

What's in a Word

Dr. Larry Spencer

Emulating Stephen Colbert in his *Meanwhile* segment I will begin by saying that most of every Sunday you can find me sitting on the right side of the sanctuary next to my wife of 59 years. When the scripture comes up, I use my cell phone to find a copy in the browser, so I can follow along with it. When the songs are sung, I try to read the baseline for harmony. When the sermon is being spoken I close my eyes to focus more closely as to what is being said. On other Sundays I'm upstairs clicking buttons on the two laptops to make sure the service goes out over Facebook to our listeners in NH and Florida. As the service progresses, I switch from one camera to another, zooming in when the preacher is speaking and zooming out when the congregation or the choir is singing. Clicking on the Facebook page to go live at 9:25 and clicking on the end live command when the final benediction is given.

But meanwhile, yes meanwhile, I stand behind this pulpit a bit anxious and with hope that what I have to say will make sense, in what I have to say will make a difference in the lives of my listeners, in what I have to say won't go over like a lead balloon and whether my voice will hold out while trying to say what I want to say.

So why am I here today? I'm a participant in an Internet group that tries every February to examine the roles that science and religion play in our lives. We are encouraged to sermonize in this month as it is the birthday month of Charles Darwin. I'm also here because I like to challenge myself. To investigate topics of interest to myself and hopefully to my listeners. What better way to challenge oneself than to talk of science in front of a group of lay listeners. I'm also here to bring a bit of diversity to our Sunday services and for a chance to do the children's sermon. As you all know, for many years I not only taught Sunday School, but also did the nursery at least once a month. I do like children.

My topic today is "What's in a Word". In past sermons I've talked about what separates us from the rest of God's creatures and for the most part have come up short in differences, except for one main difference. Other creatures do have a language. Bees do a dance in their hives to tell their fellows where the good sources of nectar are. Whales vocalize in the lower frequencies to tell their friends in places far away how things are going for them. Yet, with all the language ability, no other creature on this Earth has a written language, a language that consists of words or characters that can pass onto others our thoughts. Not only do we have a language of words that are spoken but even one that can be written; in stone, on parchment, on the screen of one's computer and even by tattoos on our bodies. How is it that we have both a written and a spoken language? As an evolutionary biologist I would hypothesize that having such makes us more fit. Remember in the past when I've talked about Darwin, his thesis was that individuals pass on to future generation attributes that are related to survival. Some attributes are beneficial and thus retained, some are detrimental and thus lost. Over time therefore, a population of individuals will change their behavior, their physiology, their morphology to fit the demands of their environment. We call this mechanism "natural selection".

I want this sermon to involve some audience participation. You will notice that in the bulletin, you have some blank pages. We're now going to do an exercise that involves you writing down some common words. Let's begin by having you write down five last names. You can use your own, that of your neighbors in the pews or even those not in our midst today.

Let's compare my list with yours:

Smith
Carpenter
MacDonald
Arnsdottir
Spencer

For most of our existence we probably only used first names and if you have ever called role in a college classroom like I have, with a large group of students there are many with the same first name. Therefore to avoid confusion, we came up with the idea of last names. Let's look at the derivation of the names I used:

Smith—comes the Anglo-Saxon era of time and means someone who works as a blacksmith

Carpenter-Roman/French origin, someone who makes items of wood

MacDonald-Gaelic in origin meaning son of Dòmhnall,

Arnsdottir—Icelandic, means the daughter of Arnar. Our exchange student from many years ago was Gunnhildur Arnsdottir and when we were in Reykjavik, we found it easy to find her phone number by using her last name. If she had been a male, her name would have been Arnarson.

Spencer-British in origin meaning "dispenser of goods", perhaps initially like a butler, but later on in politics the dispenser of funds.

Now let's do the same thing with respect to words that you might expect to hear in a sermon. Write those words in your bulletin.

Let's compare my list with yours:

Love—The internet gives the following: The word 'love' was once '*leubh', a word used by the Proto-Indo-Europeans approximately five thousand years ago to describe care and desire. When 'love' was incorporated into Old English as 'lufu', it had turned into both a noun to describe, 'deep affection' and its offspring verb, 'to be very fond of'

Justice-Latin jus meaning right or law

Repentance-Old French from the preceding Latin word to be sorry for

Evil-Old English yfel) from the Proto Germanic word which meant bad or vicious

Sin-From the middle English sinne and thus from the Proto Germanic word for implying a verdict of "truly guilty" against an accusation of.

How many words does an average person know?

For a three to four year old child, the number of words they know is between 500 and 900.

For those of you in the book group reading *Lessons in Chemistry* the dog, Six-thirty early on knew 390 words. I should note that he didn't know the word "smart". By the end of the book his word count was almost a thousand. I guess he could have had a good conversation with a three year old.

The average American knows about 20,000 words, the average college educated person about 40,000 words. Sometimes that does seem like enough to finish the crossword in the Laconia Daily Sun, but the words I miss are usually those dealing with celebrities.

Now, all words are composed of characters, so let's look at that aspect.

