

LANGUAGES ARE RUBBER, NOT PUTTY

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This Thinksheet's **issue** is, at bottom, how language relates to reality--in the middle, how the two changes, in life & language, are related to each other--& on top, what tensile limit does language in general, & do particular languages, exhibit when language authorities attempt to change the way people talk & write & (therefore) think?

The Thinksheet's **occasion** is the persistence with which, in decision-making as to the theme of the annual Craigville Theological Colloquy, the question preceding the Thinksheet's title emerges year after year.

Its title states the Thinksheet's **thesis**--metaphorically.

1 At **bottom** is the question of language's ontological status. Obviously, the status is not 1:1, or cats (the animals) & "cats" (the word) would be the same thing: the reference (the pointing) would be the referent (what's pointed at). Theories responding to the question run a range from close (1::1) to far (1:::1) distances between word & thing. No need to use technical terms for the stages along this spectrum & the corresponding philosophical positions, but one needs to know that the greater the distance the more powerful is the "metaphorical" element in the theory. At extreme distance, "all language is metaphor" (as the saying goes): no word ever is the thing, but only "carries over" (Gk., "meta-phor") some sememe (i.e., meaning) through some phoneme (sound) with its morpheme (form) onto some arbitrary & nonconcomitant reality. Philosophically, the important & clashing points of view are solipsism (meanings can't be "carried," so communication is impossible: each human being is an isolato/a, imprisoned "alone" [Lat., "sol-"] in "self" [Lat., "ipse"]) & logical positivism (meaning can be carried only when the referent is material, physical, & therefore scientifically verifiable [so, e.g., the word "God" can have no meaning]).

Those now preaching "metaphorical theology," esp. gender feminists, are linguistic extremists (as extremism is defined in §1), but with these nuances: (1) "All language is metaphor" becomes "All theology is metaphor"; (2) As believers in human community, they reject solipsism, which teaches that human relatedness is illusory; & (3) As religious, they reject logical positivism, which teaches (as in Freud's THE FUTURE OF AN ILLUSION) that religion is illusory. Yet they are like the solipsists in insisting on the ultimate authority of personal experience, an implicate of which is that every "person" (a gender-transcending abstraction) is logically & therefore morally equal to every other "person." And they are like the logical positivists in holding to one implicate of logical positivism, viz., that since meaning cannot extend beyond "science" (i.e., scientism), language otherwise used falls into the category of esthetics, where *de gustibus non disputandum* (Lat. for no point to arguing over matters of taste)--so metaphor is sprung free from tradition to become the servant of taste (e.g., one may or may not have a personal taste for calling God "Father" or using exclusively masculine pronouns [not feminine or neuter] to refer to God).

2 In the **middle** is an epistemological conundrum: the life/language interaction is a flow we plunge into in order to discover-&-decide how we "know" what we think & claim we know. When a language "dies" (as we metaphorize when it ceases to be spoken, the cessation analogized from our experience of death), it's only because its users-speakers have died off. But relatively, we say a language is dead (a) if an earlier stage (e.g., ancient Gk.) is no longer spoken or (b) if the (sub)culture in which it's spoken has so subsided as to be "stagnant" (a metaphor from our experience of water that's ceased to move & therefore to sustain life).

Suppose (metaphor-analogy coming!) two neck-&-neck runners are looking at each other: they're moving absolutely (i.e., in relation to the rest of reality), but aren't moving relatively (i.e., in relation to each other) unless-until one runs slower or faster than the other. Sometimes a language changes faster than its life, sometimes the reverse. Sometimes (as in the case of modern Israel, 1890-) a language is revived because life has been; sometimes the revival is simultaneous; & sometimes (as in the case of Ab. Akaka's revival of Hawaiian, 1946-) life is revived in response to the revival of a language. All these cases help us to study language/life changes

comparatively, synchronically.

