

Contesting Language(s):
Heteroglossia and the Politics of Language in the Corinthian Church

By

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Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Religion

May 10, 2019

Nashville, Tennessee

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Untuk Mami dan Papi,
Christina Gaspersz and Alexander Tupamahu

Acknowledgments

Growing up in Indonesia taught me to appreciate what we call *gotong royong*, i.e., collective work towards a particular goal. The term recognizes that a person cannot exist and do things in isolation. One is always embedded in a community that supports and sustains one's existence. The reality of "being-in-the-community"—to adapt a term from Martin Heidegger—is the very reason I have reached the point at which I am now. The completion of this project would not have been possible without the support that I received from many people. It did take a community to get this project to the finish line.

I would like to thank my *Doktorvater*, Fernando Segovia, who has been instrumental in shaping me and my scholarship. With generosity and care, he has helped me in many different ways since the first day I arrived at Vanderbilt University in June 2012. I consider it a blessing to have worked with him throughout these years. Also, I would like express my gratitude to my dissertation committee members: Herbert Marbury, Joseph Rife, and Tat-siong Benny Liew. All the constructive comments and questions that I received from them made this project much stronger. Moreover, in the process of researching and writing this dissertation, I also received generous financial and scholarly support from the Forum for Theological Exploration, the Asian Theological Summer Institute, the Wabash Center, and the Louisville Institute. For their help and encouragement throughout this journey, I am deeply grateful!

I am thankful for many fellow doctoral students at Vanderbilt who in the past seven years have become my discussion partners: Sung Uk Lim, Luis Menéndez Antuña, Menghun Goh, Nicholas Schaser, Febbie Dickerson, Amy Allen, Michael Sekuras, Leonard Curry, Kyle Eugene Brooks, Yolanda Norton, and many others. The discussions I had with them helped clarify many of my thoughts. Special thanks also to Greg Carey, Amos Yong, Jonathan Tan, and Brian

Bantum for all their advice, especially when I was struggling on this journey. I have received substantial help and support from the staff of Vanderbilt Divinity Library, particularly Keegan Osinski, Bobby Smiley, Chris Benda, Margaret Ann Trotter, and Charlotte Lew. The staffs at the Interlibrary Loan office provided exceptional service when I needed literature that was not available at Vanderbilt Library. English is my second language; the sharp editorial eyes of Ulrike Guthrie made my writing shine.

Furthermore, I would like to thank Erica Bryand Ramirez for her support and encouragement over the years and for the countless of hours we spent discussing many different issues to do with Mikhail Bakhtin, Postcolonialism, and Pentecostal studies, among others. I have been blessed by my friendship with Lloyd Barba and Sid Sudiagal, who taught and pushed me to reflect on my Pentecostal social location in a deeper way. I would like to acknowledge all the baristas at Charlotte Pike Starbucks who were very kind to me, especially when I was spending hours, days, weeks, and months writing this dissertation there. I've met many wonderful friends at Starbucks: Rusty Green, Andrew, Will Brown, and many others. To my pastor, Todd Hukill, and all the members of Connection Pointe Assembly of God Church in Nashville, thank you for your prayers and support since the first Sunday my family arrived in Nashville in 2012.

To my wife, Jeanny Rumuat: I would not have been able to do this without you. Your love is the very reason I am what I am today. Thank you so much for taking an evening shift so I could work on this dissertation in the day time. Finally, to our children, Norman and Wesley: thank you for putting up with me working on this dissertation for many hours every day. I love you both!

Table of Contents

	Page
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction	1
 Chapter	
1. Why on Earth Does Tongue(s) Become Ecstatic Speech?: The Rise and Domination of a Romantic-Nationalist Mode of Reading	8
1.1. Introduction	8
1.2. A Missionary-Expansionist Mode of Reading: A Pre-Modern Interpretation of the Corinthian Tongue(s)	11
1.3. The Rise of a Romantic-Nationalist Mode of Reading	26
1.3.1. A Brief Contextual Overview	26
1.3.2. Herder's Philosophy of Language and Nationalism	32
1.3.3. Herder's Rejection of Tongue(s) as a Multilingual Phenomenon	48
1.3.4. Herder's Constructive Explanation of Tongue(s)	51
1.3.5. German Biblical Scholarship in the Nineteenth Century	57
<i>Friedrich Bleek</i>	58
<i>Hermann Olshausen</i>	63
<i>Ferdinand C. Baur</i>	66
<i>August Neander</i>	69
<i>Gustav Billroth</i>	72
<i>David Schulz</i>	76
<i>Karl Georg Wieseler</i>	85
<i>Adolf Hilgenfeld</i>	91
<i>Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer</i>	93
<i>Summary</i>	95
1.3.6. A Glimpse of Nineteenth-Century British Scholarship	96
1.4. A Shift of the Dominant Mode of Reading	103
1.5. Biblical Scholarship of the Twentieth Century	105
1.5.1. Further Obsession with the Psychological State of the Speakers	107
1.5.2. The Widespread Negative Attitude towards Tongue(s) Speakers	116
1.6. Summary	125

