

**ASPECTS OF LITURGICAL LANGUAGES IN  
EUROPE**

**Abstract:** The three main religions in Europe the Jewish, the Muslim and the Christian have different relationship to the language of their sacred books and liturgies.

The Jewish and Muslim tradition at this time does not differ very much, as, in the course of time, they both came to the conviction that only the original texts could be really relied on. The Christian “language-policy”, however, created a situation which led to contradictions between the principles of theology and the practice of language-use.

Catholics, Protestants and the Orthodox believers have even now no common liturgical language and a really ecumenical, inter-confessional edition of the Bible. In spite of the suggestions of the United Bible Society or the Vatican Council II. the language in service books is still not homogenous.

The study of liturgical languages has always been an interdisciplinary subject of investigation involving scientists of numerous, widely-varied academic fields (theology, philosophy, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, folklore, etc.).

In spite of the great deal of work done by scientists in the last few decades to answer the questions of liturgical language-use, some aspects of it still have not been paid appropriate attention. One of these is the relationship of the three main religions – the Jewish, the Muslim and the Christian – to the language of their sacred books and liturgies.

The differences were already present in the historical past. According to the ancient records the Jews must have lost their native

tongue during the Babylonian captivity and then accepted the Chaldeic (Aramaic = Syriaic) on which a small portion of the Old Testament is written (Böhm, 1897:7). In order to understand the language of the Bible they had to study it in the same way as the Christians and Muslims had to centuries later.

Although at the beginning the conditions and the criteria of the languages used in the liturgical books were the same in all the three religions – they were written in the everyday speech of the common people – later, due to different dogmas and traditions, the situation changed.

In the first centuries AD the Christians held to the principles of Paul expressed in his letter 2 to the Corinthians 3:6, according to which not the written law is important but its spirit. The same thought is made even more explicit in his letter 1 to the Corinthians 14:11:

“But if I do not know the language being spoken, the person who uses it will be a foreigner to me and I will be a foreigner to him.” (Good News Bible, Today’s English Version, The Bible Societies, Collins Fontana, 1977)

Some verses later, he once again underlines the importance of native language-use in church service:

“But in church worship I would rather speak five words that could be understood, in order to teach others, than speak thousand of words in strange tongues.” (14:19), (Good News Bible, 1977)

The Jewish tradition at this time did not differ very much from the Christian one because both of them used the Greek Septuaginta (a very literal translation of the Old Testament, see – Barr, 1975:325). However, in the course of time the authority of this version began to be questioned by the Jews. They gradually came to the conviction that only the Hebrew text could be really relied on.

We have to admit that in medieval Hebrew theology there existed tendencies emphasizing the importance of peculiar language forms in the Writings; nevertheless, we cannot speak about a strict sticking to the letters of the Tora (and not to the sense) in the Jewish religion. The basis for the different attitudes to the form of the sacred text can be found in the various interpretations of the divine revelation. Although it was generally accepted that the Bible, God’s word, was

revealed by God to man, some Jewish theologians, however, interpreted God's words only theologically (as a sense), while for others the revelation was a linguistical notion as well implying the sacredness of the form of the text, too(see: Seckler, 1981:89–90).

A more radical opposition of the two conceptions is only the product of later times, when the followers of the Reformed Judaism declared that the biblical books were written (only) with divine inspiration and in this sense the linguistic approach has lost its importance. The progress of this conception went parallel with the general ideas of reform in 19th century Europe. As a result, after a series of smaller translations the whole Old Testament was published in Budapest in 1907. It should be noted, however, that the primary purpose of this translation was to provide a better understanding of the Bible and it was not meant for liturgical use (Bottyán, 1982:102–105).

For the Christians the Latin Vulgata (406 AD) with its “*sensus de sensu*” philosophy of translation served as a reliable source for almost a thousand year even after the collapse of the Roman Empire. St. Jerome’s work, in spite of its high philological quality, anticipated the problems of translating sacred books.

