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Code-switching with Deity

I have loved words and etymologies for as long as I can remember. There was no practical purpose for this knowledge—I just liked the fact that every word is miniature history lesson. I later studied the Russian language, which I used on a Latter-day Saint mission in that country. My interests and skills seem, on the surface, to be the perfect preparation for my current pursuit of an advanced degree in Slavic languages and literatures. However, the most important aspect of my academic studies was a profound spiritual experience in a Russian class at community college.

When I graduated from high school, the prosaic requirements of my parents' health insurance meant that I should enroll in the local community college. I desperately wanted a fun class like pottery or jewelry-making, yet I was drawn to Russian 101. This was confusing because, as young man, I was entirely apathetic to foreign languages and humanities in general. I read and reread the description in the course catalog, hoping to make sense of this curious attraction: "RUS101 Elementary Russian I. Basic grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary of the Russian language. Practice of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Prerequisites: None. 4 credits." I resisted this spiritual prompting because Russian is such an *impractical* and *hard* language. Studying languages was so far from my personal interests that I could not understand why a loving Heavenly Father would push me in that direction. After a discussion with my father, I dutifully accepted the spiritual prompting to study a foreign language, but I

concluded that Spanish was a better option because it is so *useful*. However, as I sat in the first Spanish class the very next week, I could not shake a deep unease that I was in the wrong place. Although my 19-year-old understanding of the Spirit had struggled with the initial prompting to enroll in Russian, the stupor of thought was unmistakable. I realized that God's plan for me passed through the Russian class.

Five hours later, I was in a different classroom learning the Cyrillic alphabet. I was captivated by the marvelous sounds of palatalized consonants and the symmetry of Russian vowels. The class laughed while trilling our r's and practicing the Russian vowel ы (known as yery, it has no English approximation). Russian was as difficult as I expected but I was happy in the endeavor. The spiritual fog quickly lifted, and I experienced an inexplicable peace for the entire semester. This was more than just a positive educational outcome—the Spirit confirmed to me that I belonged in the language. I was ecstatic later to serve as a Latter-day Saint missionary in Russia and Belarus where the spiritual sense of belonging anchored me for two years. This continued in the years after my mission as I traveled throughout Eastern Europe and studied at the university level; I received a testimony like Paul that “in every thing ye are enriched by Him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge” (*Holy Bible*, 1 Cor. 1:5) ranging from the Restored Gospel and historical Christianity to the Russian language, Slavic literature, and cinema. The key has been recognizing that Heavenly Father's gift to me was not pragmatic or limited to a certain time and place. Instead, my obedience to the spiritual prompting to study Russian became a defining feature of my lived experience.

My faith and language studies have been engaged in this beneficial cycle for years, each illuminating the truth in the other. For example, I learned that some expressions are so sacred that they cannot be used outside of the religious experience. The sacral nature of Christ's claim to be *I am* in John 8:58 is muddled in English because we regularly use the present tense, first-

person singular conjugation of *to be*. Analysis of this verse in English requires an explanation and discussion of English grammar. However, Russian is a zero-copula language with no present tense *to be*; without any grammatical opportunity to say *I am*, Christ's statement that *I am* (Я есмь [ya esm']) serves as a bold declaration that He exists of His own will. We as (Russian-speaking) mortals cannot use it—Christ is the only perfect existence that can claim *I am*.

Etymology also reveals Gospel truths about obedience. *To obey* (послушаться [poslushat'sya]) literally means *to listen completely*. While English has other techniques to establish habituality and completion, the Russian perfective verbal aspect intrinsically affirms that obedience cannot be a partial endeavor. I also learned that gratitude invokes the hand of God in all things; *thank you* (спасибо [spasibo]) in Russian is derived from the imperative phrase “God save you.”

Although the modern usage has lost any religious connotation, I consciously say *spasibo* to show true gratitude in my daily communications. For faithful believers with an interest in etymology, this also influences how we pray. Rather than commanding God to save Himself, we consciously select a different word to express the precise form of our gratitude. This might include a verb like “I thank thee” or a short-form adjective similar to “I am thankful for...” The constraints help me to be more deliberate in prayer without limiting the gratitude that I feel.