Diachronically we may study one life/language case over centuries of change. The best example, from the standpoint of abundance of data, is English--to me the most fascinating case not only because this language is my mother-speech but also because in '36-'37, under an Eng.-PhD (Ox.) Englishman, I had a college course titled "The History of the English Language"--a course I never think of without remembered excitement & joy. How complex, seemingly chaotic yet orderly, are the change transactions between Eng. & the culture (broadest sense) of those who have spoken it!

3 But on **top** of all this is the operative question I repeat from this Thinksheet's intro: "What tensile limit does language in general, & do particular languages, exhibit when language authorities attempt to change the way people talk & write & (therefore) think?" We face here two levels: the lower is generative grammar, "the grammar of grammar," what we know about language as a human behavior; the upper, for our present purpose, is what we know about the Eng. language historically, comparatively, & in recent efforts to improve it lexically (its diction), functionally (its structure), & morally (its sensitivity). For the present purpose, only this last interests me. Before particulars, I'll state my answer: The limit is severe, as you can see in this Thinksheet's title's metaphors:

Putty, when you stop applying pressure to it, **remains** where it was when you removed your tool from it: rubber, when you stop stretching it, **returns** to its former position. I could go on for pages illustrating, from the history of my mother-speech, the truth that language is far more like rubber than like putty.

4 Gender feminism, as the language form of fe/male egalitarianism, aims to revise Eng. so as to represent, & promote, the **equality** of the sexes, a sociopolitical agenda. Its credo appeared in publishing houses' stylesheets, in school-speech (children being taught to taboo "sexist" language, esp. generic pro/nouns), in college-university-seminary speech-codes, in "the media" (television, radio, newspapers). But the movement has crested. E.g., the rubber has returned from "chairperson" & "chair" to "chairman" (for women & men). I'm hearing/reading gender-feminist complaints against the passive return. (More passive, from the nature of language, than active, though some of the return is from deliberate "backlash.")

In religion, this rubber-return is increasing the stridency of the gender feminists. E.g., Donna Schaper, a UCC intra-state area executive, in the forum "Reimagining: A Show and Tell," at the third national UCC Womens' Meeting (as reported on p.8 of the Sept/96 UNITED CHURCH NEWS): "What is really going on is the struggle, a great struggle, about whether women will be allowed to name our God." Assuming, as I do, the accuracy of the quotation, what am I to make of this assertion? "Allowed": by whom? who's/what's stopping them? And what's with this exclusivistic "our" (in the name of inclusivism?)? Yes, women are different from men, but are they therefore to worship a deity different from men's (& from the masculine-inclusive-of-feminine God of the Bible)? And if these women claim to be Jews or Christians, they are too late to name their God: he's already named himself (Ex.3, Phil.2.9-11) & doesn't take kindly to the thought of anybody's imposing on him a name-change. In D.S.'s statement, all I can agree with is that there's "a struggle" going on about language for God--& on this she's an enemy of mine, as is the whole United Church of Christ establishment, national & judicatory levels.

5 Nothing I've ever said/written about language for God (i.e., God-language) has compromised my enthusiasm for finding **fresh, bold metaphors** for Christian public worship, private devotion, & witness. At his own expense, a NYC commercial artist (& former student of mine), Jn. Lefton, created this insert display-ad for buses & trains:

The gospel says every human being is sinful, corrupt, worn-out, run-down, & in need of a new start -- a recycle job, new birth, the daily cleansing of being forgiven & forgiving: we are God's junk, mirrored in (metaphored by) the junk we regularly sort out for recycling. What's then at issue? It's that such a metaphor adds to the Christian canonical-classical metaphor-treasury with-

**Jesus Christ
recycles people.**

For further information read John 3:16 or visit your local church.

out the reductionism at the heart of the gender-feminist attack on the Bible, viz. subtracting the biblical God's masculinity, which while consistent (God never being given female names/titles/pronouns), is said to be....