The Bible and the liturgy from the point of pragmatics are complicated acts of communication where God’s word is communicated in human speech and is interpreted by the people. All the symbols, gestures and speech are means of this communication which also express man’s acceptance of the divine revelation. Communion, songs, worship, thanksgiving and the characteristic features of the language used in the liturgy (at least according to the opinion of some theologians and linguists) make up a symbolic system. Changing one part of the system can upset or distort the whole meaning – the human acceptance of the divine revelation (Thurneysen, 1964: 192–206). But here arises another question: can human language be an adequate means in this communicative act, when, on the one side we have God, described by the Bible as a state of peace, repose and absolute eternity, and man on the other side with his limited, always changing language? Has man the right to force his own language on God?

According to Muslim theologians there cannot be any right for man before Allah. Man should renounce all his personal freedom and obey the Almighty (Thivollier, 1963:31). The language of the Koran, therefore, has been preserved in its original form.

Christian liturgies – at least in the early times – did not restrict the use of vernaculars; therefore, in the early centuries we have Greek, Latin, Armenian, Syriac, Coptic, Gothic and later Slavic in liturgical use (Csanádi, 1992:70). In the following centuries, however, this tendency changed, Catholic church-authorities got more cautious, afraid of the heresies and distortions of the dogma. The use of vernaculars was restricted to the explanation of the tenets and to religious teaching. The existence of a large number of biblical quotations in medieval chronicles all over Europe testify to the fact that if not the whole Bible, at least its most important parts were translated into local languages well before the Reformation (Nemeskürty, 1990:16). It was a common tradition – and it is even now a missionaric practice – to read out passages from the Bible before sermons in the language of the believers.

It should be pointed out that behind the linguistic conservatism of the Latin and Greek Churches lay theological considerations as well, and not simply concern about the inadequacy of local languages to express the sacred thoughts of the canonical works.

The differences concerning liturgical languages between the Latin and Greek Churches came to be felt more distinctly only at the time of Reformation. Luther's Bible-translation and his introducing vernacular into the church service called forth such a prompt reaction from the Catholic Church that in a short time there appeared as many Catholic translations as there were Protestant. Bible-translations published decades earlier than Luther's (in Italy, France, Bohemia, see: Vogel, 1962) also show that the need for understanding the Bible was a common European cultural demand. The Trient-Council (1542), however, did not change the Catholic Church's position to the liturgical language.

The Orthodox Church both in Greece and Russia was to a certain degree – at least geographically – protected from the innovations of Reformation. In Byzantium the struggle for the purity of the liturgical (and literary) language can be connected with the influence

of Hesychasm. The “Atticizing” tendency aimed at a purified literary language has been trying to revive the standards of Attic Greek since the first century A.D. This archaizing style was only intensified by the Hesychastic attitude to language according to which a word itself was the essence of the phenomenon. It was not an abstraction which could be substituted by any synonym. The consequence of this theory has been seen for centuries in Orthodox territories. The Slavonic and Greek languages were not far removed in structure and lexis from the liturgical languages, and when copying the manuscripts local elements could get into the text. After centuries these seemingly small changes amounted to considerable alteration. Hesychasm and the “Atticizing-movement” created a kind of natural strain slowing down the changes.

These Greek developments had a strong impact on Church-Slavic in Bulgaria and Russia (Second South Slavic Influence). Grammarians and Church-leaders tried to create a uniform Church Slavic following the Cyrillo-Methodian models and in this way purify it from Bulgarian, Serbian and Russian elements (see: Talev, 1973.) Members of one generation did not feel the influence of the local language in the texts and might have thought the alterations brought into the canonical Church-Slavic by Church authorities in the 17th century to be heretical. This reform and misunderstanding of the reform caused a serious crisis in Russia, splitting up the Orthodox Church and depriving one part of the population from essential human rights (Old believers).

