

## Cultural linguistics, mission, and theology for the majority world

By Jim Harries.

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"Now the whole world had one language and a common speech ... but the Lord [said] ... let us go down and confuse their language so that they will not understand each other." (Genesis 11:1-7 NIV)

### Abstract

Sharifian's studies on cultural linguistics provide a means of analysis that can articulate otherwise hidden issues in intercultural communication. This can help those concerned with Christian Mission to better understand what goes on in cross-cultural missionary encounters. Teaching non-Western people to communicate in English does not in itself enable profound mutual understanding, because cultural conceptualisations remain very different in different Englishes. As a result, the opportunity of indigenous peoples to develop their own churches and lifestyle is curtailed. This article finds that use of indigenous languages in theological education is advisable as a means of putting the global church onto a sounder footing.

**Key words:** cultural linguistics, conceptualisations, theological education, Christian mission, Africa, language, linguistics, intercultural communication.

### Introduction

This article examines research and writing on *cultural linguistics* led by Professor Farzad Sharifian of Monash University (Clayton, VIC Australia). It considers its pertinence to issues of mission, theology, and development in the majority world, especially Africa. Work done by Sharifian and colleagues for over 15 years has "advance[d] multidisciplinary inquiry into the relationship between language and *cultural conceptualisations* . It champions research that advances our understanding of how features of human language encode culturally constructed conceptualisations of experience" (my emphasis).<sup>1</sup>

Sharifian and colleagues' work on cultural linguistics<sup>2</sup> speaks to a puzzle regarding the relationship between language, culture, and meaning that has long troubled missiologists and theologians.<sup>3</sup> The brilliance of Professor Sharifian's approach arises from his identification of *cultural conceptualisations* . Focusing on "meaning as conceptualisation" (2015a:473) results in the realisation that the meaning of terms and circumstances arises from the way they are *conceptualised* by a particular community. The nature of the conceptualisations arises from the particular features of the culture and context in which the community lives. This results in differences in ways in which words impact that are not otherwise recognised. An important part of Sharifian's work focuses on global Englishes, often stake-holders' second or even third languages. "Unfamiliarity with cultural differences that exist between different varieties of English can have damaging and even irreparable consequences," Sharifian tells us (2011:72). Sharifian asks, "What happens when different languages that are associated with different systems of cultural conceptualisations come to contact with each other," (2016b:4)?

A conceptualisation is a way in which a term is understood in the light of the *culture* of a particular community. Many of Sharifian's examples come from his interaction with Aboriginal people in Australia. They therefore parallel other engagement by Western English speakers with majority-world communities. By way of introductory example of a conceptualisation, a term such as *mother* is in the West typically conceptualised as referring to the person who biologically gave birth to someone. In Aboriginal (and many other majority world) conceptualisation, *mother* includes one's biological mothers' sisters, and even cousins, and beyond.

Throwing light from Sharifian's and other scholars' work on cultural linguistics' onto the practice of Christian Mission by Westerners in the majority world, points us towards some new direction indicators and agendas for mission practice. Much Western mission has operated on the basis of a broad assumption that enabling more and more people to use one language (typically English) in intercultural understanding will lead to effective intercultural communication.<sup>4</sup> This article re-evaluates such presupposition. It asks, does use of English interculturally, by apparently obviating the need for translation, result in advocating what is not culturally in tune with the situation of a particular indigenous people? A process of translation into another language would enable and in fact necessitate a reprocessing and recategorization of thoughts originally presented in English. Perhaps a failure to account for the impact of cultural conceptualisations on understanding risks English-language mission becoming a straight-jacket for tying non-Western Christians to unhelpful neo-colonial models.

