to most questions, 'a little bit yes, and a little bit no'. In America I see inspiring Christian scholars and in Britain also. The Royal Society of Edinburgh meeting I mentioned, was organised in part by the Science, Religion and Technology Project of the Church of Scotland and in part by the largely Anglican Society of Ordained Scientists.

But the philosophical and religious ideals associated with traditional conceptions of knowledge and education have to be rearticulated and the institutions of learning reanimated by them if the vineyards are not to prove barren and the tenants become corrupt. The corrective is provided by Paul's letter to the Philippians (4: 8–9)

> "Finally brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard do, and the God of peace will be with you".

*The following draws upon the 1997 commencement address at St Anselm College, New Hampshire, and a sermon delivered at Greyfriars Kirk at the opening service of the University of Edinburgh 1997–8 academic year.

Why did the crowd think St Peter was drunk? An exercise in applied sociolinguistics

David Crystal

> *... And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. And they were amazed and wondered, saying, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judaea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans*

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and Arabians, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God. And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others mocking said, 'They are filled with new wine'. But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them, 'Men of Judaea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day ... '

People have puzzled over the nature of the miracle reported in *Acts* 2 for centuries, and the passage is especially intriguing if you are a linguist. Did Peter really find himself speaking in languages he did not know? Did he continue speaking in his own language, and the listeners *heard* him in their own languages? Or were the other tongues some kind of ecstatic speech—an early instance of glossolalia, as a footnote in the Jerusalem Bible translation suggests?

I recently came across the work of a US theologian, Bob Zerhusen, who seems to have cast some fresh light on the matter, in an article called 'An Overlooked Judean Diglossia in Acts 2?', published in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 25.3 (1995), 118-30. His article is a fine example of the way in which a concept from linguistics (sociolinguistics, in this case) can be used to help clarify—perhaps even solve—a problem from another field. Maybe 'solve' is too strong. A millennium or more of traditional explanation cannot be changed overnight. Or can it? Anyway, I was impressed by this article, and think it deserves wider discussion. So, as the Americans say, let me share this one with you.

But first: What is the 'diglossia' referred to in the title? The term was first introduced by US linguist Charles Ferguson in 1959. It refers to a linguistic situation, found in many parts of the world, where a single culture uses two varieties of a language, or two separate languages, for different and complementary purposes. One is used for special, formal occasions, such as in literature, law, and religion—this is called the 'High' variety (or language). The other is used for ordinary, informal occasions, as in everyday conversation, and this is called the 'Low' variety (or language). At a wedding ceremony, for example, the ceremony itself and the formal speeches would use High language, and people would switch into Low language for the ensuing party.

High language is always felt to be superior to Low; it is considered more cultivated or beautiful; and it always has a strong literary tradition behind it. It is also often closely associated with a religious tradition, in which case it will be viewed as sacred. It needs to be taught in schools, and few people end up being as competent in it as in their Low

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language, which is learned at home. Sometimes, the High language may be so removed from everyday language as to be largely unintelligible, with only a small number of specially trained people being able to use it. But even in such cases, the whole community nonetheless accepts it, holds it in high esteem, and judges their own use of language by its standards. Ordinary people might even go so far as to say that they do not speak their own language properly—judging their colloquially 'low' speech to be inferior, compared with the standards of the 'high'.

A well-known case of diglossia using High and Low varieties of the same language is Modern Greek, where the two varieties are known by different names: *katharevusa* (High) and *dhimotiki* (Low). An analogous relationship exists between Standard German and Swiss German in Switzerland, and between French and Haitian Creole in Haiti. The Classical Arabic of the Qur'an makes that the High language for all varieties of modern Colloquial Arabic.There are also well-known instances of different languages being used in this way, such as Spanish and Guaraní in Paraguay. Sanskrit is a High language for many of the modern languages of India. In a few countries, three languages may even participate, as in Tunisia, where French and Classical Arabic are both rated High, and Colloquial Tunisian Arabic is rated Low. Technically, this would be called *triglossia.*

Whether we are talking about High and Low varieties of a single language, or different languages rated as High and Low, the primary point is that the conventions are universally respected by the community. The importance of using the right kind of language in a particular situation is critical. Anyone who used Low speech on a High occasion would be the subject of ridicule, and vice versa.