Both opposing parties thought that by changing the sacred text they changed the meaning of the whole, only their perspectives were different: the Old believers – from the perspective of the present, the reformers (Nikonians) from the perspective of past.

In effect, Hesychasm theory has similar views with modern conceptions about poetical language but, at the same time, some of its ideas can be traced back to Panini. They have in common the concept that not only the elements but their structure and hierarchy jointly make up the “work” – literary or mystical. A component of a structure can be songs (sounds), words (graphic signs, sentences and other visual or aural signs. (LaBauve), 1992:240–246). The hypersemantic meaning postulated by modern linguists for poetic

language resembles the role of liturgical language in Hesychastic interpretation. (see in detail: Weinreich, 1963. 150–171). Strangely enough, Panini's efforts made some thousand years ago to describe Sanskrit aimed at something similar. He was anxious to revive not only the graphic form of a Sanskrit word but its sounding as well (hence his detailed phonetic descriptions). He assumed that in liturgical use both originally written and pronounced words had identical value (M. Fehér, 1993–94, 606–625).

Catholic and Protestant Bible-translations of the Reformation period had a strong influence on the literary languages in Europe (the *Károli* and *Káldy* in Hungary, the *King James* version in England and *Luther's* in Germany). The authority of these first translations, however, proved to be so great that the correctors of later centuries dared to make only minor modifications in the language. Even 19-th century revisions did nothing more than correct the obsolete words and christological errors, thus preserving the archaic language. This method created a strange situation for the Protestant liturgical language. It was on the way to becoming like the Church Slavic in "Slavia Orthodoxa", although it had nothing to do with Hesychasm. This unwillingly created situation led to a thorny contradiction between the principles of theology and the practice of language-use. As Protestant theoreticians claimed to revive the early Christian liturgies, this artificially supported archaic language stood in contrast with the principles (see: Bittinger, 1966).

A real change in "language-policy" was instituted by the Catholic and the Protestants only in the 20th century. This slow development was marked by transitional solutions which can be best demonstrated if we compare two missales (Catholic).

Magyar–latin misszálé (Budapest, 1944:438)

„*És elindulván, szokása szerint az Olajfák hegyére méne: követék pedig őt a tanítványok is.*” Lukács, 22:39

In this short passage there are three archaic forms: *méne*, *követék* – verb, past tense, *elindulván* – verbal adverb, past tens. Passages without biblical quotations do not have archaic forms.

Magyar misekönyv, (Budapest, 1967:400)

„*Az utolsó vacsora után Jézus elindult és szokása szerint kiment az Olajfák hegyére. Követték őt a tanítványok is.*” Lukács, 22:39

This quotation is literary Hungarian, without any archaisms.

English Bibles in the 20th century tried to preserve something of the “Bible-English”, especially those based on the King James version:

“But Jesus said unto him, Judas, betrayst thou the Son of man with a kiss?” Luke.22:48 (King James Version, Nashville, Tennessee, 1970)

In some versions the archaic personal pronouns: *thou, thee, thy, thine* and *ye* are preserved in sentences where God is addressed in direct speech:

“Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup of Me: yet not My will, But Thine be done.” Luke. 22:42 (New American Standard Bible, La Habra, 1977).

Without any archaism is published the Good News Bible (1966), in up-to-date language, “...in common English – that is the idiom which is used in common by all strata of English-speaking society as a means of communication, a spoken idiom rather than a literary one.” (Bruce, 1979:260)

The Protestants in Europe followed the suggestions of the United Bible Society and similar editions appeared in most countries (see the opinion of the Hungarian language lector, Lőrinczy, 1978). The language in service-books, however, is still not homogenous.

The Catholic versions after the Vatican Council II (1963–65), in the sense of the “*aggiornamento*” (Latin: *accomodatio*) accepted the modern literary languages for Bible-translations and liturgical use (but did not suggest the spoken idiom preferred by the United Bible Society – see the opinion of the Hungarian language lector: Ruzsicky, 1966.) The English – American Catholic editions generally follow the competent standards of the International Committee on English in Liturgy. For biblical quotation they rely on the New American Bible (1970).