### **Theological education through english**

The Western church has made many admirable efforts at transporting its theological knowledge globally, especially to poorer parts of the majority world (Heist et al 2016:3). Our particular focus in this article will be on Africa, but it will also extend much more widely. Increasingly, as English continues to gain global momentum, and as a result of globalisation as a whole, English is more and more widely used in theological education. A whole curriculum might be transported lock stock and barrel and presented using English in a part of the world very different to the native-English speaking territory in which it originated.<sup>5</sup>

There has been much murmuring against the above system of wholesale transfer of theological education. "Theological colleges dotted across Africa are orphans of mission headquarters and churches abroad ... the African church has never really supported theological education" (Karamaga 2013:xviii, citing James Kombo in the same volume). These "orphan" theological education programmes in Africa and beyond remain heavily dependent for their success on injections of Western funding. This dependence itself raises questions regarding the relevance of what is taught. Hence Sanneh's constant emphasis on the importance of translation into vernacular languages: "Translatability became the characteristic mode of Christian expansion throughout history" (1989:214). Despite the existence of a robust world-wide Bible translation movement, the West continues to transport its *theology* through Western texts written in European languages. Very few, if any, theological teaching institutions in Africa engage sustainably in a deep way with African languages.<sup>6</sup>

In response, some might point out that mission investments into Africa these days pass through the hands of indigenous leadership. If indigenous African church leadership is consulted, and they themselves opt for English language education, then this, for them, validates the use of English. Perhaps here we need to see a shift to a less financially-naive understanding. Western Christians often consider African churches to be in need of theological education. They consider that the education that they have in the West would benefit Africans, and they have a history of funding education in Africa. As a result, for an African church leader *not* to express a desire for assistance for theological education in English is to stare a gift horse squarely in the mouth. Add to this the reality that the hierarchy and upper echelons of African churches often function in European languages. The same upper-echelons may be relating very closely to churches in the West who are giving them funds.<sup>7</sup> Promotion up the hierarchy of African churches is often aided by, if not based on, levels of achievement in theological education which uses English as a medium of teaching.<sup>8</sup> As a result it is understandable why African church leaders are often keen on programmes of theological education in English, whether or not those programmes are contextually helpful, and certainly whether

or not they are the most efficient or effective use of resources to facilitate communication of Christian truth.

I do here draw on personal experience, having taught for 18 years at theological education programmes in Western Kenya, in the area where I am still living. One of the things that has amazed and disheartened me has been hearing the terms students use to encourage their colleagues to continue with their studies. This kind of encouragement, as I recall, was never so as to be more effective in ministry, or so as to have a better knowledge of God and his Word. On the contrary, it was always so as to improve students' chances of one day being paid by a foreign missionary or Western-funded church. This applied even when the programme was in indigenous languages.<sup>9</sup>

### Drawing on cultural linguistics

I suggest that because the relationship between Australian Aborigines and White settlers has strong parallels with that between African people and Westerners, work done by Sharifian and his colleagues is of particular relevance to us. Malcolm (2017), one of Sharifian's colleagues, has made a detailed study of ways in which Aborigines use English. Use of English by Aborigines is enabling English "to carry ... cultural conceptualisations ... [using] the morphosyntactic system of another language" (2017:629). That is, Australian Aborigines use English as a substitute for their own languages, in a way that parallels the way they would speak in their own languages. Aborigines do not use Australian English as other Australians might. Instead "the course of the development of Aboriginal English may be seen from a cultural linguistic perspective, as driven by the need to give better expression to certain cultural conceptualisations. The rationalisation of English by Aboriginal speakers entail[s] the foregrounding of certain cultural conceptualisations which ... [are] ever-present in their consciousness and which ... [are] comparatively less salient in the other English to which they ... [are] exposed" (Malcolm 2017:644-645). Malcolm gives us an example. In Aboriginal English, we find, "the conceptual importance of reinforcing the interconnections of all things ever present ... [including] between language and the reality for which it stands," (2017:648). Hence "everything you see is my family," would be a typical Aboriginal comment (Bob Randall, cited by Malcolm (2017:648)).