In 1989-90, we spent a year in Suzhou, People's Republic of China. In learning to speak Chinese, I found that written Chinese has no alphabet, but is composed of characters that originally were derived from pictographs. Let's take a look at some simple characters/words

One- yi

Two-er

Three-san

Person-ren

American-Meiguoren

To be literate in Chinese one must know between 1500 to 2,000 characters. Thus, I was essentially illiterate in Chinese as I only learned about a 1,000 characters. To facilitate the use of characters, the Chinese government moved from old style characters to simple characters. When we were in QuFu, a young man volunteered to show us the town. We ended up showing him. All the signs were in the old style characters and our Lonely Planet book translated the signs for us.

In most other languages, words are composed of alphabetic letters.

Here's some examples of a variety of alphabets:

- Alpha - A α Beta - B β Gamma - Γ γ Delta - Δ δ Epsilon - E ε Zeta - Z ζ
- Eta - H η Theta - Θ θ Iota - I ι Kappa - K κ Lambda - Λ λ Mu - M μ
- Nu - N ν Xi - Ξ ξ Omicron - O ο Pi - Π π Rho - Ρ ρ Sigma - Σ σ/ς
- Tau - T τ Upsilon - Υ υ Phi - Φ φ Chi - Χ χ Psi - Ψ ψ

Αγάπη

agape

The modern Russian alphabet consists of 33 letters: twenty **consonants** (⟨б⟩, ⟨в⟩, ⟨г⟩, ⟨д⟩, ⟨ж⟩, ⟨з⟩, ⟨к⟩, ⟨л⟩, ⟨м⟩, ⟨н⟩, ⟨п⟩, ⟨р⟩, ⟨с⟩, ⟨т⟩, ⟨ф⟩, ⟨х⟩, ⟨ц⟩, ⟨ч⟩, ⟨ш⟩, ⟨щ⟩), ten **vowels** (⟨а⟩, ⟨е⟩, ⟨ё⟩, ⟨и⟩, ⟨о⟩, ⟨у⟩, ⟨ы⟩, ⟨э⟩, ⟨ю⟩, ⟨я⟩), a **semivowel** / consonant (⟨й⟩), and two modifier letters or "signs" (⟨ъ⟩, ⟨ь⟩) that alter pronunciation of a preceding consonant or a following vowel.

любовь
lyubov'

Our alphabet

ABCDEFGHIJKLMOPQRSTUVWXYZ

Love

Words can exist on their own, but typically form the basis of a language. English came to us out of the steppes of Asia, across northern India, spreading westward through Europe, incorporating a bit of Dutch from Holland, some vocabulary from northern Germany, and lots of connections to French from the back and forth movement of kings/queens from England and France. English, French, German, Italian, Greek, and Portuguese belong to one large family of languages.

If you had arrived in New England with the pilgrims, you would have found that the indigenous folk spoke an Algonquin language such as that spoken around here by the Abenaki. Even today our state and city names are from indigenous words. The imported languages would have been English, German, Dutch, Swedish, French, etc.

If you had visited California two hundred years ago, you would have had to learn between 80 to 90 languages to communicate with the indigenous folks found there. There were perhaps three hundred dialects belonging to perhaps 20 different language families.

Before the continent of Africa was colonized, there were perhaps two to three thousand different languages. Today there are 800 to 1,000 languages spoken in Africa today grouped into four families, or groups of languages thought to have common origins—Hamito-Semitic, or Afro-Asiatic, Niger-Congo-Kordofanian, Nilo-Saharan, and Khoisan.

Words form the basis of our everyday conversations, yet, there are those among us who can take the very same words that form our conversations and provide us with paragraphs that not only encapsulate their thoughts but provide us with ideas to be digested and acted upon. Here are some of those dialogues. Can you identify their authors: **Note:** Not all are positives!!

Hillary Clinton–UN Conference 1995

"If there is one message that echoes forth from this conference, let it be that human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights once and for all. Let us not forget that among those rights are the right to speak freely—and the right to be heard."

Prince Hamlet soliloquy

What a piece of work is a man, How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, In form and moving, how express and admirable, In action, how like an Angel, In apprehension, how like a god, The beauty of the world, The paragon of animals. And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me; no, nor Woman neither; though by your smiling you seem to say so.^[1]

Trump–Inauguration speech

We've defended other nation's borders while refusing to defend our own; And spent trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay. We've made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has disappeared over the horizon. One by one, the factories shuttered and left our shores, with not even a thought about the millions upon millions of American workers left behind. The wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their homes and then redistributed across the entire world. But that is the past. And now we are looking only to the future. We assembled here today are issuing a new decree to be heard in every city, in every foreign capital, and in every hall of power. From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this moment on, it's going to be America First.

Thomas Jefferson-Declaration of Independence

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men.

Martin Luther King, Jr. –I have a dream speech

When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men — yes, Black men as well as white men — would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked insufficient funds.

So, our lives are tied up in our words, some of which we regret having uttered, some of which we should have uttered but didn't and some of which forms our common communication with our fellow humans on a daily basis. Let me finish this sermon with one last example of a paragraph of words that we should hear in our hearts and minds.

1In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2**He was with God in the beginning. **3**Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. **4**In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. **5**The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Amen