faith* and *belief*, or *love* and *charity*, or *eternal* and *everlasting*. In some cases these distinctions are taught as authoritative, fundamental distinctions in the gospel. Of course, many languages have only single terms for each of these pairs, so attempts by English speakers to explain the difference between faith and belief, or charity and love, and then to translate the ideas into another language will often meet with frustration.

FANCIFUL ETYMOLOGIES

The third type of use is what I would call fanciful etymologies, because they do not make serious claim to historical validity, but are used for rhetorical effect. A good example of this use is the explanation Joseph Smith gave for the meaning of the word *Mormon*. In a letter to the editor of the *Times and Seasons*, Joseph corrects an error regarding the name *Mormon*, and then gives a "fanciful etymology" of the term; that is, he does it for rhetorical effect, rather than seriously claiming that it is historically valid:

The error I speak of is the definition of the word "Mormon." It has been stated that this word was derived from the Greek word "mormo." This is not the case. There was no Greek or Latin upon the plates from which I, through the grace of God, translated the Book of Mormon. ... I may safely say that the word "Mormon" stands independent of the learning and wisdom of this generation....Before I give a definition, however, to the word, let me say that the Bible in its widest sense, means good. (Smith 299-300)

The prophet then cites how the term "good" is expressed in various languages, ending with the Egyptian "mon," meaning good. He then suggests that we can add the English word "more" to this Egyptian term and we would have a meaning for "Mormon" which would be "more good." The

prophet's earlier comments tell us that he is not claiming a valid etymology for the term, but is using a "fanciful etymology" for rhetorical effect. President Gordon B. Hinckley in the Church's General Conference, October 7, 1990, used the same analysis of the word, indicating that this is what Mormons are all about (Hinckley 51).

EX POST FACTO ETYMOLOGIES

The fourth type of use is what I would call ex post facto etymologies. In this case, teachers or writers appeal to the English morphology of a word as evidence of its correct gospel meaning. A good example of this use is the familiar explanation of *atonement* by James E. Talmage in *Jesus the Christ*. Talmage wrote "This basal thought (i.e. reconciliation whereby man may come again into communion with God...to dwell...in the presence of his Eternal Father) is admirably implied in our English word "atonement," which, as its syllables attest, is *at-one-ment*, 'denoting reconciliation, or the bringing into agreement of those who have been estranged'" (Talmage 23). The noun "onement" was used by John Wycliff in his 1382 edition of the Bible. In time it became customary to express the idea as "at onement." In his Bible of 1526, William Tyndale used the term "atonement," continuing the emphasis on the reconciliation implication noted by Talmage (Merriam-Webster 27).

Talmage was apparently seizing the teaching moment, using the historical morphology of this word as a kind of mnemonic device to teach one important consequence of the atonement to English speakers. It is instructive that he phrases his explanation in terms of our "English word" and in terms of "implication" rather than meaning. Had he been writing in Finnish, he could have appealed to Finnish morphology and taught the idea of "making right," or "putting things into harmony." The word in other languages could yield still other implications.

Talmage's use of English morphology to make his point is not particularly problematic for me, because he said that the English word "implies" "at-one-ment." There is a clear difference between "imply" and "mean." Still, I find that many teachers and writers do interpret Talmage's use of the term

“imply” to mean “mean.” In fact, this type of argumentation, i.e. that “atonement” means “at-one-ment,” has become a popular emphasis in the writings of contemporary teachers.

Still another example of *ex post facto* etymology is the definition given by a writer to the English term *condescend*. He explains that the prefix *con*, meaning *with*, combined with the stem *descend*, tells us that the related word *condescend*, in such verses as I Nephi 11:16 (condescension of God), means “the descending of God *with* us...” apparently in the sense of “accompanying us down. He writes that the angel speaking to Nephi chose this term “to convey precisely the original meaning given by its Latin roots, *con* plus *descendere*, that is, “to descend with...” (England 45-46).

COMPARISON OF USES

The following chart compares the distinctive characteristics of these four uses. As the chart reveals, the **Foreign Language Insights** give complementary information, and are often based on early source documents. They do not claim final

authority, giving the “correct” meanings, nor do they focus attention on a specific idea or meaning, or use English structure as their authority. The **English Language Distinctions** do use English as their authority as they provide complementary information, and they often claim to give “correct” meanings, but they do not focus on one idea nor do they use source documents. The **Fanciful Etymologies** do focus on one idea, and do use English as an authority, but they do not claim “correctness” nor do they claim to be giving complementary information or to be based on source documents. They are used for rhetorical effect. The **ex post facto etymologies** claim correctness, give complementary information, focus on one idea, and use English as an authority, but they do not use early source documents—hence the term *ex post facto*.