Cultural linguistics builds on earlier work which tells us that language and its expression of meaning are inherently metaphorical (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), and that metaphors are inherently bodily (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). The latter is to say – that what metaphors express arises from human bodily forms, functions, and contexts. In fact, language is shaped by the whole of human cultural life (2017:52). Sharifian's "focus on meaning as conceptualisation" comes from "cognitive linguistics" (2015a:473). Derivation of meaning in bodily / cultural metaphor strongly "implies a rejection of [the] Cartesian body/mind dualism" long dominant in the West (Sharifian 2017:65). Descartes had conceived of the mind as having a distinct and abstract conceptualising function capable of comprehending universal absolutes. In the light of cultural linguistics, however, finding that the fundamental avenues of human thought are much more closely connected to our living circumstances, implies a much more bounded mental ability. That is to say – humans can only think humanly; Thought is never abstract; Outcomes of thought are not only biased by, but rather are defined by, our spatio-cultural existence.<sup>10</sup>

Sharifian and his colleagues give several examples of ways in which English is adapted for indigenous purposes. Already cited above, the English term *mother* is extended by Aborigines to include female relations who are not one's biological parent (Sharifian 2015a:484). Aboriginal people consider the land to be part of their community. Hence they can say "this land is us" or "this land is me" (Sharifian 2017:53). Shame is understood very differently in non-Western societies than in the West (2017:194). Aboriginal English is more profoundly rooted in spirituality than is Western English. For example, to "smoke someone" is in Aboriginal English to give them spiritual protection (Sharifian 2016b:8).

My own knowledge of an African language, Luo, and extended living in African community (since 1988) tells me that such spiritual rootedness, at least in parts of Africa, is very similar.<sup>11</sup> In the same vein Degani says of the Māori of New Zealand, that her explorations in cultural linguistics "demonstrate that the English language can serve as a vehicle for expressing Māori cultural conceptualisations [including *spiritual* conceptualisations] *when it is used by Māori people who have knowledge of Māori language and culture*" (my emphasis, Degani 2017:678).

The above kind of differences in language understanding can be perceived and even *measured* through evaluation of people's re-call and re-interpretation of stories they hear. Aboriginal people reading or hearing what were originally non-Aboriginal stories results in the triggering of indigenous schemas that are reflected in their re-telling of the stories. Many of these are in the area known in English as the *spiritual* (Sharifian 2017:42, and Sharifian et al 2012:59). Sharifian et al (2012:30) explains all this in some detail through comparison of responses to stories by Aboriginal as against other Standard Australian English users.

These kinds of conceptualisations are crucial for mutual understanding. English speakers who do not share knowledge of Māori, Aboriginal or Luo language and culture might be unaware of the potential for miscommunication even if language is one, i.e. English. An "unfamiliarity with Aboriginal cultural schemas informing Aboriginal English can lead to miscommunication," (Sharifian 2015a:486). "Unfamiliarity with cultural differences that exist between cultural varieties of English can have damaging and even irreparable consequences" (Sharifian 2011:72, already cited above). For example, the English term "medicine" being understood as "spiritual power" results in much "miscommunication between Aboriginal and non-aboriginal speakers" (Sharifian 2017:56/7).<sup>12</sup>

Miscommunication often "appears to be the result of unfamiliarity on the part of non-Aboriginal speakers with cultural conceptions that underlie the use of Aboriginal English," (Sharifian 2017:197). Peeters et al. looks at "cross-cultural pragmatic failure" that arises from differences in ways in which language is conceptualised (2013c:vi). Sometimes the peculiar conceptualisation of a language might have been shaped in distant history. As a result, it might no longer be at all evident to people who do not share that history (Sharifian 2017:22). For an example of such see Sharifian (2017:93/4).

Cultural linguistics brings to light new problems and new solutions – aspects of the interaction of language and culture that "until now have not been visible" (Sharifian 2015b:16). This should help to enlighten us about shortcomings of international languages. Yes, people can learn them and use them. However – even those who learn international languages fluently and *sound like* native-speakers, might operate from very different cultural conceptualisations. This even in use of common terms such as "family, home and shame" (Sharifian 2017:194).<sup>13</sup>

The mismatch of cultural conceptions extends to the non-local. Much global communication is of news items, editorials, and human interest stories, many of which are broadcast over the media. Sharifian implicitly asks; is this kind of discourse on neutral ground? Some, including presumably many journalists, might suppose that it is. Sharifian finds rather that "Political discourse is heavily entrenched in cultural conceptualisations" (2017:168).

