

# RECONSIDERATIONS

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EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

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## WHAT MAKES US HUMAN? TWO PERSPECTIVES FROM LINGUISTICS

*Brent Henderson*

*Editor's note: The following is an abridged version of a paper that Professor Brent Henderson presented on September 22, 2009 in our lecture series on "The Eclipse and Re-appearance of the Human in Higher Education."*

What is language? It is a more difficult question to answer than it seems. For much of history, language has been considered an essentially social phenomenon. In the late 1950s, Wittgenstein's views on language expressed in *Philosophical Investigations* were becoming well-known. Simplifying his view, Wittgenstein argued that language was purely a social phenomenon, having little meaning outside of common usage. This view of language is still common in philosophy today. Baker and Hacker (*Language Sense and Nonsense*, 1984), for example, write that language "exists in the activities of language users" and that "the normativity of the language the child is acquiring lies with the adult who trains...not with the child who learns."

This view of language is understandable and highly intuitive. It is also completely wrong, as argued in the 1950s by MIT linguist Noam Chomsky who published his *Syntactic Structures* in 1957, beginning the so-called "linguistics revolution." What did Chomsky do that was so revolutionary? Before spelling that out, it is important to note that psychologists at the time mostly viewed language through the lens of Behaviorism, the school of thought led by B. F. Skinner. Again oversimplifying, Behaviorism is the idea that everything which any person (or animal) does should be

understood as a behavior, including thinking, feeling and speaking. In fact, in the same year *Syntactic Structures* was published, Skinner's book *Verbal Behavior* was published, arguing that language is learned by operant conditioning. Children, it argued, learn language conditioned by their parents through observation and correction. Again, this is highly intuitive thinking, but also completely wrong.

Chomsky eschewed intuitive reasoning and instead scientifically examined the nature of the rules that govern language. Of course, everyone knew that languages form sentences following specific rules. After all, one cannot just say anything. In English we say *John bought a new car*, but not *Bought a new car John*. But Chomsky showed that these rules are complex and often make reference to information that is not present in natural speech, information which therefore is not available

to children when they learn their language.

From this, Chomsky argued that children cannot learn language from input alone: there is not enough information in adult speech for children to arrive at the right rules. To explain this, Chomsky made the revolutionary proposal that the basic principles of language are innate, cognitive structures "built in" our brains, biologically as much a part of us as opposable thumbs or binocular vision. Chomsky called this set of principles Universal Grammar (UG). The conclusion was anathema to Skinner's Behaviorist approach to language, and the linguistics revolution (including a scathing 1959

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review of *Verbal Behavior* by Chomsky), led to the demise of Behaviorism as the dominant paradigm in psychology. At the same time, it opened language and the mind to the scrutiny of scientific investigation, setting linguistics on its modern path.

Let us evaluate this shift from the perspective of the eclipse and re-appearance of the human in linguistics. On the one hand, Chomsky's revolution led to a discovery of something essential about being human. It has long been observed that language is uniquely human. No other animal has it. Chomsky identified the source of this difference, the same source as other physical differences: our DNA. This allowed for new branches of science to open up, including biolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and neurolinguistics, all highly successful, ongoing efforts to ground language solidly on a biological basis. But in another sense the Chomskyan revolution has made language – that essential property of humanness – far less human than it once was. Recall that for Wittgenstein and Skinner, language was essentially social and communal and therefore impossible to study abstractly apart from a community of humans who speak it.

In the Chomskyan school, however, language boils down to a set of principles wholly present in the minds of *individuals*. It is privative, arising from our genes and principles they give rise to as our infant brains develop. Chomskyan linguistics seeks to understand these principles by using science to study linguistic structures and discover their properties. Linguists then hypothesize how such properties relate to the universal principles of UG. How language is actually used has almost nothing to do with it.

This should not be taken as a criticism of Chomsky, whose approach I wholly endorse. I am simply observing that this shift in approach to language has led to the eclipse of the human in linguistics. Chomsky showed that language could be fruitfully divorced from the humans that speak it. He turned it into a natural object – like a rock, a spider, or a DNA sequence – and in doing so made it possible to study language just like any other natural object, scientifically. In that shift is where the human gets lost, and in fact where it *must* be lost if

we are to answer scientific questions. This is because the loss of the human here is not a methodological decision that has been made, but it is wrapped up in the very nature of the scientific approach.

Science seeks understanding through a specific method. At the core of this method is a process of taking control over things. In fact, the most important parts of a scientific experiment are called “controls.” In science, we remove the object of study from its natural environment and manipulate it with tests to see how it changes. A zoologist might closely control the environment of the animal they are studying, subjecting it to various stimuli, etc. Linguists do it by manipulating sentences or words to see whether native speakers judge them to be grammatical or not under certain conditions. This forced manipulation is just how science works, and it cannot be any other way – it is the way that we know observations are accurate and that correlations we infer have a foundation in cause and effect relationships.