The chart reveals that there is reason to be concerned with **English language distinctions** and **ex post facto etymologies**. To give further explanation why I believe a problem exists with *ex post facto* explanations, I would turn first to some insights from cognitive linguistics.

		AUTHORITARIAN-CLAIMS TO GIVE THE CORRECT MEANING	COMPLEMENTARY--PROVIDES ADDITIONAL IDEAS TO CURRENT UNDERSTANDINGS	FOCUSES ATTENTION ON A SPECIFIC IDEA OR MEANING	USES ENGLISH AS AUTHORITY	USES EARLY SOURCE DOCUMENTS FOR UNDERSTANDING
FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSIGHTS		Yes				Yes
ENGLISH LANGUAGE DISTINCTIONS	Yes	Yes		Yes		
FANCIFUL ETYMOLOGIES			Yes	Yes		
EX POST FACTO ETYMOLOGIES	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		

INSIGHTS FROM COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

Current research is helping us understand how we categorize things in our minds. It shows convincingly that the classical way of categorizing things, almost universally accepted since Aristotle, is simply not valid (Lakoff 5-57). The classical way claims that categories exist independent of our minds, and that we discover these categories by recognizing common features that they share. *Man, woman, child, dog, elephant, and racoon* may be placed in the same category, because they share the feature "animate." Within this category there is a subcategory "human," the members of which share the same features, and so on. Classical categories are thus defined by **common properties** and **clear boundaries**. Other examples of classical categorization in linguistics can be drawn from phonology and syntax. In fact, much of recent linguistic theory is based on classical categorization.

George Lakoff, in his book *Women Fire and Dangerous Things*, discusses evidence that contradicts this rigid, albeit time-honored, view. He points out that if all members of a category do share a common set of properties, each member of the category should be an equally good example or representative of its category. The research is clear that this notion of equal membership in categories is not valid. There is a clear tendency for mental organization that favors certain members of a category to be viewed as better representatives of the category than others. These members carry what John Austin calls the "primary nuclear sense" (qtd by Lakoff 18). Modern linguists call it the central or prototypical sense. In other words, the categories we sense have prototypical members. If one were to ask for an example of the category "bird," one would be more likely to get as a response "robin" or "sparrow" than "chicken" or "penguin" (Lakoff 41).

In addition, categories also have members that belong as a consequence of metonymy—where the part stands for the whole. Using Lakoff's reference to Austin we can illustrate these relationships: The word "healthy" has a "primary nuclear sense" referring to the well-being of the body, yet we also say that exercise is healthy, or that someone has a healthy complexion. In these instances, the word is being used metonymically rather than in the nuclear

or prototypical sense. In each case the same category term, i.e. healthy, is used, but in terms of category membership, they exist by metonymy with the prototypical member of the category. They are not equally good representatives of the concept of the category "healthy" (Lakoff 18-19). Lakoff gives other examples that illustrate that categories have extendable boundaries by analogy, or metaphor; for example, the foot of a mountain is not a foot in any nuclear or prototypical sense, yet by analogy, or metaphor, we accept it in the same category (19-20).

Linguists and anthropologists have long enjoyed showing how different languages divide the color spectrum in different ways, suggesting that the language we speak largely determines the way we view and categorize our universe. Lakoff confirms that

If one simply asks speakers around the world to pick out the portions of the spectrum that their basic color terms refer to, there seem to be no significant regularities. The boundaries between the color ranges differ from language to language. The regularities appear only when one asks for the *best example* of the basic color term given a standardized chart of 320 small color chips. Virtually the same best examples are chosen for the basic color terms by speakers in language after language" (Lakoff 26).

In other words, even though their languages divide the color spectrum differently, people everywhere have a sense of the prototypical or focal colors.

In addition, neurological studies by Kay and McDaniel suggest why we categorize colors as we do (610-646). Their "theory has important consequences for human categorization in general. It claims that colors are **not** objectively 'out there in the world' independent of any beings. Color concepts are *embodied* in that focal colors are partly determined by human biology" (Lakoff 29).

INSIGHTS APPLIED TO EX POST FACTO ETYMOLOGIES

Now to return to the question of ex post facto etymologies. Even though Talmage wrote of "implication" rather than "meaning," some writers claim that the "at-one-ment" meaning is the primary or focal meaning. Eugene England, for example,

claims that most theologian's have erred, and have encouraged a misleading emphasis on the idea of payment or expiation (33). He argues that "William Tyndale, who used the word in his Bible in 1526, had the correct understanding, and that later theologians have gone astray in their emphasis on *payment* or *expiation*.