Even mathematics, perhaps supposed as the most objective discipline one can find, is subject to cultural conceptualisations, such that people of minority cultures studying maths find themselves "studying a field of knowledge which has been developed through another world-view" (Barton and Frank 2001:146). "Worldviews construct the complex and flexible frameworks within which we think and feel," Peeters (2013b:252). There is no *neutral* discourse. All discourse is subject to conceptualisations. So much so, that Sharifian proposes that Cultural Linguistics, to facilitate international communication, provide guides for dictionary making (Sharifian 2017:188). Yet language learners typically "gain an early awareness of the cultural values and communication norms of those whose languages they are learning [by] immersion" (Peeters et al, 2013a:4), not from dictionaries.

### **General implications**

Sharifian's insights throw light onto race issues. To conceal conceptualisations used by *immigrants* to the West to avoid being racist is to foreclose on the possibility of such conceptualisations being recognised, responded to, or addressed. This is an enormous issue that I cannot pretend to address adequately in this short article alone. It is having extensive ramifications throughout the developing and developed world.<sup>14</sup>

With respect to Aborigines in Australia, Sharifian advocates for what I would term a *stretching of* English. He suggests that English teaching ought to be able to incorporate the worldview and conceptual implications of the use of English by Aborigines (Sharifian et al 2012:59-60). It should be

understood, then, that *mother* could be inclusive of one's maternal aunts, as well as being exclusive to one's biological mother. Shame should be taken as a strong deterministic emotion, at the same time as being recognised as a much weaker emotion, as in the modern West. There should be no perceived anomaly in saying "we are the land," and so on. That is – English should lose its specificity. Unfortunately – it seems to me – this would mean that when Australians talk together they will not necessarily know what they are talking about.<sup>15</sup> Many commentators on *world Englishes* fail to realise how problematic it is for English to mean more and more different things to more and more different people.<sup>16</sup>

Jenkins suggests that native-English speakers may be disadvantaged in a world of globalised English, considering them "the world's worst communicators."<sup>17</sup> In order to aid communication with people who use simplified English, native English speakers should self-dummify, so to speak. They should "simplify," according to Rob Steggle.<sup>18</sup> As in continental-Europe, the arena of Jenkins' particular interest, Native-English speakers who travel to Anglophone Africa should presumably also un-learn then re-learn their English, if this is possible?

If the above is not possible, then the creation of new-Englishes around the world could be interfering with clear communication, at least on the side of native-English speakers. Native English is, for international use, according to Jenkins, illegitimate. It leads to mis-communication. Native-English speakers then should, while presumably maintaining their native-English for home use, also have another *language*, which is also English, but is for international use. The cultural conceptualisations of these two should be kept distinct.<sup>19</sup>

Given the growing dominance of world-Englishes, should native English speakers learn *another English* as their second language?<sup>20</sup> Are courses available to help one to do so? Alternatively, should one learn an English that is *conceptualisation-free*, so that listeners can understand it literally, then interpret in the light of their communities' conceptualisations when they go home? Is it possible to speak in a way that is conceptualisation-free? Perhaps then global-English is spreading more darkness than light? Perhaps global communication would be better served by *old-fashioned* translation? The use of English globally supposedly does away with the need for translation. In the light of our discoveries, however, it does not do that. One reason inter-language translation is difficult is exactly because it must take account of differences in conceptualisations. Cultural conceptualisations effectively ignored in use of global English may be too important to ignore.

The appropriation by one people of the language of another is fraught with opportunities for miscommunication. Many African countries have adopted a European language for business, education, and other formal purposes. This has been aided by European powers sponsoring and subsidising their languages, such that, according to McKay, it has become "imperative" to use English to gain access to "the global community for economic development" (2002:17). Such advisability ignores the importance of native conceptualisations that Sharifian points us to. Clearly, ignorance of conceptualisations used by native English speakers will handicap the communicative efforts of non-native speakers of English. This contributes to African people remaining protégés of others (Tshehla 2002:19).