6"only metaphoric," since all God-language is metaphoric, since (§1) "all theology is metaphor" because "all language is metaphor." Gender feminists differ among themselves as to how deep in this knife is plunged, but even the shallowest thrust linguistically kills the biblical God. For the biblical God is the God of **eternal initiative**, but the metaphorists (the "only-metaphoric" crowd) reserve the linguistic initiative for man, humanity. They deny the existence of revelation-privileged metaphors, preferring the snake's "Did God really say...?" (Gn.3.1 TANAKH; I translate closer to the Heb., "Is it so that God said...?"). They want to remain in charge, in control of religion as of all else, in decisional control by metaphoric freedom to claim wordings without being divinely or humanly claimed by particular expressions.

Let's see how this works out. Mordecai Kaplan (b.1881) claimed that religion itself is only a metaphor for ethical living. A purely human creation like language & art, religion is expressive of a people's culture: the question is how to sustain & enrich the particular culture (in his case, Jewish) without the encumbrance of a transcendent deity whose talk (i.e., revelation) has the perpetual initiative in our decision-making. Founder of Reconstructionism, Kaplan voiced what is for millions of Jews the essence of Judaism: not Torah joyful obedience, but cultural affirmation by participation in Jewish peoplehood. Such Jews break the hearts of faithful rabbis who hold that God, not peoplehood, should be central to the people's attention & sense-making & community.

Next, consider those metaphorists who think religion is real but God is only a metaphor for religion, a Feuerbachian projection of human personhood onto the screen of one's / one's group's "ultimate concern" (Tillich) or "good" (Wieman's "naturalistic theism," a theological rendition of Whitehead's "process").

Last, consider those metaphorists who believe God is personal but should not be referred to by personal pronouns. The Bible's consistent use of only masculine pronouns (he, etc.) for God is merely metaphoric, a matter of projection rather than revelation. This concession to gender feminism, defended as necessary to avoid the error of thinking God male, has created an oddity in the history of religion, viz. a deity thought to be personal but never referred to pronominally as personal. (See #2770, "'A New Religion?'").

Being an antimetaphoristic revelationist, I reject all of the above in this §. As a canonical-classical Christian, I accept & affirm the masculinity of *deus revelatus* (he, God [not goddess], Lord, King, Father, Son). I'm not so naive as to project this onto *deus absconditus*, who/what God is that's beyond, though not inconsistent with, who/what he's revealed himself to be. When gender feminists complain that I fail to make the "sociology of knowledge" cultural adjustment, correcting for the alleged fact that the divine Patriarch was the inevitable "imag[in]ing" of the divine in a patriarchal culture, I bristle with questions. Can't the same thing be said for the prescientific notion of personalized natural forces: in our secular culture, is not the idea of a personal deity an anachronism? Is male/female equality so clearly true as to relativize any pre-gender-feminist ideas of the divine? (In our society, the theory of optimal male/female relationships--& therefore of any "projections" thereof onto deity--is a work in process, not a known quantity or quality.) Who says that in history, nothing in religion gets "cut in stone" as a matter of truth, not just development?

Women (& their male camp-followers) bent on "the struggle...to name our God" (§4, ¶2) understandably are revulsed by the Bible's exclusively masculine naming of God who, while having some feminine metaphors, has no feminine names, titles, or pronouns--who is never addressed, or pronominally referred to, as feminine. This consistent positive/negative biblical practice should surely be in the data base of anyone writing biblical theology proper, i.e. the biblical doctrine of the divine. What prominence it's given is another matter: it's hard to underweight (since the Bible here, as seldom elsewhere, is consistent), & it's easy to overweight (in reaction against the gender-feminist redesigning of deity)....In the immediately above ¶, I did not include, in the listing of biblical masculine lexica for God, "Master," the antonym of servant or slave. Note this astounding fact in our language's titles for

deity: "Master" represents (in KJV) 17 Hebrew, Aramaic, & Greek masculine titles! Rightly, gender feminists say that the call to submit (as servant or slave) is a guy thing, not a gal thing. While Buddhism in preaching enlightenment is gender-neutral, the religions of the so-called West (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) preach submission (Arabic, "Islam"), which is (according to feminists) gender-specific, masculine. In all three Western religions, Abraham submits to a divine command (commanding/demanding being a guy thing, right?). NB: In the Bible, it isn't just that **language** for God is masculine; deeper than language, God's **behavior** is masculine. All this is awkward in our gender-egalitarian period, but won't be when this period passes, as is beginning to happen.