Studying Russian linguistics has also helped me to unpack the formalities of LDS prayers. Consider the dedicatory prayer at the Kirtland Temple where Joseph Smith, the first prophet of the Restoration, used the archaic pronouns *thou*, *thee*, and *thy* as well as verbal suffixes *-st* and *-eth*. It is probable that Joseph used this vocabulary to maintain a sense of continuity with the King James Bible.

...we ask ***thee***, O Lord, to accept of this house, the workmanship of the hands of us, ***thy*** servants, which ***thou didst*** command us to build.

...he who ***diggeth*** a pit for them shall fall into the same himself (Doctrine and Covenants 109: 2, 25; emphasis added).

This verbiage is both recognizable and unfamiliar for most English speakers, the perfect recipe for discomfort. Nonetheless, modern prophets encourage us to use these archaisms as the “special language of prayer” (Oaks 16). While studying Russian, I learned that these archaic forms are still present in that language; the second-person singular *thou* is grammatically identical to *ty* (as are *you* and *vy*, the second-person plural pronouns), and obscure English concepts of pronoun declension and verbal conjugation are practiced in every Russian sentence. I also learned that second-person singular *ty* in Russian indicates a degree of intimacy and closeness with family members and friends, which is used in prayers offered to Heavenly Father. This led to a small miracle because my desire to pray with this loving, familial relationship in Russian allowed me to feel more authentic when praying in English!

Recently, I have contemplated the impulse to use a distinct prayer vocabulary. In response to an inquiry from a colleague at UCLA about praying in the LDS community, I explained that prayer is often described as a conversation between the person and Heavenly Father. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland reaffirmed this in the most recent General Conference, stating that “God hears *every* prayer we offer and responds to each of them” (8). I also explained to my colleague that prayer has been identified as a significant aspect of the “Mormon manner of speaking” (Evans 73). As I pondered her question in the following months, I realized that the special language of prayer could be broadly categorized as code-switching. This is a sociolinguistic phenomenon that occurs when a speaker mixes languages or language varieties. This mechanism encodes meaning into the conversation that is not explicitly present in the words used; only participants in the same language community are able to correctly decode the meaning. For example, by praying with *thou* in a group setting, the speaker may be demonstrating a shared identity or solidarity as an English-speaking member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or as a follower of Christ. Many scholars have pointed out that

such usage is not historically accurate because Christ and the apostles did not converse with the Early Modern English of the King James Bible. However, Elder Dallin H. Oaks helpfully clarifies that “the history of English usage is not the point” of using these sanctified terms (17). This vocabulary is special because it demonstrates a conscious choice to align oneself with a particular community in the present day which is earnestly seeking God.

Code-switching also allows the speaker to incorporate a preferred expression that is otherwise absent from or difficult to express in the dominant language. Standard English has no mechanism to “communicate the desired feelings of love, respect, reverence, or closeness” (Oaks 16) using the second-person singular pronouns according to the T-V distinction. I sensed this lacuna when I learned about Russian pronouns and degrees of intimacy and formality; the archaic pronouns in English stood out as a logical solution because they are linguistically available due to obsolescence as well as analogous to the personal pronouns in other languages. However, the linguistic justification of any expression is not as relevant as the fact that by using the pronouns, the speaker encodes a certain feeling for deity that the intended audience can decode. This includes God, who can read my heart and understand all the implications and intentions in my faulty speech. When I speak to Him with *thou*, or when I continually mix both *thou* and *you* in a single prayer, I can only hope that He recognizes my efforts to communicate devotion to Him. It may be bold to describe to describe this effort as code-switching with deity. However, I like this framework because it anticipates God’s participation in the conversation. The nature of His responses will vary according to our personal needs and situations, yet every divine response to prayer is an affirmation from God that we are members of His community. I am personally inspired by every attempt to use special prayer language because it is evidence that our community is actively searching for the right voice to communicate with God.

As a scholar of faith, I am acutely aware of the negative reputation of scribes throughout the scriptures. Christ cautioned the faithful to guard against “blind guides” (Matt. 23:24) such as the scribes who practiced excessive formalism and legalism in their analysis of the scriptures. On the other hand, Christ also promised to send “prophets, and wise men, and scribes” (Matt. 23:34). The difference between these two groups of scribes is the spirit of revelation, which I believe encompasses all our earthly endeavors. As I study and teach Slavic languages and literatures, I aspire to be a scribe in the company of prophets and wise men. I am confident that I can receive God’s promise to Moses that, “I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say” (Ex. 4:12).

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