

“Therefore Ye Are No More Strangers and Foreigners”

WILLIAM G. EGGINGTON

Good morning. As was noted in the introduction, I come from Australia, so that’s why I think you talk funny. As was also mentioned, I’m a linguist. Linguistics is the scientific study of language.

In 1978 Pam and I were living a pretty comfortable life in Brisbane, Australia. We had a nice house close to Pam’s parents and three wonderful children, ages five, four, and two. I had a good job. But I also had a dream. I wanted to know more about how language works, especially for people acquiring a second language. At that time one of the best graduate linguistics programs in the world was at the University of Southern California, located just south of downtown Los Angeles. So we left this good life and went off to Los Angeles.

The second day in LA we bundled the kids into a borrowed car and visited the USC campus to keep an appointment with a linguistics professor. I was excited to be finally going to the temple of my academic dreams. We arrived on campus and acquired a campus map, but there was no Linguistics Department listed on the map. We found a traffic station and asked a security guard where the Linguistics Department was.

“The what?” he asked.

“The Linguistics Department,” I answered.

He picked up a phone and asked, “Hey, Joe, do you know where the ling . . . ling . . .” Turning to me, he asked, “The what?”

“The Linguistics Department.”

“Do you know where the Linguistics Department is?”

We eventually found the department in a rickety old building. It wasn’t a good start. I’ll never forget the bemused smile on Pam’s face as we began this adventure. Thank you, Pam.

Most days I leave my BYU office in the early evening and wander around campus trying to remember where I parked the car that morning. I look at the beautiful mountains, this incredible campus, and the miracle that each of you represents. I can’t help but think of G. K. Chesterton’s poem titled “Evening”:

*Here dies another day
During which I have had eyes, ears, hands
And the great world round me;
And with tomorrow begins another.
Why am I allowed two?*

William G. Eggington was a professor and chair of the BYU Department of Linguistics and English Language when this devotional was given on 8 November 2011.

This is what I'd like to talk to you about today—some aspects of this great world around us and how we interact with the world using our eyes, ears, and hands. Perhaps I can also provide one answer to why we are allowed so many days beyond the one.

What is our relationship to the great world around us? We are told to be “in the world but not of the world.” We are instructed to “go . . . into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15), which of course we take to mean preaching the gospel to all of God's children. In so doing we follow the example of Christ, who also went “into the world” (John 3:17). Based upon how Christ went into the world, let me suggest that going into the world means righteously interacting closely and lovingly with all of God's children. In so doing we fulfill the mission assigned to us, because we are “children of the prophets; and [we] are of the house of Israel; and [we] are of the covenant which the Father made with [our] fathers, saying unto Abraham: And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed” (3 Nephi 20:25). This is our responsibility to all the kindreds of the earth. Note that this responsibility extends not just to people who are like us, or to people who want to become like us, but to all the kindreds of the earth.

Let me now talk about some aspects of this great world around us and all the kindreds of the earth who live here from a linguistics perspective. We are living in times that some describe in terms of two “ages”: the information age and the age of proximity. Much has been said about the information age, during which incredible growth in technology has allowed each of us to have access to vast troves of information. A huge portion of the world's current scientific, technological, or cultural information is stored and retrieved in the English language. In many respects, Anglo-American cultural values, carried by the English language, dominate global behavior either in terms of

adopting these values or reacting to them. As native or near-native English speakers, we at this university have inherited a linguistically and culturally privileged position among the world's population. In fact, it may be no historical accident that English, so far, is the working language of this dispensation as well as history's first world language.

The information age has a companion. Never in human history have so many people moved around so much and so often for so many purposes. The global population is on the move, whether it be through international immigration, internal in-country migration, tourism, or short-term travel for business or educational purposes. This is exciting, but with these movements come the challenges of a new age—one that I have labeled the age of proximity, adapting a term used in slightly different contexts.

Over many millennia, human beings have developed modes of behavior that have grown out of social comfort zones in which we interact with people “just like us.” Beginning with interaction in settings such as those found within families, clans, tribes, villages, towns, cities, regions, and nations, we like to spend time with people who share our linguistic and cultural ways. We are most comfortable when we are with “our people.” Things go more smoothly. But in this age of proximity we spend more and more time proximate to people from other families, other tribes and villages, and other cities, regions, and nations. These people speak other dialects of our language or totally different languages. They share different cultural norms that seem strange to us. In essence, we interact more and more with—and are closer and closer to—people who speak in strange tongues and who do strange things. We are living in a world of strangers. This is the age of proximity. This situation often threatens to take us out of our same-language and same-cultural comfort zones. The sociocultural and sociolinguistic

consequences of this age of proximity are not as apparent here at BYU as they are in Los Angeles, for example, but they are here, and it is likely that you will be dealing with them both here and elsewhere throughout your life.