According to the intentions of the Vatican Council II, Catholic liturgies are held in modern literary languages or in Latin (rarely).

Present situation:

All the more interesting is the situation in our day when scientific study of the Bible (historical, hermeneutical, linguistic etc.) transcends the barriers set by different confessions. Christians, Jews

and scholars of other denominations freely make use of each other's work. The technique of Bible-translations came to be determined by the international rules of linguistics and history, and now there cannot be any accusation against Catholics using the Vulgata as their source. But an agreement on the exact wording of the Bible is still ahead and the ecumenical, interconfessional editions claiming it in their titles (e.g. *La Bible Oecumenique*, 1969, Catholic, New International Version, 1963, Protestant) are in reality only the start of the process to "truly ecumenical" editions (Bruce, 1979:216).

In addition to the doctrinal divergencies, modern Bible-translations differ in language style, too, preferring either literary, dignified and archaic, or common style. Liturgical languages also reflect this diversity in style.

Although Catholic and Protestant liturgical language-use, in general, is based on similar principles influenced by modern theories in "translatorica" (i.e. translation should convey the same meaning for the reader as the original did for its contemporary readers), in practice there are still differences.

One of the reasons for this can be the fact that the Protestants did not jettison phrases, words and grammatical structures established by liturgical or literary tradition (see: Lőrinczy, 1978:390). It is common knowledge that the native language was strongly influenced by the Protestant biblical language in Protestant areas. The modern Hungarian Protestant translation changed the most frequent archaic verb forms and perfective verbal adverbs, but some stylistically archaic passive forms and lexical units still remained:

Károli Version, Revised, 1927. Matthew, 28:19

„Elmenvén ezért, tegyetek tanítványokká minden népeket, megkeresztelvén őket...”

New Version, 1975, (Protestant)

„Menjetek el tehát, tegyetek tanítványává minden népet, megkeresztelve őket ...”

The archaic perfective verbal adverbs – *elmenvén, megkeresztelvén* – were changed to *–menjetek el* –(imperative) and *– megkeresztelve* – (verbal adverb).

The Hungarian Protestants defended the use of the passive voice (rarely used in Hungarian) maintaining that if we avoid using it, the



subjects of the sentences are left indefinite and in this way it is not known who acted (felvétetik – Luke 17:35).

Protestant Slovak Bible-editions mark the archaic features with other linguistic means:

- a. with the vocative forms of proper nouns (Luke 22:48)
- b. with frequent use of verbal adverbs (Luke 22:39, 22:44, Praha, 1969).

In the Russian Protestant Bible this marker is the great number of perfective adverbs (Luke 22:39, 22:40, Moscow, 1968).

The editions of the United Bible Society (Good News, Die Gute Nachricht) with their everyday, spoken language represent excellent, easily readable translations but none the less they run into difficulties when councils (British, American, or German) decide about the linguistic standard of liturgical languages.

The Orthodox Slavs' liturgical language is the product of continuous modifications of Old Church Slavonic in the 18th century. As a more radical reform could have repeated the situation brought about in the 17th century, these modifications did not move the language really closer to the modern idiom. The Old Believers, dissatisfied with any official change at all, use the 16th-century variant of the Old Church-Slavic. In any case, the members of the Russian Orthodox Church are dependent on modern translations (available only since the end of the 19th century) if they want to understand the Bible or the liturgy.