### **Implications for Christian mission and the Church**

Missionaries who endeavour to learn a language for use in ministry or evangelism, should learn it with its conceptualisations. This requires immersion experience in the local community. It remains an open question whether it is even possible to hold two different languages with two distinct sets of conceptualisations in one's head, at one time. There is much evidence that bi-lingualism is possible, but is *bi-conceptualism* possible? To do away with one's own cultural suppositions to enable one to accurately perceive foreign conceptualisations other than as a variant of one's own, is a difficult task. In fact, it might be an impossible task.

It has in recent decades or centuries been thought that European languages' inter-cultural relevance lies in their being overtly rooted in *secular* foundations. Secularism has been considered to be the universal that is more or less realised when one does away with *religions*. It was thought that people would do away with religion, as the world was becoming secular. English, being rooted in a secular foundation, then, might have been considered a legitimate vehicle for inter-cultural

communication. These days though, “religion” no longer being considered to be a universal category that can be “put-aside” (Nongbri 2013:2) raises questions regarding the universality of secularism. Indeed, in today’s world, there seem to be many secularisms (Calhoun et al 2011).<sup>21</sup> Yet, if secularism is not universal, then what is universal? What is universal I suggest is God, i.e. religion in the traditional sense of *faith in Christ*.<sup>22</sup> Mutual belief in God, not mutual belief in secularism, might enable effective international and intercultural communication, albeit best it not be done through use of one language.<sup>23</sup>

We have learned above that the globalisation of English makes it more difficult for native-English speakers to communicate accurately with non-Western peoples. On this basis, native-English speaking missionaries therefore have a more difficult task than that of non-native speakers. While the globalisation of English has made it easier for native-English speakers to simply use their own language, even when in a vastly different cultural context, their use of that language handicaps them. Important indigenous cultural conceptualisations used by the people who don’t think and act from a western context are inadvertently missed. Everyone chats along merrily in English. The words and even sentence structure they are using are like a veneer concealing numerous very different ways of being in the world. Penetrating through this veneer of largely school-learned English might require moving away from the more educated to the poorer grass-roots of the church. It might mean bypassing structures set up by government and mission,<sup>24</sup> that would prevent grass-roots interaction. In a sense, the missionary may need to push the reset button and begin again, by engaging with people using their languages, learned from them through a process of immersion into their way of life.

Indigenous people are likely to be unfamiliar with the cultural conceptualisations that are needed to produce and express theology(s) that can satisfy the West. As a result, they might have to regurgitate what they have been taught relatively undigested. Efforts at helping them to master Western theology could conceivably be thwarting the development of a meaningful indigenous understanding of God. God himself, I believe, is not so ignorant of people’s cultural conceptualisations. He intends to communicate with people in relation to and in the light of their conceptualisations. To be used by God, a missionary should learn to do the same.

The cultural-conceptual gap between Africa, Australian Aboriginals, the Māori, and the West, has grown vast. That is a gap to be bridged, and not to be ignored. Sharifian's work points us towards the need for understanding until recently barely perceived. That requires long-term missionary service and theological education to be carried out in indigenous languages, having been *designed* using those languages.

## Conclusion

This article has looked at Christian mission, with a focus on theological education, in the light of recent studies of cultural linguistics, especially as carried out by Farzad Sharifian and colleagues. Foreign-subsidised theological Education having in recent decades in much of the majority world been engaged predominantly in English and other European languages, has resulted in a lack of local relevance. When subsidy is cut theological education programmes often collapse.

Cultural linguistics explains outcomes until recently shrouded in fog. It does this by enabling the identification of a level of language-understanding that has been widely ignored. It shows how *conceptualisation* of terms in a language follows the culture of the community using it. Hence African, Aboriginal, and Māori English cultural conceptualisations are sufficiently different from those of Western English to significantly shift understanding of their Englishes.