We can choose to respond to challenges brought about by the age of proximity in a number of ways. We can withdraw into our sameness—our family, friends, and regional and national identities—setting up barriers that protect us from interacting in meaningful ways with those who are different. Some people of the world have chosen to do this by withdrawing geographically behind walls of national or religious exclusion. Others choose to do it in more subtle ways, relying on technology, so that even though they are physically surrounded by those from different backgrounds they can always be “virtually” at home, encased in their familial comforting iPod music, their electronic Facebook and Twitter friends, and their same-minded political blogs and digital social networks. In many ways, even though they are surrounded by different people, they are always immersed in their virtual tribe. They only have to interact with nontribal members in minimal and superficial ways. It’s comforting, and it’s natural human behavior—default behavior for the natural man. But, as suggested earlier, it’s not what Heavenly Father wants us to do.

Over the past few months in Sunday School, many of us have followed Paul’s apostolic mission as he went fearlessly into strange places, introducing strange people to Christ’s teachings while at times coping with those at home in Jerusalem who wanted to keep Christianity “within the tribe.” He often pled with those at home to welcome these strangers into their families, their homes, and Christ’s Church. In one memorable exchange, he argued that there should be “no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19).

Similar to a standard modern Church mission, Paul had to go elsewhere to interact with strangers and bring them to Christ. But here’s what is interesting about our current times. In the age of proximity, the strangers and foreigners are coming to us. They are all around us. Our challenge then is to overcome our natural-man reluctance to interact with those who come from different languages, dialects, and cultural backgrounds and to treat them as no more strangers but actual, or potential, fellow citizens with the Saints in the household of God. This challenge is not easy. Even when we can overcome language barriers, there are a host of other more subtle difficulties.

Let me give you a brief linguistic lecture that focuses on one of these difficulties. Language consists of sounds that make words that make sentences that make meaning. So far, so good. But things get complicated. Consider the following exchange between two people in a home setting.

Pam: That’s the phone.

Bill: I’m washing the dog.

Pam: Okay.

Those three utterances are grammatically correct, but as a meaningful set of sequenced expressions devoid of context, they don’t make sense. But you know what they mean.

By saying, “That’s the phone,” Pam’s intention is to say, “The phone is ringing. I’m not going to answer it. You answer it.”

By saying, “I’m washing the dog,” Bill intends to say, “I am unable to answer the phone. You answer it.”

Pam’s “Okay” means, “I’ll answer it.”

Often things we say not only have a grammatical sense but also an intentional sense. We say one thing when we mean another thing. This phenomenon is what linguists call pragmatics. You were able to make sense of Pam and Bill’s exchange because you have developed “pragmatic competence,” or the ability to

express and comprehend hidden, intended, or unstated meaning that is embedded in understandings of particular situational or cultural contexts. Your pragmatic competence comes from lifelong experiences dealing with similar cultural and situational contexts.

Even when people share the same or similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds, pragmatic problems arise. Consider the following (many of the anecdotes I will relate are exemplars of actual published research):

Let's say an imaginary Jack and Jill are driving home to Provo from Salt Lake City.

Jill asks Jack, "Are you thirsty?"

Jack responds, "No."

Things go silent in the car. They arrive in Provo, at which time Jill turns to Jack and says, "You know, you need to work on being a little less self-centered," and departs rather frigidly.

Jack stares into the void wondering what just happened.

So what happened? By asking if Jack was thirsty, Jill was intending to signal that she was thirsty and perhaps they could pull into their favorite fast-food place in Lehi. Jack didn't comprehend Jill's indirect intended meaning. (Adapted from Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* [New York: Quill, 2001], 15.) This is an example of what linguists call "pragmatic failure." As a noted researcher in the field states:

Most of our misunderstandings of other people are not due to any inability to hear them, or to parse their sentences, or to understand their words[.] . . . A far more important source of difficulty in communication is that we so often fail to understand a speaker's intentions. [George A. Miller, "Psychology, Language, and Levels of Communication," in Albert Silverstein, ed., *Human Communication: Theoretical Explorations* (New York: John Wiley, 1974), 15; cited in Jenny Thomas, "Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure," in Kingsley Bolton and Braj B. Kachru, eds., *World Englishes: Critical Concepts in Linguistics*,

6 vols. (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 4:22]

So if examples of pragmatic failure abound when people from shared backgrounds communicate, you can imagine how frequently they occur when people from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds interact—which of course happens frequently in this age of proximity.