2. A Heteroglossic-Immigrant Mode of Reading: An Alternative Theoretical Framework	127
2.1. Introduction	127
2.2. The Problem with a Romantic-Nationalist Mode of Reading	128
2.3. Language as <i>Heteroglossia</i>	133
2.3.1. Saussurean Language as an Abstract-Immutable System of Signs	133
2.3.2. An Alternative View from Indonesia.....	141
2.3.3. Mikhail Bakhtin’s Philosophy of Language	152
<i>Active Response, Polyphony, and Unfinalizability of Dialogism</i>	156
<i>Polyglossia and Heteroglossia</i>	166
<i>The Centripetal and Centrifugal Forces of Language</i>	172
2.4. Immigration and Language Struggle in the United States: A Contextual (Re)collection	178
2.4.1. For an Immigrant Like Me, Language is Always a Struggle	181
2.4.2. The Centripetal Force of “Anglicization” in America	190
2.4.3. Summary	207
2.5. Some Hermeneutical Strategies	207
3. The Heteroglossia of Immigrants in Roman Corinth: A Socio-Historical Reconsideration	213
3.1. Introduction	213
3.2. A Broad Overview of Linguistic Situation in the Greco-Roman World	214
3.2.1. Bilingualism	215
3.2.2. The Rule of the Imperial Languages	219
3.2.3. The Fate of Minoritized Languages	227
3.3. The Heteroglossia of the Roman Corinth	229
3.3.1. Pre-Roman Corinth	229
3.3.2. The Destruction and Rebuilding of Corinth	232
3.3.3. The Dominance of Latin and Greek in the Roman Period	239
3.4. The Case for a Heteroglossic Roman Corinth	243
3.4.1. Who were the Freedpersons in Corinth?	245
3.4.2. Roman Corinth at the Crossroads of Trade	253
3.4.3. The Isthmian Games	256
3.4.4. The Jewish and Samaritan Communities in Corinth	259
3.4.5. The Egyptians in Corinth	262
3.4.6. Specific Names of Immigrants in Corinth	265
3.4.7. Summary	270
3.5. The Insufficiency of the Latin-Greek Binary Framework	270
3.6. Taking Seriously Heteroglossia and Immigration	272
3.7. The Specters of Other Languages in 1 Cor. 14	280
3.8. Some Closing Remarks	288

4. A Linguistic Struggle in the Corinthian Church	291
4.1. Introduction	291
4.2. The Case for Heteroglossic Struggle in the Corinthian Church	295
4.2.1. Pauline Appropriation of Isaiah 28:11	298
4.2.2. Concerning the Singular and Plural Forms of γλῶσσα	308
4.2.3. Concerning “Translation”	317
4.2.4. Concerning φωνή	326
4.2.5. Concerning the Issue of Unintelligibility of Tongue(s)	335
4.2.6. Summary	337
4.3. The Constructed Linguistic Stratification: Prophecy vs Tongue(s)	338
4.3.1. Previous Scholarship	341
4.3.2. Internal and External Arguments for Linguistic Stratification	345
<i>Internal Argument (14:1-5)</i>	347
<i>External Argument (14:22-25)</i>	355
4.3.3. The Result of Stratification: Subject Formation	362
4.4. The Silencing of Minority Languages	364
4.4.1. Politics of Race	368
4.4.2. Politics of Gender	383
4.4.3. Politics of Imperialism	404
4.4.4. Summary	411
4.5. Reimagining Tongue(s) as a Site of Resistance	412
4.6. Some Closing Remarks	416
Inconclusion	419
Bibliography	429

Introduction

I write in English, but I have never lost a feeling of distance from it. There is a tremendous difference between your mother tongue and another language. . . there is no substitution for the mother tongue.
Hannah Arendt¹

[L]anguage bears within itself the necessity of its own critique.
Jacques Derrida²

A Personal Narrative

Since all politics is personal, as the saying goes, I begin this dissertation project with a personal narrative. Writing this dissertation has been not only an academic journey for me, but also a political one. As Hannah Arendt says of herself above, so too for me writing in English remains a great challenge simply because of the “distance” that I have with this language. I concur with Arendt that nothing can replace one’s mother tongue. This simple and indeed mundane experience is what brought me to this dissertation project. Language is not only a means of communication, but also a constant struggle. When I was in California working with an Indonesian church, I saw many first-generation immigrants struggling daily to climb the socio-economic ladder, struggling simply because English is not their first tongue.