This important way of gaining knowledge, however, contrasts sharply with experience gained when we encounter human personality. Here, science cannot be our approach. Rather, when we encounter personality, we must

accept it as is, without attempting to take control of it. In fact, we must let it take power over us. We must make ourselves vulnerable to it. People of faith know this: faith can never be arrived at by power and manipulation. Rather, it can only be arrived at by giving oneself over to something that is Other, something larger, through vulnerability and trust. The same goes for other humans: to get to know someone, manipulation and deconstruction of personality will not do. Rather, there must be acceptance and relinquishment of any attempt to control.

Once we understand this fundamental opposition, we can see how easy it has been for the human to slip from view in the university – just as we saw it slip from view in linguistics. It is in the very nature of science to obscure personality. Because science proceeds by control, it cannot recognize, methodologically, the importance or centrality of personality and, by implication, humanness.

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Consequently, the more trust and focus we put on the scientific method, the more eclipsed humanness is going to become. My limited view is that, in many ways, our universities today are dominated by a heavy emphasis on the value of science, and that this is in large part responsible for the eclipse of the human in higher education. The reasons for this over-emphasis are understandable. Science is invaluable, reliably providing new knowledge, technology, and systematic ways of thinking which greatly aid in our understanding of the nature of reality, the universe, and ourselves. Science deserves the value we assign to it, and I am not being critical of that. However, there is room for criticism when we assign science an exclusive value far beyond other ways of gaining knowledge, in particular those which involve the encounter of personality. Such endeavors needn't be sought to replace scientific ones, but could re-emerge as necessary complements to them, assigned equal value in academics. Interestingly, just as modern linguistics gives us a window into the eclipse of the human, it also lets us observe its re-emergence.

Getting back to Chomsky and UG, the idea that all children are born with a universal, innate set of language-learning principles that constrain how language is learned and the forms a language can take makes two interesting and important predictions with regard to the 6,000 or so languages spoken in the world today. First, UG predicts that all the wild variation we see in the world's languages must at some level be an illusion. Since all languages are based upon UG, the surface variation we see must be hiding deep similarities. The quest to prove this has been one of linguistics' major enterprises, and it has been proven. In general, the more deeply and broadly the world's languages are studied, the more similar they begin to look. The Ethiopian Semitic language Tigre and Spanish both use dative morphemes and object agreement to mark objects in the same way. Reflexive pronouns are subject to the same restrictions in both English and the Somali Bantu language Chimiini. Dozens of generalizations like these point strongly to the conclusion that the UG view of language is correct, allowing fruitful com-

parison of unrelated languages to hypothesize about UG's properties.

The second important prediction of UG is that where we do find structural variation in languages, it should be highly constrained variation, since UG constrains it. This also turns out to be true. For example, like English, many languages require a question word to move to the front of a sentence (*Who does John think \_\_ attended the party?*). Other languages like Swahili or Japanese do not require the question word to move. Importantly, nearly all languages employ these two patterns. No language moves question words to the end of the sentence or the third position from the front, for example. Thus, variation is highly constrained.

Discovering these facts required linguists to do a lot of trekking around the world, so it is not surprising that linguists were among the first to raise the alarm about the global threat to diversity that

our planet is currently experiencing. For a variety of reasons – population growth, global trade, nationalism, etc. – the world's languages are undergoing a mass extinction that, percentage-wise, dwarfs the plight of endangered species. Today, there are an estimated 6,000 languages in the world. Fifty-two percent are spoken by fewer than 10,000 people, 28% by fewer than 1,000 people. More than 500 are nearly extinct, with

at most a few dozen elderly speakers. Optimistic estimates are that half the world's languages will disappear by the end of the present century. Krauss (1992) argues that it will be more like 70-90% that will be gone. On average, a language dies at a rate of about one every two weeks. Most of them have never been described or documented.

This is bad for science, of course, since linguists need languages to compare and inform our theories, and the more we have the better. But linguists also recognize that the miracle of language is that while it is based upon this highly-structured, biological skeleton of UG, around this skeleton speakers build systems of cultural knowledge that encapsulate their values and needs, their way of understanding. For example, Aymara speakers (who live mostly in Bolivia) have a way of thinking about the flow of time that is different from most cultures.

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For most, the future lies ahead while the past lies behind, but for the Aymara the opposite is true. This is based around the reasoning that one can see and know the past, but not the future. The Aymara language encodes this view. For instance, adverbial phrases that English would associate with past time events are associated with future time events in Aymara. To say *last year*, e.g., one says literally *front year* (*nayra mara*); to say *a future day*, one says *behind day* (*qhipa uru*).