## **Conclusion**

At present major liturgical languages in Europe can be divided into three groups:

- I. Ancient languages:
  - a. Hebrew – used by Jews
  - b. Greek – used by Greeks and Greek Catholics (on occasion)
  - c. Latin – used by Roman Catholics (on occasion)
  - d. Arabic – used by Muslims

- II. Modified ancient languages:

- a. Old Church–Slavic (16th-century standard) – used by Russian Orthodox Old Believers
- b. Old Church–Slavic (18th-century standard) – used by the Orthodox and Greek Catholics in „Slavia – Orthodoxa”

### III. Native languages:

- a. slightly archaic variants – used by Protestants
- b. literary variants – used by Roman Catholics and in non-Slavic countries by Greek Catholics

## References

- Barr, J. (1979). The Typology of Literarism in Ancient Biblical Translations. In *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, I. Philologisch-historische Klasse*.
- Bittinger, A. (1966). *Der Frühchristliche Gottesdienst und seine Wiedererlebung innerhalb der reformatorischen Kirchen der Gegenwart*, Marburg a. d. Lahn: Oekumenischer Verlag.
- Bottyán J. (1982). *A magyar Biblia évszázadai*, Budapest, Református Sajtóoszt.
- Böhm J. (1897). *A liturgikus nyelvekről*, Eger.
- Bruce, F.F. (1979). *History of Bible in English*, Guilford and London: Lutterworth.
- Csanádi B. (1992). *Alapvető liturgika*, Budapest, Christianus.
- M. Fehér I. (1993–1994). Übersetzbarkeit philosophischer Texte und philosophische Probleme ihrer Übersetzung: der Fall Heidegger, In *Existentialia*, vol. III–IV.
- LaBauve Hébert, M. (1992). *Hesychasm, Word-Weaving, and Slavic Hagiography: The Literary School of Patriarch Euthymius*, München: Otto Sagner.
- B. Lőrinczy É. (1978). Az új magyar protestáns bibliafordítás néhány nyelvi-stilisztikai problémája, *Magyar Nyelv*, 4.
- Nemeskürty I. (1990) *Magyar Biblia-fordítások*, Budapest, Szépirodalmi Kiadó.
- Ruzsiczky É. (1976). A nyelvi lektor munkájáról (A Biblia lektorálása során szerzett tapasztalatok alapján), *Magyar Nyelvőr*, I.

- Seckler, M. Petuchowsky, J. Ricoeur, P. Birkman, R. (1981). Literarische und religiöse Sprache, In *Christlicher Glaube in moderner Gesellschaft*, 2. Freiburg–Basel–Wien: Herder.
- Talev, I. (1973). Some Problems of the Second South Slavic Influence in Russia. München: Otto Sagner.
- Thivollier, P. (1963). Тиволье П. Спутник искателя правды. Bruxulles: La Vie avec Dieu.
- Thurneysen, E. (1964). Offenbarung als Sprachereignis, In *Theologische Zeitschrift*, 20.
- Vogel, P. H. (1963). Europäische Bibeldrucke des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts in den Volkssprachen, Baden–Baden.
- Weinreich, U. (1963). On the Semantic Structure of Language. In *Greenberg, J.H. (ed) Univeersals of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### Quoted works

- Good News Bible (1977). Today's English Version, The Bible Societies, Collins, Fontana.
- Magyar–latin misszáló (1944). Budapest.
- Magyar misekönyv (1967). Budapest, Eccl. Kiadó.
- New American Standard Bible (1977). La Habra, California: The Lockman Foundation.
- Új Testamentom, azaz a mi urunk Jézus Krisztusnak új szövetsége (1927). Ford. Károli Gáspár, Budapest.
- Biblia, Istennek az Ószövetségben és Újszövetségben adott kijelentése (1975). Magyar nyelvre fordította a Magyarországi Egyházak Ökumenikus Tanácsának Ószövetségi és Újszövetségi Bibliafordító Szakbizottsága, Kiadja: a Református Zsinati Iroda Sajtóosztálya, Budapest.
- Svätá Biblia (1975). prel. prof. Jozef Roháček, Vydala Svetová Biblická Spoločnosť.
- Библия, книги священного писания Ветхого и Нового Завета (1968) издание Всесоюзного Совета Евангельских Христиан–Баптистов, Москва.