In 2014, I attended a Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE) summit at Garret-Evangelical Theological Seminary near Chicago. On the first night, we were asked to reflect on the challenges that scholars of color face in academia and I brought up the issue of linguistic barriers, barriers faced especially by first-generation immigrant scholars like myself. Wonhee Anne Joh, a professor of theology at Garret who was also an FTE faculty supervisor, challenged

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 13.

² Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2005), 358.

me to think beyond merely submitting myself to a dominant colonial language. She argued that rather than me acquiescing to speak like a native speaker of English, or being forced by others to do so, we needed to think about ways in which we can decolonize English. This experience at the FTE summit was what prompted me to pursue the topic of this dissertation.

I asked myself whether the struggle of language is a universal human phenomenon. If so, I wondered: Was it also the experience of early Christians? However, academic discussion on the politics of language in the early Christian movement is virtually non-existent. Why do biblical scholars not discuss it? I have known from the first semester I learned Greek in Indonesia that the Greek noun γλῶσσα means not only physical tongue but also language. But why is it that when this word appears in Mark 16, Acts 2, and 1 Cor 14, it somehow refers to unintelligible ecstatic speech? Growing up in a Pentecostal tradition, I knew that ecstatic speech is a common way of reading those texts. As I will demonstrate in the first chapter of this dissertation, such a reading is the dominant reading among biblical scholars as well. The text of 1 Cor 14 stood out in particular because there is a demand for ‘translation’ in this text. But I wondered again: How on earth can ecstatic speech be translated? Echoing Aristotle’s insistence that philosophy begins at wondering,³ these original simple questions continued to bother me profoundly, and I decided to look into this issue of speaking in tongue(s)⁴ more closely.

In the Fall 2013 semester, I took a class in the History Department at Vanderbilt on imperialism and colonialism. That class helped me to see that the production of literature is always embedded in and the result of historical processes and struggles. That is why literature is not just a *descriptive* picture of reality, but a space of struggle. As Edward Said has pointed out,

³ "διὰ γὰρ τὸ θαυμάζειν οἱ ἄνθρωποι καὶ νῦν καὶ τὸ πρῶτον ἤρξαντο φιλοσοφεῖν" (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b.13)

⁴ As I will demonstrate in chapter 4 in more detail, the parenthesis (s) is employed here because the word γλῶσσα appears in 1 Cor 14 in both singular and plural forms.

literature is a re-presentation (see chapter 4). With this in mind, I began to read the biblical texts with a very different set of eyes. In this sense, my reading is both historical and political. It aims to ground the reading of a text in the historical struggle and simultaneously look into the political struggle that gives rise to it.

Taking classes and reading texts by my *Doktorvater*, Fernando Segovia, further opened my eyes to the importance of the subject position of a reader in the process of interpretation. Readers are not transcendental, transhistorical, transcultural interpreters of a text. They are shaped, knowingly or unknowingly, by the particularity of their historical locations. An interpretation, therefore, has to be a “reading from this place.”⁵ This awareness of the inevitability of *reading from a particular place* has impacted profoundly the way in which I approach any biblical text. The text is no longer a stand-alone entity but part of an ongoing dialogical relationship with the reader(s). The dichotomy of objectivity versus subjectivity is a false one, for every reading is simultaneously objective and subjective. I explore this idea further in chapter 2.

This complexity of my personal experiences, which influences the way I interpret biblical texts, resonates quite well with William Arnal’s insistence on another way of doing biblical scholarship. In an article published in 2010, Arnal challenges scholars of Christian origins, and *biblical* scholars in general, to go out from the bubble of *mere* historico-philological analysis and engage the broader studies in humanities in serious and meaningful ways.⁶ In this dissertation

⁵ This is an allusion to two volume edited works by Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert.

⁶ He writes: “As long as we waste our erudition quibbling over the meanings of individual words, or the details of source relationships, or what Paul “really” meant, and imagine that definitive conclusions of this sort are the end and ultimate justification for our study, we will continue, justly and correctly, to be viewed as an arcane and irrelevant theological sub-field with little of relevance to contribute to the study of religion or to the humanities in general. But the study of the origins of Christianity does not have to accept this road to irrelevance and obscurity, nor need such an antiquarian, exceptionalist, or purely theological identity be imposed on the field, as a whole, from without. If, rather, we are willing to make the effort to speak to people who are interested in how humans behave, in general, we will demonstrate the potential value of Christian origins for the study of religion as a broader field, as

project, I am attempting to make a case for an alternative mode of reading the linguistic-political dynamics in the church of Corinth by engaging a broader study of humanities: among others, philosophy, sociolinguistics, politics, and archaeology.