Examples like this illustrate that language is more than a useful tool or a biological property of humans. It is also a system of knowledge that uniquely encodes the values and perspectives of a community, the repository of a community's experience of what it means to be human. Tragically, once a language is gone, this way of knowing is gone forever. With every language and culture lost, we thus irrecoverably lose an important part of what it means to be human.

What is being done about this crisis? The dominant approach in linguistics is to emphasize description and documentation of endangered languages, creating grammars, lexicons and archives of recorded materials. This is important work, but what is preserved of a language in this approach is a pale ghost of a living language spoken by a vibrant community. Of course, at the heart of the limits of documentation is that, like theoretical work, it divorces a language from its speakers. But within this renewed interest in language documentation, brought on by the diversity crisis, linguistics has also again begun to encounter the human. Unlike theoretical linguistics, one cannot do language documentation in the comfort of one's office with one or two speakers, eliciting pre-constructed sentence forms. The community must cooperate on many levels, and this requires the linguist to become involved, gain trust, engage, and invite. One must reconcile one's own goals for studying the language with the needs and requests of the native speaker community.

In doing so, it is inevitable that one encounters not only the plight of an endangered language, but its root causes as well, many of which are the same issues that lead to social and human marginalization. Marginalized languages are always spoken by marginalized people, often poor with no social represen-

tation and inadequate food, water, and healthcare. The encounter of these realities has led to what has become known as the "ecological approach" to language endangerment, an approach that works at documentation while seeking to understand the plight of the language in terms relevant for the its speakers in their particular social, political, and economic situation. Some linguists have found that engaging endangerment issues on this level inevitably requires getting involved in local social, political, and development issues, and that these cannot be clearly separated from work on the language itself.

This should not be surprising, however, since this kind of inner-connectedness is what happens when the human is encountered – when value placed on scientific documentation and theory is complemented with equal value on human life and experience. Things get messy, and it is difficult to know how to proceed, especially if you are used to a rather narrow academic paradigm. One example of what this can look like is a

Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in Guatemala called Wuqu' Kawoq ([wuqukawoq.org](http://wuqukawoq.org)) whose motto is "Strengthening Mayan Language and Medicine." Most Guatemalans speak Mayan languages, Spanish being the first language of the minority population who hold the political and economic power. A few years ago, a doctor working in clinics in rural Guatemala and studying the barriers to medical care realized that differences in language, culture, political power, and access to healthcare were all tied up so much that they could not be separated. He realized that to impact health care access in these communities and do it responsibly, he would have to use local languages and not Spanish. He partnered with linguists (including myself) to form WK which now runs medical clinics, works to support local Mayan midwife associations, develops medical and literacy training, and organizes child nutrition and clean water projects. WK does all of this using Kaqchikel and Kiche'e, two local Mayan languages, and not Spanish. In fact, there is no way this work could be done using Spanish; had they tried, it is likely they would have actively contributed to the further marginalization of the indigenous groups they were seeking to support. Because

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## NEWS FROM THE CENTER

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### Monday Class - "The Meaning of Food: Wisdom from the Garden"

Instructors: **Tim Schubert**, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services

**Sam Snyder**, UF Department of Religion

**Richard Horner**, Christian Study Center

*Mondays: January 26 through February 16, 7:30pm*

### Director's Class - "Reading the Gospels, Part 2: The Road to Jerusalem"

Instructor: **Richard Horner**, Executive Director

\*especially for undergraduates

*Wednesdays during the spring semester, 11:45am*

### Reading Group - "Essays and Poetry in 'Truth-telling'"

Facilitator: **Todd Best**, Director of Programs

Readings: *Shaming the Devil: Essays in Truth-telling* by Alan Jacobs; select poetry

*Fridays, monthly during the semester beginning January 30, 11:45am*

### Graduate Roundtable

Facilitators: **Todd Best**, Director of Programs and **Jay Langdale**, UF Dept of History

Readings: select essays

*Select Fridays throughout the semester*

### Forum on Religion and Scholarship

#### "Faithful Narratives: The Challenge of Religion in History"

*January 12: Peter Brown* (Princeton University)

*February 23: Michael Signer* (University of Notre Dame)

*March 2: John Van Engen* (University of Notre Dame)

*March 30: Lamin Sanneh* (Yale University)

*Note: This lecture series is co-sponsored with UF's Dept. of History and the Center for Jewish Studies.*

For details and schedule changes, visit our website: [christianstudycenter.org](http://christianstudycenter.org)

## YOUR YEAR-END CONTRIBUTION WILL MAKE NEXT YEAR'S PROGRAM A REALITY

By now you should have received Exec. Director Richard Horner's year-end letter and funding appeal. We hope you have had a chance to read that and that you are considering how you can help us start 2009 on a strong financial footing. We are sincerely grateful to our generous donors.

