

Part 5: Taking the message seriously: The words of the Word

The series is half finished. The foundations are laid. We should begin to look at the details. The next few sessions will deal quickly with things that deserve more space, so there should be more here on the website, in the way of videos, articles and discussions.

Words matter

We've all argued with someone, only to discover we meant different things by a single important word. We all struggle to find the right words for an important message, or flounder when something terrible happens and "there are no words". Yet, the Bible comes to us translated (see last session), so we can't easily get at the precise nuances that Bible-writers intended.

How do we ensure our understanding of Scripture is faithful despite this difficulty? First we check that the message is found clearly elsewhere in Scripture. God's word is for the whole world, it is not susceptible to loss by the need for translation. What is important is repeated!

With this warning out of the way, let's look at two ways that noticing word-choice can help us read faithfully.

Word and topic

The idea of a "semantic field" is really useful. It refers to a collection of words that speak of a particular area of life or experience: words describing colours, words about war, words for snow...

Noticing words from a particular “semantic field” is less affected by translation. Even if a nuance is missed (or added) the translator will usually render a colour word by a colour word, or a family word with a family word. Spotting which semantic fields are used frequently in a passage helps us notice what the writer is thinking about.

Spotting the topic(s) that an author intended to write about helps us avoid “reading into” the text, but instead to read “out” what’s really there.

Homework: Notice common “semantic fields” in Genesis 11:1-9 (Tower of Babel). Use a photocopy or printout, and different colours of pen or highlighter. Building words are frequent in verses 3-5. Language words are common in 1, 6-7, 9. Spotting these may not help us much, for we already “knew” this passage was about a tower and our many languages. But if you can spot two other fields being repeated, they should help you to see what the passage is “about”.

Discuss [Semantic Fields in Genesis 11](#) [HERE](#)

Repetition

Repetition of words, phrases or ideas is important. We repeat the things we want people to “get”. Repetition is another clue to the point a Bible author was making.

In Ruth chapter 1, a Hebrew word translated as “return, turn back, turn around...” is common. It carries the story, highlighting how Ruth (the Moabite) converts (turns around) and becomes one of God’s people.

Homework: either use a computer Bible to search for this Hebrew verb (use Strong’s Numbers see [here](#) for help on how to do this online), or highlight phrases or words that mean “return, turn back, turn around” etc. Trace how the usage changes with respect to where Ruth belongs.

What words are repeated in 1 John 2:15-17? What does this show you?

Discuss this [HERE](#)

Parts of speech

Just as different kinds of Lego blocks let us make different things, so different kinds of words let us do different things with words. (In what follows, getting the grammar right does not matter, “getting” what the speaker is doing does!)

Try spotting these three “parts of speech”, they aren’t all important in each passage, but usually at least one will be:

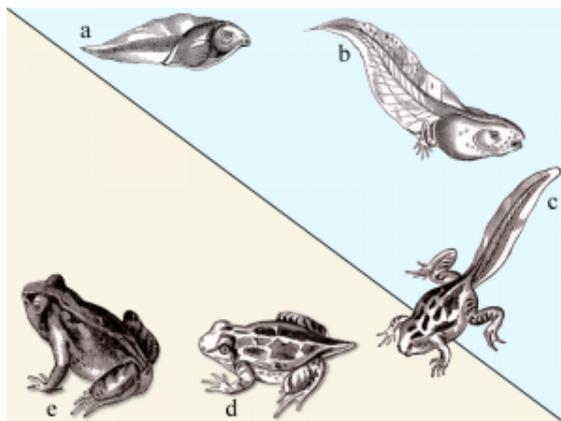
- **Conjunctions**: join and articulate (articulate means two parts work together like a hinge or an articulated truck). The simplest conjunction: “and” is not often helpful to spot, it just joins, but words like “but” or “however”, marking a contrast or exception, are vital. “Therefore” or “because” etc. mark a reason or conclusion so are really important. When a writer is trying to persuade people (e.g. in Paul’s letters) conjunctions outline the argument.
- **Pronouns**: are words that stand in place of names or identifications of people or things, like: “he, her, you, us”. Spotting them reveals relationships. Both the relationships being spoken about (e.g. between Jesus and the Pharisees) and those between writer and audience can be important.
- **Prepositions**: introduce the circumstances of an action: “in the spring” (time), “with a knife” (the means), “to set you free” (motive).

Homework: *choose a short passage from a New Testament letter, mark the conjunctions, pronouns and prepositions. What does*

this exercise suggest about the message?

Discuss this exercise with others [HERE](#). There are lists of English conjunctions and other helps there too.

Figures of speech



The image "Tadpole to frog" comes from Meyers Konversations-Lexikon 1890.

Often we do not say exactly what we mean. Sometimes we: exaggerate (Matt 6:2), minimise (Gen 18:5 cf. 6-8), use picture language (Matt 5:13)... there are many ways to say things that the words do not mean, so we should practise spotting when this happens.

Picture language often carries more emotional power than a plain "literal" expression. Picture language is cultural, "heart" now refers to romance or emotion, in the Bible they were felt in the guts or belly, while the "heart" thought and willed. We talk of head-gardeners and head teachers since "head" for us pictures thinking or willing. In the Bible this happens in the "heart". Paul says Jesus is "lord" to mean that he is in charge. When he says Jesus is the "head of the church", he seems to see the "head" as the beginning (like a tadpole?) that nourishes, and brings growth and unity to the whole (see Col 2:19; Eph 4:15-16).

Homework: read Rom 12:1-2. What non-literal language can you spot?

How does this, or spotting the other things mentioned above, help to bring these familiar words into sharper focus?

Discuss figures of speech [HERE](#)