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The Language of the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: This article states that English, the language of translation employed by Joseph Smith, retains the original thought, personal writing styles, distinctive patterns, and unique phraseology belonging to each of the ancient writers and prophets of the Book of Mormon. Barker also discusses the language of the gold plates, which has been described as being a combination of the “learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 12), and as “reformed Egyptian” (Mormon 9:32). Too little is known about the characters of reformed Egyptian, which had been “altered” by the Nephites (Mormon 9:32).

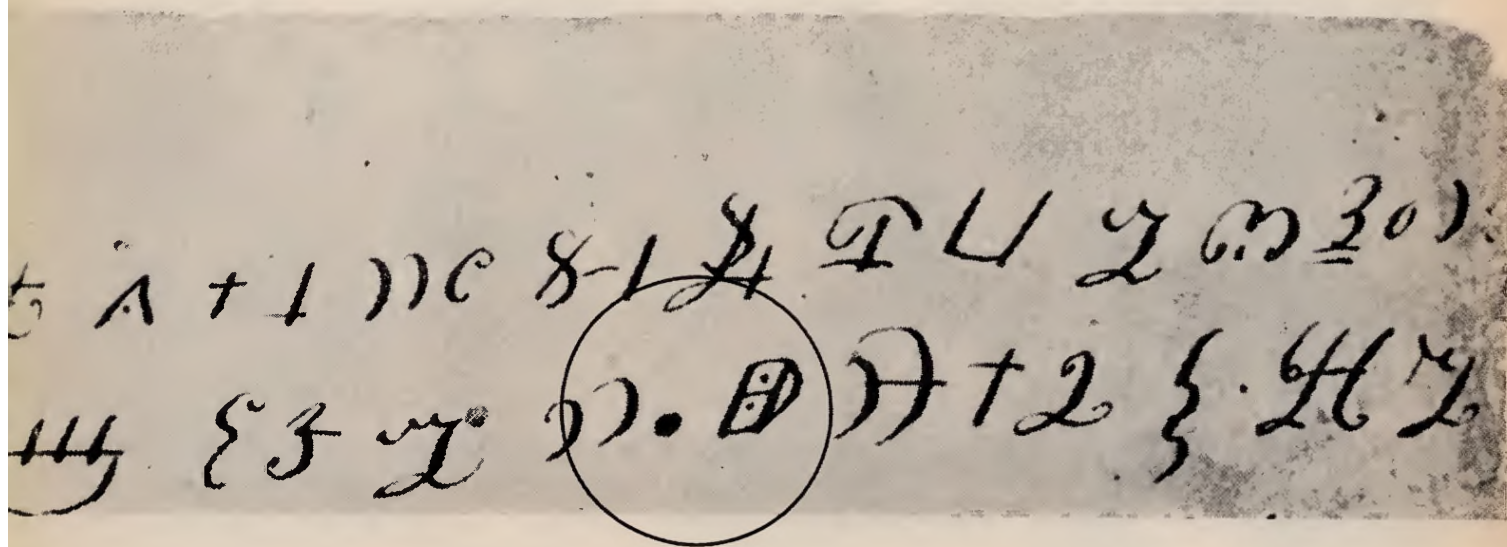
of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians"? Probably, it was, since the records brought from Jerusalem were written in Hebrew. In any case, two facts are apparent: The language used was a mixed tongue, and those speaking it were aware of the fact that the Hebrew they used was no longer the Hebrew of the books of Moses and their "language of the Egyptians" was also a language that had undergone change.

It is not without interest that the Book of Mormon should speak of those languages as having undergone change. Had Joseph Smith been not the translator but the real and only author of the Book of Mormon, it is doubtful if he would have included the observations already quoted concerning the changes undergone by the Hebrew and the Egyptian employed by the Nephites. In 1830, the historical study of language was just beginning and little was known at that time about linguistic change; quite certain it is that Joseph Smith could have known nothing about it.