The Christian Study Center is funded solely through the contributions of those who share our commitment to explore the intersection of Christian thought and academic discourse. Tax deductible contributions can be made by:

- Mail: 112 NW 16th Street, Gainesville, FL 32603
- Credit Card: through on our website at [christianstudycenter.org](http://christianstudycenter.org)

## VERSE FOR ADVENT REFLECTION

*With our year-end edition, we offer this poem for Advent reflection. Verse can be just the thing to remind us of realities that easily get glazed over with the cultural impulses of this time of year.*

*We at the Christian Study Center wish you a reflectively cheerful Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany.*

### MARY'S SONG

BY LUCI SHAW

Blue homespun and the bend of my breast  
 keep warm this small hot naked star  
 fallen to my arms. (Rest . . .  
 you who have had so far  
 to come.) Now nearness satisfies  
 the body of God sweetly. Quiet he lies  
 whose vigor hurled  
 a universe. He sleeps  
 whose eyelids have not closed before.  
 His breath (so slight it seems  
 no breath at all) once ruffled the dark deeps  
 to sprout a world.  
 Charmed by doves' voices, the whisper of straw,  
 he dreams,  
 hearing no music from his other spheres.  
 Breath, mouth, ears, eyes  
 he is curtailed  
 who overflowed all skies,  
 all years.  
 Older than eternity, now he  
 is new. Now native to earth as I am, nailed  
 to my poor planet, caught that I might be free,  
 blind in my womb to know my darkness ended,  
 brought to this birth  
 for me to be new-born,  
 and for him to see me mended  
 I must see him torn.

*Luci Shaw is a poet and Writer in Residence  
 at Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia.*

*Continued From Page 4*

WK uses Mayan languages, however, people are getting physical needs met, and local languages are being supported. Midwives who saw themselves as the last of a dying breed are now energized to pass their knowledge on to the next generation. WK recently published its first book, written in Kaqchikel (with Spanish translations). It is a guide to using cheap herbal medicines for common ailments, requested by local midwives and partially based on their knowledge, reinforced by the latest medical research.

Notice what this NGO has done: steps were taken based upon the realization that building non-quantifiable outcomes – increasing the value of local languages – were integral to and just as valuable as health care and clean water. Rather than divorcing linguistic and health care needs from the individuals that have them, WK has insisted on dealing with people personally and holistically. This is one example of what a renewed encounter with the human can look like, one that could become more common in linguistics and other disciplines if we place real value on preserving what it means to be human in all of its forms.

In this essay, I have tried to illustrate how the human can slip from view – even when studying something as centrally human as language – when we place value solely on the pursuit of objective, scientific knowledge and fail to value knowledge that is gained not by control, but by vulnerable experience. There may not be any one model for balancing scientific progress and human encounter across academia, though disciplines like linguistics seem to provide a starting place. More important is that conscious decisions be made so the pursuit of valuable scientific knowledge is not permitted to eclipse the pursuit of equally valuable human encounter. To allow it to do so is not only to neglect the study of what it means to be human, but may potentially lead to a disastrous diminishment of humanity as large numbers of unique human worldviews slip from view forever.

*Brent Henderson is Assistant Professor of Linguistics at the University of Florida.*

## CALL FOR PAPERS

The Christian Study Center welcomes submissions for lunchtime student paper presentations during the spring semester of 2009 and beyond. In order to cultivate thinking and writing at the intersection of Christian thought and academic discourse, we want to encourage students (both undergraduate and graduate) to bring Christian reflection to bear on their academic work. As students work on assigned papers in their coursework, we encourage them to draw on the resources of the Christian tradition where those resources might have something to say. For more information, contact Todd Best or Richard Horner at the Christian Study Center.



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## INSIDE THIS EDITION

**Essay: "What Makes Us Human? Two Perspectives from Linguistics" by Brent Henderson, p. 1**

*This important way of gaining knowledge, however, contrasts sharply with experience gained when we encounter human personality. Here, science cannot be our approach.*

**Advent Poem: "Mary's Song" by Luci Shaw, p. 6.**

*Quiet he lies  
whose vigor hurled  
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## FALL CALENDAR

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Mondays: January 26 through February 16, 7:30 pm

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Instructor: Richard Horner. Especially for undergraduate students.

Wednesdays, 11:45 am (period 5)

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**Graduate Roundtable**

Faciliators: Todd Best and Jay Langdale

Select readings for graduate students. Dates: TBA

**Forum on Religion and Scholarship**

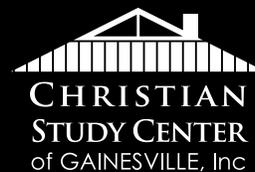
**"Faithful Narratives: The Challenge of Religion and History"**

First lecture: January 12: Peter Brown (Princeton University)

see inside for future lectures

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