The Flow of the Dissertation

My dissertation looks into the issue of language struggle through reception analysis, contextual-theoretical analysis, socio-historical analysis, and exegetical analysis. Each chapter will address each of those four aspects. The first chapter deals with the history of reception; the second chapter, with the theoretical framework; the third chapter, with the socio-historical reconstruction of the linguistic situation of the city of Corinth in the Roman period; and the fourth chapter, with the reading of Pauline discourse on language in 1 Cor 14.

In his lecture responding to Claude Lévi-Strauss at John Hopkins University in 1966, Jacques Derrida argues that the structurality of knowledge production in the social sciences—exemplified particularly in the works of Lévi-Strauss—cannot escape the process of *signification*, of making sign, of language. On the basis of this preposition, Derrida insists that the critique of this system of knowledge production is to be found within the language itself because “language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique.”⁷ He offers two strategies: first, to trace the history of the concepts employed in the system; and second, to examine the concepts and show their limits so that there “no longer [be] any truth value attributed to them.”⁸ While Derrida primarily employs the second strategy in order to

well as the potential value of the study of religion for Christian Origins; at the very least we should insist – and our scholarship should reflect this insistence – that a productive conversation about human practices can be had between scholars with data derived from the New Testament and other ancient Christian materials.” See William Arnal, “What Branches Grow out of This Stony Rubbish? Christian Origins and the Study of Religion,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 39, no. 4 (December 1, 2010): 552.

⁷ Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” 358.

⁸ Derrida, 359.

deconstruct the structure from within, in this dissertation I take the first route by examining the history of the concept.

How does the idea of speaking in tongue(s) as an ecstatic speech phenomenon manifest itself in the history of interpretation? This question is the primary concern of chapter 1. That chapter is a genealogical analysis of the concept of speaking in tongue(s), which is framed in what I call the “mode of reading.” There are two major mode of readings that have been developed over the course of the history of interpretation: missionary-expansionist and romantic-nationalist modes of reading. The missionary-expansionist mode of reading gave rise to the idea that tongue(s) is a miraculous ability to speak in foreign language. Beginning from the late eighteenth century, German scholars introduced the romantic-nationalist modes of reading that has resulted in interpretation of the phenomenon of speaking in tongue(s) as an explosion of human feeling.

Chapter 2 concerns the situatedness of my reading. First of all, I offer a critique of the dominance of the romantic-nationalist mode of reading. Instead of interpreting the phenomenon of speaking in tongue(s) from a Herderian romantic-nationalist philosophy of language, by going back to an Indonesian conception of language as a social performance this chapter suggests an alternative way in conversation with Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia. Furthermore, I localize the social context of my reading in the language struggle of immigrants in the United States. The alternative mode of reading proposed in this chapter is, thus, a heteroglossic-immigrant one.

Chapter 3 deals primarily with the socio-historical context of the city of Corinth in the Roman period. This chapter begins with a general description of the linguistic situation in the larger Greco-Roman world. I then zoom in on the particularity of the linguistic situation of the

city of Corinth, highlighting the dominance of Latin and Greek there. Yet this chapter goes further, presenting some evidence for the possibility of multilingual existence underneath the dominance of Latin and Greek in Corinth. In doing so, I attempt to demonstrate that the city of Corinth in the Roman era was a multilingual space. This social context, I suggest, would have had a direct consequence on the sociolinguistic make-up of early Christian believers in Corinth to whom Paul wrote his letter.

The last chapter is a close reading of Pauline discourse on language, particularly in 1 Cor 14. In this chapter I first present a case for tongue(s) as a heteroglossic instead of glossolalic (i.e., unintelligible ecstatic speech) problem by revisiting, among others, Pauline appropriation of Isaiah 28:11–12, the use of singular and plural forms of γλῶσσα, and the issue of Paul's demand for translation. I then highlight three aspects of linguistic politics that appear in Paul's discourse, i.e., politics of race-ethnicity, gender, and imperialism. Whereas Paul attempts to unify language by demanding translation and silencing tongue(s), this chapter reimagines tongue(s) as a site of resistance and disruption.

The Overall Aim of the Project

The aim of this project is quite simple. Because early Christians came from a diverse linguistic background, this dissertation attempts to demonstrate that language became an inevitable site of political struggle for them. The indicator of such struggle appears in how they dealt with the issue of tongue(s), namely as a heteroglossic phenomenon. Paul's discussion in 1 Cor 14 represents a discursive force of language unification in public gatherings through silencing minority language speakers. Although tongue(s) speakers have been cast as trouble-makers in the Corinthian church, this dissertation reimagines the existence of tongues as a

resistance against and disruption of the force of the unified dominant language. With this in mind, let us journey now through the history of interpretation of tongue(s).