Here's a personal example of pragmatic failure at the cross-cultural level. Prior to attending graduate school at the University of Southern California, I taught English as a second language to immigrants and refugees in Australia in an adult basic education context. During breaks, the teachers would gather in the teachers' lounge and often commiserate about this or that teaching problem, class, or student. I might say I have a problem with teaching a particular class; a colleague would respond by saying something like, "Yeah, there are some real problem students in that class. I had them last semester. What a bunch of losers!" End of conversation.

We moved to Los Angeles for graduate school, and for a time I taught in a similar context—except in this school's teachers' lounge, when I related that I had a problem, my American colleagues gave me unwanted advice on how to teach. I often listened to this advice stone-faced, suppressing righteous indignation and thinking that they obviously felt that I was an inexperienced teacher in need of assistance. How dare they! As I got to know my colleagues more and as they became my friends, I realized that they interpreted my whining about students as a plea for help, and they selflessly took the time to provide that help. Sometime later, an American teacher started at the school. She had just completed a teacher exchange to an Australian school. I heard that she thoroughly enjoyed her Australian experience, except she felt that she didn't get much help from her Australian

colleagues. I imagine that she thought she was asking for help by expressing a concern, but all she got back was commiseration rather than assistance. Even though Australians and Americans share approximately the same language, we do have slightly different cultural expectations that can often lead to pragmatic failure—to be more precise, cross-cultural pragmatic failure. These misunderstandings resulted in my thinking, for a time, that Americans were patronizing “know-it-alls” and resulted in that other teacher’s thinking that Australian teachers were unhelpful, especially to foreigners.

I even went through a period during which I started thinking about “know-it-all, patronizing Americans” in terms of stereotypes reinforced by a process known as “confirmation bias,” in which we only recognize and cognitively register features that confirm our preconceived notions, totally disregarding any nonconfirmatory evidence. Sadly, confirmation bias in cross-cultural contexts happens all too frequently. The process can easily become a silent killer of goodwill, charity, and compassion, especially in situations where non-native English speakers are involved. Linguistics researcher Jenny Thomas expressed the problem in this way:

Grammatical errors may be irritating and impede communication, but at least, as a rule, they are apparent . . . so that [hearers are] aware that an error has occurred. . . . Pragmatic failure, on the other hand, is rarely recognized as such by non-linguists. If a non-native speaker appears to speak fluently . . . , a native speaker is likely to attribute his/her apparent impoliteness or unfriendliness, not to any linguistic deficiency, but to boorishness or ill-will. [“Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure,” 29]

Here’s a brief review of some of the many cross-cultural pragmatic failures recorded in research literature. The labels “Culture A” and

“Culture B” in one example refer to different cultures in a different example.

Culture A creates and maintains friendships through expressions of positive worth. Culture B maintains friendships partially through mutual insult. Culture A thinks Culture B is rude and aggressive. Culture B thinks Culture A has superficial friendships constantly in need of maintenance.

When Culture A folks come to class late, they enter the classroom quietly and crouch over slightly as if they are wearing a Harry Potter cloaking device so as not to disturb the class. Culture B, a high-honor-based culture, requires its late students to apologize openly and sit in a prominent position in the classroom. Culture A thinks Culture B students are rude and disruptive. Culture B thinks Culture A students are cowardly, untrustworthy, and sneaky.

See if you can predict the interpretive results of pragmatic failure in the following scenarios:

- Culture A speakers require that most polite conversations end with a series of closure exchanges. Culture B folks simply walk away when the purpose of the conversation is completed.
- Culture A speakers expect regular eye contact during face-to-face conversations. Culture B speakers show respect to the conversant by looking down and away.
- Culture A speakers are uncomfortable with silence in conversations. Culture B speakers have a long silence-tolerance period.
- When Culture A speakers like someone, they compliment that person on a possession, such as a watch or an item of clothing. When Culture B speakers receive a compliment for an item of clothing or a watch, for example, they are under an obligation to offer that item to the person issuing the compliment.

Each of the various cross-cultural pragmatic features mentioned in this list is built upon one or more significant foundational cultural values.

