

Scripture, Speech Acts and Language Classes

David I. Smith
Calvin College
Grand Rapids, Michigan

An obvious way in which Christian faith comes into contact with the language classroom is when teachers use texts from the Bible in the course of language teaching. This occurs in “Bible-based” ESL materials, but it is also common in other language classrooms in Christian settings. There has, however, been little study of the functions and effects of scriptural discourse in such contexts. In what follows I pursue a single issue relating to the use of the Bible in the language class as a token of the need for further investigation.

My focus here is not on devotions at the beginning or end of classes. Such devotions may remain largely disconnected with the language teaching and learning processes that form the main substance of the class, a devout frame for an otherwise unaltered content. Rather, I am interested in attempts to bring the Bible into the language lesson proper by using biblical texts as raw material for linguistic work, especially grammar practice. I suggest that such efforts need closer scrutiny even from those who affirm the importance of the Bible for learning.

Louise M. Ebner’s *Learning English with the Bible: Textbook: A Systematic Approach to Bible-Based English Grammar* is a particularly stark example of a resource that uses biblical texts as grammatical exemplars.¹ The opening page, for instance, offers a definition of nouns and gives Bible-derived examples of various nouns (*Moses, candlestick, peace, ark*, etc). The learner is then presented with a passage from Matthew’s gospel and asked to underline all of the nouns. Finally, the learner is to write down a definition of “noun”.

Presumably, the author assumes that something spiritually worthwhile is being achieved; however, the approach appears to rely on this taking place incidentally. While the student does have to read some Scripture (albeit

without either context or framing comment), nothing in the presentation of the scriptural text appears designed to incline the student toward spiritual reflection or response. The learner might engage in spiritually significant reflection of course, but nothing in the pedagogical design invites such a response.

Perhaps those who design such materials would accept this as adequate, if not ideal: make sure that language learning takes place, and allow for a potential spiritual bonus. A reconsideration of such activities in the light of speech act theory,² however, suggests that the problems may lie deeper. Speech act theory, one of the sources of communicative theories of language teaching, points out that locutions have not only propositional content but also functional force and practical effects. I might say, "It's cold in here!" This looks grammatically like a proposition, a statement of fact. But its illocutionary force (what the utterance amounts to as a speech act in terms of the speaker's purposes and relevant presuppositions) might be a request or instruction to close an open window accompanied by an implied reproach that you are not tending to my needs. If you get up and close the window, the utterance has a perlocutionary effect (that is, an outcome is achieved by means of the utterance). It follows from these distinctions that the illocutionary force or perlocutionary effect of apparently identical utterances may vary (under other circumstances, "It's cold in here!" may signal hearty approval of the design of the new penguin enclosure at the zoo or may have the effect of mortally offending my attentive host instead of getting the window closed), and that illocutionary force may not be coterminous with grammatical structure (in the right context, "Will the sun come up tomorrow?"—grammatically a question—may be intended as a promise that I will keep my word).

What bearing does this have on grammatical exemplars in the language classroom? Among other things, it means that once any utterance is used as a grammatical exemplar, its illocutionary force is conditioned by that use. Suppose I say to a student in the hall between classes, "I promise to meet you at my office at 3:00 PM." The student is likely to show up at my office and will have a right to be disgruntled if I fail to appear by 3:10. Now suppose I display the same sentence on a slide in a language class and use it to illustrate word order. The implied message is no longer "Come at 3:00" but "Look at the formal features of the utterance." Any student who turns up at my office at 3:00 has missed the point and failed to respond appropriately.

Widdowson observes (disapprovingly) regarding such language:

A good deal of material for the teaching of foreign languages presents the language to be learned in dissociation

from a real communicative purpose in contexts devised solely as a means of teaching language. The foreign language is in this way represented as a different kind of phenomenon from the mother tongue, an artificial construct detached from the purposes for which language is normally used. It is not discourse: it is language put on display. This means that the learner is denied the opportunity of drawing on his own experience of language.³

Display language, Widdowson argues, becomes an artifact rather than discourse and so is detached from both purpose and experience since it is no longer genuinely addressed by a speaker to a hearer. Or, to put the point more precisely, the transaction between speaker and hearer has little or nothing to do with the usual communicative purpose expressed by the language sample used—a declaration of love, for instance, becomes a way of illustrating accusative pronouns and thus ends up having little to do with lovers and making no connection with the learner's experience of love.

All of this provides a critical frame for considering the use of biblical texts in the context of grammar instruction. The use of biblical texts as grammatical exemplars likewise shifts their illocutionary force. An utterance that may originally have been a stern call to obedience or a promise of God's faithfulness may retain its linguistic form but change in its force. The proper response to a command is obedience or resistance; the proper response to an exemplar is polite interest and *deliberate* disregard of semantic content—to take the content seriously is actually to misconstrue the utterance. The nature of the speech act discourages a response to the biblical utterance on its own terms. I wonder whether this disconnect is part of what informs the uneasy sense among some students that such examples are forced or inauthentic.

The question therefore needs to be raised: does the use of scriptural texts as grammatical examples necessarily reflect the authority of Scripture, or might it detract from it? "Bible-based" grammar exercises are usually designed by those with a high regard for the authority of Scripture; ironically, such uses of biblical discourse may in fact undermine its authority by stripping away the passages' force as promises, commands, etc. Do we really want to implicitly classify "For God so loved the world" together with "La plume de ma tante" in terms of discourse function?

This does not, of course, mean that there might not be more adequate ways of using biblical texts in language classrooms. A Charis Project unit about the White Rose, a student resistance group in Hitler's Germany, offers a

different kind of example.⁴ At Munich University in 1942, a small group of students began to distribute tracts expressing opposition to Hitler's regime. After a short period, the students were caught by the Gestapo, and the core members were immediately put on trial and executed. Various motives led to resistance; one of them was the discovery in the Epistle of James of the admonition to be "doers of the word and not hearers only" (1:22). The students were provoked to act on their convictions partly through this text. This short text is the only biblical text to appear in the unit; it shows up in a group of quotations connected with the students' motivations. It implicitly presents the Bible as a text that has concrete and significant effects in history. The sentence from James retains its quality as an admonition to be taken seriously because of its narrative embedding—it is presented as a functioning imperative and not merely as a set of morphological features. This does not, of course, determine the student's response or even exclude the possibility of noticing some aspect of linguistic form when reading the text, but it does provide a frame for encountering this biblical text that retains some of its proper force.

There are, of course, other productive uses of biblical texts, perhaps including uses with a grammatical emphasis, provided this does not reduce the text to display language, but rather assists a response to the text on its own terms. A focus on the function and force of language in the classroom offers a critical frame for examining what happens when biblical texts are introduced into language learning exercises. Educators who, out of a respect for the Bible as an authoritative text, seek to use it in their language teaching would do well to consider not only the linguistic appropriateness and accessibility of the texts that they use, but also the illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects of such use, lest they find themselves unconsciously working against the grain of their desire to honor the Scriptures.

NOTES

1 Ebner, Louise M., *Learning English with the Bible: Textbook: A Systematic Approach to Bible-Based English Grammar* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1998).

2 The classic texts are Searle, J. R., *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (London: Cambridge U.P., 1969); Austin, J. L., *How to Do Things with Words*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

3 Widdowson, H. G. (1978) *Teaching Language as Communication* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), p.53.

4 Baker, D., Brammer, H., Chapman, C., Dobson, S., Heywood, K., and Smith, D., *Charis Deutsch: Einheiten 1–5*. (St. Albans, UK: ACT, 1996).