



## **Linguistics & Leadership: How to Use Language as a Bridge**

Kristin Van Engen, Assistant Professor of Psychological & Brain Sciences and Linguistics at Washington University in St. Louis

### **Session 1: What is linguistics, and why do we care?**

What is linguistics? What does God have to say about language? In this first session, Professor Van Engen helps us understand why we as Christians should care about language, as well as how linguistics can help us understand unknown information.

*Language is a fundamental part of being human.*

### **Key Terms**

**Linguistics:** The scientific study of human language and how it works.

**Prescriptive Rules:** Social conventions that govern how language should be used, often based on societal norms.

**Mental Grammar:** The rules in the minds of speakers that dictate the way language is used.

### **Main Points**

- Language is a fascinating aspect of God's creation that He is interested in and curious about.
- Linguistics is the scientific study of human language, and linguists are primarily interested in understanding how language works, regardless of whether its use matches the norms of society.
- Much of our knowledge of language is implicit, and this can affect the way we perceive and treat people who speak differently from us.



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### **Session 1: What is linguistics, and why do we care? (cont.)**

#### **Content Questions**

- Had you previously thought of language as something that God cares about?
- In what ways have you observed language connecting or dividing people? How often is it based on societal norms? What about implicit knowledge?
- How might understanding language better help you connect to people in the Church?

#### **Application Questions**

- Consider the ways that your Christian community engages with language. If language is something that God cares about, how should the Church think about it? How can you lead your Christian community to consider language and care about how it is used and understood?
- What barriers do you see that keep Christians from using language well? Which of these issues might be widespread? Which ones are more specific to your community?



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### **Session 2: Languages, Dialects, and Accents**

What are the differences between languages, dialects, and accents? In this session, Professor Van Engen defines and describes the different language varieties that we all use—whether we realize it or not.

*Nobody gets to not have a dialect or not have an accent. You have one, it's just different from someone else's*

### **Key Terms**

**Language:** A spoken or signed communication system shared by a speech community.

**Dialect:** A spoken or signed communications system used by a speech community, often further defined along regional or social lines.

**Accent:** The way a language is pronounced; the phonetic and phonological aspects of variation within a language.

**Mutual Intelligibility:** The ability of two speakers of different language varieties to understand each other.

### **Main Points**

- If you use a language, you have a dialect, and you have an accent.
- No language variety is linguistically superior to another. Each one is a valid, rule-governed form of communicating.
- In the Bible, linguistic diversity is celebrated and included in God's kingdom.



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### **Session 2: Languages, Dialects, and Accents (cont.)**

#### **Content Questions**

- What languages, dialects, and accents exist in your community?
- What dialect do you speak? How would you describe your accent?
- What do people think of as the “standard dialect” in your community? Who speaks it? How do you think people with “non-standard dialects” are viewed in your community?

#### **Application Questions**

- Consider the ways language, dialects, and accents are thought of in your Christian community. Is linguistic diversity accepted? Is it celebrated? In what ways can you provide leadership on this issue? What conversations could you start that might move your community closer to the vision of language we see in scripture?
- What judgments do you tend to make about those who use different language varieties from you? For example, if you speak what is considered a “standard” American dialect and accent, what goes through your head when listening to someone with a Southern accent or someone who speaks AAVE (African-American Vernacular English)?



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### **Session 3: Variation Within Languages**

How do speakers of the same language differ in how they use it? In this session, Professor Van Engen demonstrates how even when speakers share a language, there can be significant and legitimate differences.

*Change in language  
is inevitable.*

#### **Key Terms**

Phonetics and Phonology: The way we produce the sounds of language.

Lexicon and Morphology: The words we use and how they are formed.

Syntax: The way words are put together.

Semantics: What words mean.

Aspect marker: A linguistic element that signals how a state of affairs extends over time.

#### **Main Points**

- Variation within a language is totally natural, and it's found in all languages.
- Many factors influence variation, including regionality, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, and gender.
- Languages are always changing. Humans continually innovate, name new things, change the way they put words together, and change how they pronounce them.



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### **Session 3: Variation Within Languages (cont.)**

#### **Content Questions**

- What word do you use...soda, pop, or Coke?
- How does language vary within your community?
- Do you find it hard to understand/connect with people who vary from you in dialect?
- How might being aware of linguistic differences help people feel more comfortable?

#### **Application Questions**

- How does language variation affect your Christian community? How is variation (or a lack thereof) dealt with? How can you lead others to think about variation as something that is natural and legitimate?
- Think about a time when variation in language has made a situation more difficult for you. If you're with a group, share that experience, and discuss whether these kinds of experiences might be happening at your church or other Christian community.



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### **Session 4: Communicating in a Second Language**

There's a lot that goes into communicating in a second language. In this final session, Professor Van Engen details a few ways that speaking in a second language is more difficult than we might think, and encourages us to lean on grace, humility, and understanding when trying to communicate across languages, especially in the Church.

*Communication is so important within the Church and within society.*

#### **Main Points**

- The Bible has a lot to say about welcoming the stranger, and one marker of being a stranger is having a foreign accent.
- Speakers of a second language carry the rules of their first language with them, often without knowing it.
- It takes an extra amount of effort to communicate in and understand someone speaking in a second language.
- Christians should bring grace and patience to situations with non-native language speakers. Both parties need to work together to make communication successful.

#### **Content Questions**

- How does your church/community interact with people who speak another language?
- How could understanding the struggles of speaking a second language help us welcome the stranger as the Bible calls us to do?
- What ways could you and your community go out of the way to welcome those who may not be native speakers of your language?
- Do you usually interpret a foreign accent as a sign of strength? How might that change how you see others?



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### **Session 4: Communicating in a Second Language (cont.)**

#### **Application Questions**

- As this course comes to an end, consider the holistic language environment in your Christian community: how languages vary within themselves, what dialects and accents are spoken, the treatment of those who speak other languages, etc. How can you and those in your community take the lessons of Professor Van Engen and lead others to reflect the realities of language and the way God reveals his love of language in scripture and creation?
- Think about what steps your church can take to welcome the stranger through language. Would adding a service in another language help people access your church? What about having interpretation options in the main service? Does everyone who leads your services from week to week speak the same language/dialect/accent? Could that be making it harder for people to participate in worship? If applicable, decide on a next step to explore for your community to help create a more welcoming linguistic environment.