While Sharifian and other authors advocate for what I have called a *stretching* of English, this article makes the case that insights arising from cultural linguistics ought to make us realise that the use of one language across cultures results in loss of functionality. For purposes of theological education and Christian mission, use of indigenous languages appears to be an essential prerequisite to achieving accuracy in communication.

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1 <http://www.springer.com/series/14294>

2 There is an issue amongst protagonists of Cultural Linguistics, as to whether or not the term should be capitalised (Peeters 2017:507). For purposes of this article, I do not insist that it be capitalised.

3 The puzzle I refer to, is that of the derivation of meaning from language in the light of a context: Meaning being affected by the cultural context in which language is used, how can it be clear to someone not sharing that context?

4 I am not claiming that this is openly stated as a belief or position. I am suggesting that it is an implicit implication of much contemporary mission practice from the West to Africa, that predominantly happens through the medium of Western and not African languages, especially through English.

5 See <https://www.globaluniversity.edu> for an example

6 Such *sustainable* engagement is in practical terms very difficult given contemporary domination, including financial domination, from outside of Africa.

7 Gifford explains this for the Roman Catholic church, which I suggest is not very different from many other Western-mission led churches: “The list of [church aid agencies bringing money to Africa] is virtually endless, and the extent of Western funding is virtually impossible to discover as so much is invisible as it is personal” (Gifford 2015:93).

8 In a church known to me in Kenya, the rank of clergy is indicated by the colours of the shirts they wear in their church uniforms (non-liturgical clerical dress). This rank is determined by the level of education. That education is almost all in English. That which is not, is translated from English.

9 I was involved in two programmes, one of which used indigenous languages, which has since closed.

10 For example, that ‘up’ is associated with happiness, and ‘down’ with its opposite, is illustrated by the following phrases: “I’m feeling up. That boosted my spirits. My spirits rose. You’re in high spirits. Thinking about her always gives me a lift. I’m feeling down. I’m depressed. He’s really low these days. I fell into a depression. My spirits sank” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:16).

11 Wilson (1961) outlines many aspects of Luo customary law, and thus in effect points to the kinds of cultural conceptualisations referred to by Sharifian.

12 While it is true that in interactive learning, doing theology, and practical ministry, there is space for negotiation and clarification of what terms mean, such negotiation and clarification is unlikely to shift as major a language as English, especially when it occurs on the periphery – i.e. with non-native English speakers of African origin. As a result, while participants in a particular discussion at a particular time and place can learn that words should not be taken as meaning what they seem to mean, such learning is lost when the same language is re-used elsewhere.

13 In theology additional interpretive issues arise from denomination, background, tradition, and so forth.

14 I have addressed this issue in more depth in Harries (2011).

15 This position is not unique to Sharifian. Many commentators on ‘world Englishes’ are similarly commenting on how English will continue to be used for intercultural communication, and even intra-cultural communication, even though they mean more and more different things to more and more different people (see for example McKay 2002:12).

16 See for example Jenkins (2006:140): “From a world Englishes’ perspective deviations from NS’ [native speakers’] norms thus become linguistically interesting (but otherwise neutral) ‘differences’ rather than ‘deficits’.”

17 <http://www.bbc.com/capital/story/20161028-native-english-speakers-are-the-worlds-worst-communicators>

18 Cited by Jenkins: <http://www.bbc.com/capital/story/20161028-native-english-speakers-are-the-worlds-worst-communicators>

19 I am very aware that not all scholars will agree with Jenkins. I think however she makes a very important point.

20 Although much debated in the industry, native-English is taken as 'standard' by many learners of English around the globe, many East Africans certainly being a case in point (Kanyoro 1991:403).

21 Contributors to this volume edited by Calhoun et al, define secularism in many different ways, varying especially from country to country, outside of the West.

22 From Cavanaugh (2009:64), early use of the term 'religion' referred to Christians who had taken monastic vows.

23 There are other issues that weigh against the global use of one language that I do not have space to enter into here.

24 Government policy in many African countries requires English to be used in all formal education.