"The chief innovation of the beginning of the nine-

teenth century was the historical point of view. . . . This brought about a vast change in the science of the language, as in other sciences. Instead of looking at such a language as Latin as one fixed point, and instead of aiming at fixing another language, such as French, in one classical form, the new science viewed both as being in constant flux, as growing, as moving, as continually changing."⁴

The beginnings of modern linguistic science were made by Friedrich von Schlegel who in 1808 was the first to speak of comparative grammar "but, like Moses he only looks into this promised land without entering it"; Rasmus Rask who published a book in Danish in 1818 (not translated in any language except German and then only in part in 1822); Jacob Grimm, the first volume of whose *Deutsche Grammatik* appeared in 1819, brought out in new form in 1822; and Franz Bopp, whose first book was published in 1816, and whose *Comparative Sanskrit Grammar* came from the press between 1833 and 1849. A work of Wilhelm von Humboldt (Continued on page 444)



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The Language of the Book of Mormon

(Continued from page 389)

appeared, after his death, from 1836 to 1846. But until Max Muller in 1861 gave the first series of his *Lectures on the Science of Language* most of the work of the linguists was "difficult of access except to the specialist." The first edition of Whitney's *Language and the Study of Language* did not appear until 1867.

If the testimony of Joseph Smith and the witnesses concerning the origin of the Book of Mormon is true, the Lamanites (Indians) continued undoubtedly to inherit the language which had been "handed down and altered by us according to our manner of speech," and they still speak it in modern forms. By a comparison of Egyptian and Hebrew with the Indian languages should it be possible for linguists to determine that the Indian tongues are modern forms of Egyptian and Hebrew or of a mixture of Egyptian and Hebrew? And if such a relationship is not proved, is the lack of such proof damaging to the claim of the Book of Mormon to divine authenticity?

In answering these questions, let us consider whether the relationship could be determined under favorable circumstances and, then, let us inquire whether the circumstances are favorable.

Antoine Meillet, late professor at the College of France and one of the world's greatest linguists, says, concerning one difficulty in determining the relationship between two languages:

"Between two widely separated moments in the development of one and the same language, the linguistic type may change completely. . . . Language relationship, the expression of an historic fact, *implies nothing in common, however slight, between the languages considered.*"⁵

Whenever two languages have developed so far apart as to have "nothing in common, however slight," only the knowledge of the unbroken history of both from a common ancestor or of one from the other can substantiate the fact of their relationship, unless monuments or documents are extant and known which preserve the stages of their divergent development from the moment of

their separation down to the time of the period of their comparison. This is the case for English and Russian. Meillet continues:

"In the present state of things, English and Russian are two languages of absolutely distinct types, and it is hardly possible to discover a few elements of similarity of vocabulary; this does not prevent them from being two Indo-European languages; the proof lies in the fact that Modern English continues Old English, and Modern Russian, Old Russian, and the comparison of Old English and Old Russian is directly demonstrable, and especially is it easy to prove that the Germanic group of which English forms a part and the Slav group of which Russian forms a part, are both forms taken by the common Indo-Germanic language. As long as two languages of the same family survive, they cannot cease to belong to the same family, no matter what changes they may undergo, even if the changes that take place do not permit a single trace of their common origin to survive."⁶

Meillet presents another example of the inability to establish by direct comparison the relationship between two languages. He says:

"If one were not in possession of the old Germanic dialects on the one hand and of Latin on the other, it would be impossible to demonstrate the relationship between French and English."⁷

These examples are so numerous that Meillet is led to state:

"In time, however, related languages end by becoming so different that it is impossible to recognize their community of origin. . . . The relationship of two languages then can be, and often is, something that cannot be demonstrated, even when it is real."⁸

In another work, Meillet presents such great differentiation:

"If one had—considering English of the present day and forgetting all its past—to demonstrate that English is an Indo-European tongue, one would not succeed."⁹

This difficulty would arise from the fact that one would not have under consideration the record of the linguistic changes as they developed, but only the end result of final differentiated forms. Cases of this kind lead Meillet to state:

"One is never justified in affirming
(Continued on page 450)