Actually, the "at-one-ment" definition fits best as an explanation of the consequences of the atonement rather than a definition of the atonement itself. The word "atonement" occurs 81 times in the Old Testament, and is almost always associated with a sacrifice of some kind, to make payment to make things right, to expiate, as if laws of justice were pending. In Hebrew the verb *atone* meant "to cover" or "wipe off." It also has the meaning of bearing something away, as in the case of the scapegoat that "bore away" the peoples sins (atonement).

Interestingly, the word occurs only once in the entire King James New Testament: "... but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement" (Romans 5:11). The New Testament Greek term is *katallage* (καταλλαγή), denoting an "exchange as with money" of something for something, including a change of something to remove enmity, which, or course, implies reconciliation (Duckwitz). However, the term *ransom* occurs twice in the New Testament in connection with Christ' mission.

In the Book of Mormon *atonement* occurs 29 times, with familiar phrases such as the need for an "infinite atonement," and the "power of the atonement," all of which suggest a powerful act that would bring about something marvelous.

But the act should not be confused with the consequence, yet that seems to be what is happening with these ex post facto etymologies, which direct attention to the nonfocal understandings of the gospel terms. To me it is clear that the "at-one-ment" that is achieved is a **consequence** of the atonement, just as many other things are, like forgiveness and resurrection, but none of these is the central or focal meaning of atonement.

A similar problem exists with the ex post facto definition of *condescend*, which claims that the prefix *con* and the stem *descend* tell us that the word *condescension* in I Nephi 11:16 (condescension of

God) means the descending of God *with* us, apparently in the sense of "accompanying us down." It appears that this, too, is a non-central focus being taught as the central focus. Despite the morphology, the notion of "with," or "accompanying," is secondary to the central or focal meaning. While it is true that our Savior did come down to live with us, the central meaning of *condescend* is to willingly lower oneself from a high station to a lower one (OED). England gives his explanation in opposition to the now familiar negative meaning of *condescend*, which implies "patronizing." Most will agree that the "patronizing" meaning is clearly wrong, but the ex post facto definition is also off the mark.

CONCLUSION

In the end, what are we to conclude about the four uses of linguistic arguments in teaching gospel doctrine? Aside from saying that this is simply academic hair splitting, I would suggest that teachers and writers tend to favor one of the following conclusions:

Conclusion 1. Each language is unique and offers its own valuable insights into the gospel.

The implication of this conclusion is that no single language can convey all relevant, rewarding, or correct perceptions of gospel doctrine. From a purely pragmatic point of view, this conclusion could cause one of two problems: 1) Translators would have endless difficulty in deciding which meaning or perception should be translated, or 2) an argument could be made that it does not make much difference which meaning or perception is translated. The relativism suggested by the conclusion could open many doors to sophistry. If the fullness of the gospel can be brought to every person in his own tongue, we must reject this claim.

Conclusion 2. Since the Gospel was restored through English, that is the language through which the gospel is best understood.

This conclusion implies that the semantic and morphological distinctions in English reflect truths not accessible by the same means in other languages. Both **English Language Distinctions** and **Ex Post Facto Etymologies** tend to perpetuate this notion, but historical and contrastive studies give ample evidence to the contrary. While it

is true that each language divides semantic space in slightly different ways, there is no reason to believe that English divides it in the way that harmonizes best with divine semantics. To assert such a thing is to perpetuate ethnocentrism, and to justify linguistic imperialism.

Conclusion 3. Some uses of etymology that help us understand and appreciate early source documents are useful; fanciful etymologies are interesting from a rhetorical perspective, but they do not help us in making sound linguistic arguments; English language distinctions provide interesting ideas, but often fail the test of translatability; ex post facto etymologies, as appealing as they may be in English, do not make good linguistics nor good gospel doctrine. At best they provide an eclectic way of making one's personal point at the possible expense of skewing the plain, focal concepts of the gospel.

EPILOGUE

When Nephi, Jacob, Enos, Alma, and Joseph Smith speak of teaching the plainness of the Gospel, might they be speaking of teaching what cognitive linguists have come to call the focal ideas that seem to resonate with our very souls, regardless of our languages, just as focal colors resonate with all peoples, regardless of their languages. Perhaps the idea of focal meanings even tells us something about what preaching the "fullness" of the gospel means. Perhaps it does not mean preaching every nuance offered by every language, but rather preaching the nuclear or focal elements that are universal, probably associated with our spiritual selves in a way that produces a harmony, a fullness in simplicity, when they are known.

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