7 This Thinksheet is mainly saying that "languages are rubber, not putty": ideological waves such as the latest form of feminism hit & stretch them, but after the wave they return to their normal shape. To this I must now add (continuing what I've just said about the language-roots of "Master") that the language in sacred books (Bible, Gita, Qur'an, et al) is neither putty nor rubber but **stone**--"cut in stone," as the saying goes. An "Inclusive Language [English] Bible" has been produced, but an inclusive language Bible could never be published: nobody's insane enough even to dream of bowdlerizing the Hebrew-Aramaic-Greek texts to emasculate-demasculinize the Bible's deity. My point? Those of us who do our most basic praying to & thinking about the biblical deity in the Bible's own (Hebrew-Aramaic-Greek) expressions are appalled at the madcap miracle of turning this stone into putty. All translations of any literature float on the literature's surface & are more/less faithful re-presentations of the texts. As music is the eye of the ear, literature is the ear of the eye: when I look at a Bible translation, am I seeing mud or hearing through clear water? Language is culture's most conservative element, & any culture's basic literature is that culture's bedrock. (My mixture of metaphors is studied; the reality is complex.)....EXAMPLE:

When in THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL's Psalter I read (Ps.23) "God [replacing "the LORD"] is my shepherd," I'm looking at mud thus dulling the bright sound pressing up from below. And I think of what an eminent hymnologist, in an upcoming review of this hymnal, says about it: It's revisionist prosody is at the level of "Me Tarzan, you Jane"--caused by the "one tonality" of radical feminism. The gender feminist tabus (I add) are, only in this among new hymnals, "set in stone," the putty of inclusivist newsspeak hardened into censorship Sprachzwang (compulsory speech) in the interest of a claimed Sprachreinhart (speech purity) to improve the way Christians speak of God (Sprachbesserung, "speech bettering," speech-reform). (Forgive the Deutsch, but often the Germans say it shorter though in longer words.)

....I've often heard it said that "Ten years from now, our [UCC] churches will have gotten used to the new hymnal, & objections to it will have been forgotten." I think not, but I fear so. Words are deeds, & changing the words was action before the act of publishing & distributing the new hymnal. Further, human beings post-facto rationalize their behavior. Some churches that bought the new hymnal pig-in-a-poke, sight-unseen, though they feel "taken," are saying "We'll get used to it." That's the danger, & the tragedy.

8 The metaphor war is at the heart of the current christological crisis arising from **Jesus-Seminar** versioning of the so-called "historical Jesus." The best corrective is Jaroslav Pelikan's magisterial JESUS THROUGH THE CENTURIES (H&R/85). Here I give you this from pp.90-92: "The human mind...could not perceive spiritual reality except through the use of physical images." So the Bible uses "simple and even homely analogies," God being "clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Rom. 1:20)." "Idolatry was the vain attempt of the human worshiper to cross the [visible-invisible] gulf," which was "bridged when the Logos became flesh." Thus idolatry's "fallacy of misplaced concreteness...had now been replaced by the concrete events of the life of Jesus....The God who had prohibited religious art...had now taken the initiative of depicting himself in visible form, and had done so not in metaphor or in memorial but in person and, quite literally, 'in the flesh.'" The meta-physical had become historical."....Great scholarship wedded to canonical-classical Christian faith, in radical contrast to all ideological distortions such as Jesus-Seminar historicism & gender feminism. Metaphorical mastery without falling into metaphorism.