The Quality of Loyalty

Richard L. Evans



Before we conclude these comments on qualities of character, there are some that should not be overlooked, including the quality of loyalty. Loyalty is essential in every worthy relationship of life: in families; among friends; between teammates; between employer and employee; loyalty to those who work for us, and with us, and loyalty to those who provide employment. When we work for someone in honorable employment, we should give full service—for only by the success and solvency of constructive ventures can there be assurance of security. So long as we receive benefits from an honorable source, we should be loyal to it, and contribute to its success. Like other essential qualities of character, loyalty gives the assurance of what we can count on. It gives the assurance that friends will not faintheartedly fade from us at the first failure of fair weather. This does not mean that a person should protect another person in evil, or in violation of law, but should insist on fair presentation of facts. Significantly, a search would show that "loyalty" comes from the same word root as "law," and these words are associated in dictionary definition: "Faithful and true to the lawful government . . . true to any person or persons to whom one owes fidelity, as a wife to her husband, friend to friend; fidelity to a superior (and, we might add—to a subordinate) . . . to duty . . . to principle; . . . lawful and legitimate . . . allegiance." This calls up the question of what might be called "unlawful loyalty." Lawless men may be loyal so long as their mutual safety or survival depends upon it, but disloyal as soon as one, by sacrificing the other, can serve the cause of his own safety or survival. One cannot enter into an evil or unlawful act or association, or conspire to do anything dishonorable with anyone else, and be assured of the limits of loyalty. Evil and friendship, evil and honor, are not compatible. But the righteous love and loyalty of family, of friends; loyalty among people for high purpose, loyalty to high principle—such is the loyalty that persuades a person to stand steadfast as to an issue or an honorable obligation, even after it becomes inconvenient. Without the quality of loyalty there is little in life that can be counted on.

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The Language of the Book of Mormon

(Continued from page 446)

that two languages are not related, at least distantly: a relationship would be discovered perhaps, if one had older forms of these same languages."¹⁰

In the case of the Indian languages, these older forms which might permit of the tracing of the relationship are either wholly lacking or, as yet, undiscovered and undeciphered. Without knowing the past history of the Indian dialects, it is at present impossible to determine whether they continue Hebrew or Egyptian or a mixture of both: if resemblances were to be discovered, they might not be related; and if none were discovered or discoverable, they might be related.

"Relationship implies no present resemblance between the languages considered, nor especially of the general system of the languages considered; and, inversely, there are many resemblances, both of structure and vocabulary, that imply no relationship."¹¹

It is thus seen that, even in case of the development of the Indian dialects away from an earlier form or forms has not been particularly more rapid or greater than that of most languages over a like period of time—in the absence of numerous linguistic monuments—it is impossible to trace their relationship either with Egyptian or Hebrew or with any other Old World language.

However, from what the Book of Mormon says about the language of the Nephites and Lamanites (Indians) and from what is known about the Indians since the discovery of America, the discovery of the relationship of these languages to other languages would be much more difficult than in the case of Russian or French, because one must expect (without knowing) the Indian languages to have undergone greater and more radical changes.

Why must one expect the Indian languages to have undergone very great changes? Because the factors known to make for rapid radical changes in language have been operative in the history of the Indian languages! They may be enumerated thus: the Nephites, as

already seen, changed their language, Hebrew, for a mixture of Egyptian and Hebrew which may have been largely Egyptian or which may have been one in grammar and the other in vocabulary; throughout the history of the Nephites and Lamanites (Indians), there have been violent social changes; for centuries the tribes lived in isolation; the language was transmitted orally without the conservative influence of commonly used written forms.

It is not the writer's intention to speak here in detail of the influences making for great linguistic change. To do so would have no point since all linguists are agreed concerning them; let it suffice to quote again from Meillet:

"A population which learns a new language frequently tends to introduce graver changes into this language than a population which continues its former language."¹²

"Populations which live in isolation, divided into little groups having little contact between them, can come to possess dialects [*parlers*] which are not understood except by a very small number of tribes. Thus the native American tribes

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present an infinite variety of languages of which many have some common traits, but which differ enough in detail, not only that they are unable to understand one another from tribe to tribe, but even, at least on first examination, so that linguists are not in a position to establish a classification. There are in America hundreds of languages, which form a large number of groups that have not yet been compared with each other, simply because the indigenous population seems always to have been of slight density in the greater part of the American continent, and because the tribes who speak these languages have remained isolated from one another and because all the forces of differentiation have acted without meeting any efficacious resistance."¹³

Thus it is seen from its very nature as a mixed language and from the character of the native population of America living in isolated communities, the native dialects would tend to greater and greater differentiation; and, that this had been the case, is seen from the fact that linguists have not yet succeeded in classifying them in their present day forms, much less in demonstrating their relationship to Hebrew, Egyptian, or any other Old World language.

In the absence of texts offering examples of progressive change, even had the difficulty not been so great, none other than conjectured, but unproved, solutions could be found. This is true because, with present resources, the philology of the Indian tongues themselves—necessary for any sure work of comparison—cannot be worked out.