English is not a good language to use to illustrate diglossia, though the existence of formal and informal varieties of speech hint at it, and in some parts of the English-speaking world, a creole form of English may exist as a Low variety alongside the High standard language, as in parts of the West Indies. The former use of Latin by the Church in its services is probably the nearest many English speakers have come to encountering a real diglossic situation using different languages. In that situation, Latin was very definitely the High language; English was the Low. Very few people who attended a Latin Mass were able to understand the language; most had to follow the service in translation in their missals. But for generations this constraint was felt to be a perfectly natural, acceptable way of worshipping. Diglossia is like that: it is a normal way of life, sanctioned by tradition. It takes a thought revolution (such as the Second Vatican Council) to change it.

Zerhusen's paper is a detailed application of the diglossia concept to

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the situation described in *Acts* 2. It is quite a long paper, with many references, and to paraphrase it is immediately to lose its scholarly weight; but the thrust of the argument is still fascinating. I reduce it to six steps.

1 Are we told anything in *Acts* 2 about what the 'other tongues' were? No. The text mentions no specific languages. All it does is say where the listeners came from. It does however say that, whatever these languages may have been, they were the listeners' native languages ('each one heard them speaking in his own language')—thus ruling out the likelihood that ecstatic utterances were involved.

2 Who were the people in the crowd? As the event took place in Jerusalem, the probability is that most would have been local to Palestine, and we know that the two languages spoken widely by ordinary people in Palestine in the 1st century AD were Aramaic and Greek. But Luke wants to stress the universality of the gathering, so goes into detail about the visitors. Of the various places named in the list, some are to the West, and some to the East. It is known that Jews from the Western Diaspora (e.g. in Egypt, Libya, Crete) were predominantly Greek-speaking, and those from the Eastern Diaspora (e.g. in Parthia, Elam, Mesopotamia) were predominantly Aramaic-speaking. So most of the crowd—probably all—were conversant with Aramaic and Greek.

3 Hebrew was still surviving as a language in the 1st century AD, but was used only within the sphere of Temple worship. Ordinary people would encounter it used by the priests in conducting the liturgy and reading the scriptures (much as the situation exists in many parts of the world outside Israel today), but not elsewhere. In other words, Hebrew had become a High language, and the situation in 1st century Palestine was diglossic. Hebrew, as a sacred language, is often contrasted with 'other languages' in the Old Testament.

4 The reason why the crowd understood Peter and the others, therefore, is because the disciples were speaking languages that the crowd already knew. When the text talks about 'other tongues', it means 'tongues other than Hebrew'—that is, Aramaic and Greek. We do not know which language Peter was using. That doesn't matter. As a local Judaean, it would have been one or the other of these two. It may have been both, as he was probably bilingual. (Most people in the world are bilingual—a fact which is invariably a source of 'amazement and wonder' to those who have experience of living only in one of the world's traditionally monolingual communities, such as England and the USA.)

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5 In which case, why should the crowd react with amazement and ridicule? *The answer is now clear. Because the situation was a diglossic* one. The cultural expectation of the whole crowd, whether from Palestine or abroad, arriving at the festival, would be that anyone claiming to speak with religious authority would use the High language of the community—Hebrew. You don't prophesy in Low language. No priest of the Temple would ever have done that.

6 *So, faced with someone getting up and daring to prophesy boldly* in Low language, a natural reaction would be to assume that the person was drunk.

I find this reasoning very plausible—and certainly worth opening up to wider discussion. It has implications, too, for our translations. For example, when the *Jerusalem Bible* uses the phrasing 'and began to speak foreign languages', this already makes an assumption about the nature of the miracle which took place. I didn't want to make that assumption, at the beginning of this article, which is why I used a more neutral translation, that of the *Revised Standard Version*, for my opening quotation. If the diglossia account is correct, Peter and the others didn't use 'foreign' languages at all; they used their native languages. But they did use 'different' languages from the one they were expected to be using, and this is perhaps all that the original Greek text permits us to say.

So was there a miracle? Yes there was, but of a rather different kind from the one traditionally assumed. The verb used of Peter in the Greek New Testament (*apophtheggesthai*—'as the Holy Spirit was *giving utterance* to them') refers to the uttering of inspired, authoritative speech. It is this which was the miracle. Jesus had predicted that the coming of the Holy Spirit would result in ordinary people speaking out powerfully. It is the impressive witnessing, not the language used, which was the true miracle—a message that seems to be as valid today as it was then, if not more so.

Note

For people who have difficulty getting hold of the relevant issue of *Biblical Theology Bulletin,* I would be happy to provide a photocopy of the original article, if they send a stamped addressed A5 envelope to me at PO Box 5, Holyhead, Anglesey LL65 1PB.

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