A much-studied cultural value revolves around personal autonomy—as in who has the power to tell someone else what to do, as revealed in Hofstede’s Power Distance Index (PDI). (See Geert Hofstede, *Culture’s Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations* [Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2001]; cited in Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* [New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008], 204; see also 209 and note on 293–294). People from cultures with a low power-distance index are reluctant to tell others what to do, and they devise intricate linguistic complexities in order to avoid expressions of raw power. Low power-distance nations are more likely to be English-speaking. English speakers are masters at mitigating or masking power. For example, if you want someone to close the door, you are more likely to use a “wh-imperative” such as “Would you mind closing the door?” rather than the direct polite imperative “Please close the door.” Here is another example: Even though you know for sure that the party begins at 7:00, when someone asks you what time the party begins, you are more likely to soften your certainty by saying something like, “Ah, I think it starts at 7:00.” And another example: If you have to give someone advice, you are more likely to use softeners and hedges such as “You know, ah, maybe it’d be good if you did this.” People from high power-distance cultures do not have such a complex repertoire of power-avoidance linguistic devices; and so, from the perspective of native English speakers, they often come across as being rude, assertive, and disrespectful. On the other hand, our attempts at avoiding power are often interpreted as an indicator of uncertainty, weakness, or insincerity.

So what has this linguistic lecture got to do with our goal of trying to figure out how strangers and foreigners can become fellow citizens with the Saints in the household of God? As I mentioned some time back, our language (English), our Anglo-American culture, and our pragmatic ways play dominant roles in the globalized world. In essence, it can be argued that the world is coming to us. Our language, our culture, and our pragmatic behaviors can easily be seen as the default—as the normal. We can almost subconsciously develop a sense of ethnic superiority—a stance that says all these other ways of doing things are strange, odd, cute, or interesting, but we really know what the right way is, don’t we. And as soon as all these other folks become like us, the better things will be.

It is likely that this attitude is not going to help all the kindreds of the world be blessed through us. It smacks of ethnic superiority—a trait that President Gordon B. Hinckley warned us about in his first general conference after being called by the Lord as prophet:

*There is so great a need for civility and mutual respect among those of differing beliefs and philosophies. We must not be partisans of any doctrine of ethnic superiority. We live in a world of diversity. We can and must be respectful toward those with whose teachings we may not agree. [“This Is the Work of the Master,” *Ensign*, May 1995, 71]*

If we are to fulfill the charge given to us by our prophets in this age of proximity, we need to develop a sophisticated ability to analyze language use and cultural values in a conscious manner so as to solve pragmatic misunderstandings. Doing so can lead to positive outcomes.

Let me provide two very personal examples. My sister and I joined the Church when I was fourteen years old. We became members because two young elders—one from Utah and the other from Arizona—gained the trust

and confidence of my parents, especially of my father. One of these missionaries, Kent Thurgood, is sitting here in the front row. My father never became a member, but he often told me how impressed he was with “those two American boys,” especially with their kindness, their humility, and their respect for his cultural values. Because of their ability to gain my father’s trust, my father allowed them to teach the family, which, in turn, allowed my sister and me to gain testimonies of the truthfulness of the gospel and be baptized. This would never have happened if these two young men had not developed a love for and an understanding of the strangers and foreigners they were teaching.

Many years later I had the pleasure of having lunch in Sydney, Australia, with Elder and Sister Hafen. Elder Bruce Hafen was BYU’s provost during the time Rex E. Lee was president of BYU. He was later called as a Seventy and for a time served as the area president for the South Pacific region based in Sydney. Elder Hafen had no historical connection to Australia, but during that lunch it was apparent that he and Sister Hafen had become authorities on Australian history, culture, language, and pragmatics. He had accomplished this through hard work, prayer, humility, and compassion. In so doing he had developed a deep love and respect for the people he was called to serve. His accomplishments in Australia during his time of service became legendary.

These two examples show what happens when we learn to love and respect strangers and foreigners. I began this talk by quoting G. K. Chesterton’s poem. Let me repeat it:

*Here dies another day
During which I have had eyes, ears, hands
And the great world round me;*

*And with tomorrow begins another.
Why am I allowed two?*

I have argued that one reason we are “allowed two” and many more than two is so we can be instrumental in bringing strangers and foreigners to the household of God by developing an awareness and appreciation of the cultures and the ways of thinking and speaking of these strangers and foreigners, who, in this age of proximity, are part of our great world around us.

There is another very sacred scripture concerning strangers that stands as a challenge to us all:

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. [Matthew 25:34–40]

My prayer is that the matters we have discussed today can help us be more successful in bringing strangers and foreigners to the Lord’s house. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.