"It has been easy to establish the relationship of languages of which one had good grammars and whose philology had been worked out; we are not confronted with languages whose grammar it is necessary to make and the most of which, because of the lack of ancient texts, are *not susceptible of any philology*."¹⁴

Must one not conclude then that from the languages of the American Indians no "damaging evidence" against the Book of Mormon may be expected? Though furnishing no "evidence," the known linguistic facts are not inconsistent with the data and claims of the book.

Is the English of the translation inconsistent with the claims of the

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book? It is not. Critics of the Book of Mormon who have assumed the contrary have overlooked the facts: The purported manner in which the Nephite records were abridged would not make for a finished style; a prophet never loses his characteristic individuality and never becomes a mere mechanical instrument in the work of the Lord; the criticism they offer of the Book of Mormon was leveled against the New Testament writers; the Lord has employed one means only to establish his work—testimony.

A finished style is rarely an improvisation. Authors known as stylists have written, corrected, and rewritten their work, sometimes many times. This they could do in most cases because of the ease with which a new copy could be made. The abridgement of the Nephite record was made on metal plates. If a word, the form of a sentence, or anything else were not quite satisfactory, once engraved on the plate it could be changed only with considerable expense of time and labor. Under these conditions it is likely that only for the gravest of reasons would the text be revised and quite naturally the style would not be polished.

A prophet never loses his characteristic individuality and never becomes a mere mechanical instrument in the hands of the Lord. The English of the Book of Mormon is not claimed to be divinely revealed. Translators of a text they fully understand do not reproduce the thought and feeling of the text in the same words; the language of each will depend on previous training, ability as a writer, etc. Why should one expect any different result in the case of Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon?

"It should not be supposed, however, that this translation though accomplished by means of the interpreters and Seer Stone . . . was merely a mechanical procedure; that no faith, or mental or spiritual effort was required on the Prophet's part; that the instruments did all, while he who used them did nothing but look and repeat mechanically what he saw there reflected."¹⁵

The Lord's description of translation is contained in the following to Oliver Cowdery:

"Yea, behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the

Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart.

"Now, behold, this is the spirit of revelation; behold this is the spirit by which Moses brought the chil-

dren of Israel through the Red Sea on dry ground. . . .

"Ask that you may know the mysteries of God, and that you may translate and receive knowledge from all those ancient records which

A summation: Qualities of Character

Richard L. Evans



In past comments on qualities of character, we have talked of faith; of courage and kindness; of integrity, sincerity, and loyalty, which seem in a sense to add up to a simple word—a word which doesn't include them all, but without which all else would be of little use—and what they add up to is a kind of guilelessness, which in a sense is simply simple honesty. The Psalmist said it in this sentence: "Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile."¹ Now as to summation of these qualities, we turn to some sentences from three sources, the first consisting of some wise and ancient words from Marcus Antoninus, from back some eighteen centuries: "Do not consider anything for your interest which makes you break your word, quit your modesty, or inclines you to any practice which will not bear the light, or look the world in the face."² Two others are cited from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: "In all things preserve integrity; and the consciousness of thine own uprightness will alleviate the toil of business, soften the hardness of ill-success and disappointments, and give thee an humble confidence before God, when the ingratitude of man, or the iniquity of the times may rob thee of other reward."³ Now from the third source: "Give us a character on which we can thoroughly depend, which we know to be based on principle and on the fear of God, and it is wonderful how many [other] brilliant and popular and splendid qualities we can safely and gladly dispense with."⁴ Simply, this all adds up to being honest with ourselves, to being honest with others, to being honest with the Lord God, and to being honest in an endeavor to keep his commandments. Peace and confidence and love and loyalty lie in this direction; unhappiness and sorrow in any other. Despite all sophistries, and cynicism, this is simply so. No person has the right to harm another, (or himself, for that matter), or to take unjustly from another, to take the virtue of another, to impair the faith of another. And anyone who isn't honest is simply punishing himself—for there isn't any way to peace, or to happiness, or any real progress, or any lasting and satisfactory relationship in life without an absolute honesty—an honesty that is akin to a kind of guilelessness that knows no duplicity or deception, that knows no crafty cunning. This in summary from a significant source: "The foundation of leadership is personal character, . . . Personal character . . . is in fact the prime determinant in . . . success or failure. . . ."⁵

"The Spoken Word," from Temple Square presented over KSL and the Columbia Broadcasting System, March 27, 1960. Copyright 1960.

¹Psalm 32:2.

²Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, 121-180 A.D.

³William Paley, 1743-1803.

⁴Arthur P. Stanley, 1815-1881.

⁵Air Commodore W. C. Cooper, *Character and Its Place in Industry*, Rotary, R.I.B.I. Vol. 2, No. 24.

have been hid up, that are sacred; and according to your faith shall it be done unto you."¹⁶

"In attempting to exercise this gift of translation, however, Oliver Cowdery failed; and in a revelation on the subject the Lord explained the cause of his failure to translate:

"Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it [i.e. the gift of translation] unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.

"But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind, then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you, therefore you shall feel that it is right.

"But if it is not right, you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought; that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong; therefore you cannot write that which is sacred save it be given you from me." (*Ibid.*, 9:7-9.)

"While this is not a description of the manner in which Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, it is, nevertheless, the Lord's description of how another man could exercise the gift of translation; and doubtless it is substantially the manner in which Joseph Smith *did* exercise it, and the manner in which he translated the Book of Mormon. . . ."

The translation "thus obtained was expressed in such language as the Prophet could command, in such phraseology as he was master of and common to the time and the locality where he lived. . . ."¹⁷

Had the language of the Book of Mormon not been Joseph Smith's, Joseph Smith would have been unlike the prophets of the Old and New Testaments. Eusebius, quoting an earlier Christian writer says:

"The false prophet speaks in ecstasy. . . . But they cannot show that any prophet, either, of those in the Old Testament or of those in the New, was inspired in this way. . . ."¹⁸

In consequence each of the New Testament writers is characterized by his own peculiar style. The style of Paul is one and the style of Peter is different. Both were prophets.

As critics object to the language of the Book of Mormon, just so pagan writers criticized the New Testament authors:

"The culture of the Greek language and the old authors of Hellas could not but render despicable the language of a few obscure and illiterate Jews."¹⁹

Linguistic science has discovered nothing to cast doubt on the truth of the Book of Mormon statement that "the record was written in a language which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians." If linguists fail to determine that the Indian tongues are modern forms of one or both of

these languages, it is because the difficulties are too great and the texts available are insufficient in any case to permit of such determination.

The English of the translation is consistent with the claims of the book itself. Critics of the Book of Mormon have overlooked the fact that the language of a true prophet is not the Lord's, but the prophet's own and they overlooked the fact that the Greeks and Romans made the same uncomprehending criti-

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cism of early Christian writers which they now make of the Book of Mormon.

In no case is any linguistic discovery or any principle of the science of language "damaging" to the Book of Mormon. The idea of linguistic change expressed in the Book of Mormon was held by a few, a very few scholars in Europe at the time the Book of Mormon was being written. This view is consistent with the truth. The very fact that everything in the book is consistent

with known facts is evidence of its divinity. It is not "proof." Indeed we should not expect such "proof." The means employed in establishing the divinity of the Book of Mormon is consistent with the practice of the Lord in all ages. The Lord has always established his gospel by the testimony of men, of those living by their spoken words and those dead by their written testimony, followed by the testimony of the Holy Ghost. In harmony with this, the divinity of the Book of Mormon is likewise

supported by the testimony of men, both living and dead, and confirmed by the testimony of the Holy Ghost: ". . . if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost."²⁰

FOOTNOTES

- ²¹ Ne. 12.
- ²² Mormon 9:32-33.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 9:33.
- ²⁴ Jespersen, *Language*, p. 32.
- ²⁵ Meillet *Linguistique Historique et Linguistique Generale*, p. 106.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.
- ²⁹ Meillet, *Caracteres generaux des langues Germaniques*, p. 17.
- ³⁰ Meillet, *Linguistique Historique et Linguistique Generale*, p. 94.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 107.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 116.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.
- ³⁵ B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church*, Vol. 1, p. 130.
- ³⁶ D & C 8:2, 3, 11.
- ³⁷ Roberts, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 132, 133.
- ³⁸ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, V, 17, 1-5.
- ³⁹ Mourret, *Les Origines Chretiennes*, p. 167.
- ⁴⁰ Moroni 10:4.

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Leaves no intense awareness, since you came.
There is no measure that will hold the vastness
Of the surging sea: the air one breathes
And so an answered moment only leaves
A sureness of all future merged in past.
Our traveled road has left no space for doubt;
Love became life: all else was crowded out.