Abstract

Hospitality involves receiving others as guests in a way that makes friends of foreigners. As an expression of the heart of God, hospitality is a crucial means of accomplishing the mission of God. After briefly exploring the theme of hospitality in the Bible and in missiological and translation literature, this paper considers how hospitality—and the lack of it—are expressed in attitudes and behaviors related to language. Individuals, communities, and whole societies may exercise welcoming, unwelcoming, or even hostile behavior toward the linguistic “other”. People, and their languages, flourish in environments of safety and welcome. The concept of linguistic hospitality provides a fitting and motivating framework for those working in minority language community contexts, even as its practice provides a means for modelling and advancing meaningful development, education and engagement with Scripture. The paper concludes with suggested ways individuals, communities and larger societies can practice linguistic hospitality.

Introduction

The word “hospitality” stirs up varying images in the mind. A business-minded person may think of freebies a company provides to attract and keep customers. Indeed, there is an entire “hospitality industry” focused on hotels, recreation, entertainment, and food and drink. More relationally oriented individuals may think of inviting friends for dinner or providing overnight accommodations for visitors from out of town. The concept carries deeper meaning in stories from the Bible where it includes welcoming strangers and foreigners, and protecting and providing for those in need. As a major theme in the Bible, hospitality provides a framework for interpreting its grand narrative. Such a framework illuminates the mission of God—all that He does in order to reconcile all things to Himself through Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:20). God is the source and chief initiator of His mission, and His people are invited—much like guests—to participate. The hospitable God who lives in eternal trinitarian fellowship meets our most basic needs and welcomes us—former strangers and aliens—into belonging and community with Him. A framework of hospitality can be both illuminating and

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motivating for those interested in advancing meaningful development, education and engagement with Scripture. After briefly considering the concept of hospitality in everyday experience, in the Bible, in missiology and in translation literature, this paper focuses on attitudes and practices characterized as “linguistic hospitality” at the individual, community and societal level, and concludes with ways we can employ hospitality as participants in God’s mission.

Hospitality--a deeper look

Most of us have memorably experienced hospitality at one time or another in the form of “friendly reception.” We thus know that hospitable hosts greet and treat guests in ways that make them feel welcome, comfortable, and provided for. Thoughtful hosts often go out of their way to find out more about their guests’ specific likes and dislikes. Good hosts provide a safe environment where their guests feel valued--where they will know they are seen, heard, accepted, without being subject to undue scrutiny or unmerited judgment. And good guests, having their needs met and more, recognize when the time has come to express appreciation and move on!

Hospitality in the Bible

The Bible includes all of the foregoing aspects of “welcome and friendly reception”. Murphy (2015:3) points out that “hospitality [in the Bible] is two dimensional; it is both an inner disposition of the heart and a concrete outworking of the hands. It is both attitude and act, both sentimental and ethical.” One of the best known, most frequently cited examples of hospitality in the Bible is from Genesis 18:1-10, where the Lord appears to Abraham through the appearance of three guests. Abraham hurries to meet his guests, provides water and a comfortable resting place for them, and asks them to allow him to prepare for them a meal. The guests agree, and through this provision and reception of hospitality both parties are blessed. The guests delight in communion with Abraham, and Abraham hears from the Lord. This theme of mutual blessing continues throughout the Old Testament accounts of hospitality. Rahab and her family clearly benefited from her reception of the Israelite spies (Joshua 2). The widow who sacrificially received Elijah received a miraculous, continuing supply of oil and flour (1 Kings 17:7-24). And the barren woman and her husband who built a special room for Elisha were granted a son (2 Kings 4:8-37).

In these and other passages, an added emphasis on hospitality throughout the Bible is on treating foreigners or strangers as guests, not just one’s friends and relatives--and caring for the needs of the vulnerable. Pohl (1999:16) notes that “The distinctive quality of Christian hospitality is that it offers a generous welcome to the ‘least,’ without concern for advantage or benefit to the host”. It is instructive that the word for hospitality in the New Testament is φιλοξενία, which translates literally

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4 See definition 1, https://www.dictionary.com/browse/hospitality?s=t
as ‘love of the foreigner’. Jesus gave specific instructions to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and
the blind to one’s banquet—those who particularly could not repay the favor—and then the host would
be blessed (Luke 14:13-14). In the epistles, all believers are urged to “practice hospitality” (Rom 12:13)
and reminded that in so doing, some have received angels without knowing it (Heb 13:2). Hospitality
was a requirement for leaders in the church (I Timothy 3:2), and even for those widows who expected
to receive help from the church (I Timothy 5:9-10). The early church grew in depth and in numbers
through the exercise of hospitality, as the traveling Apostles and other teachers depended on the
hospitality of those to whom they were sent.

Hospitality in Missiology

From a missiological perspective, hospitality is based on love for the stranger, and ultimately
grounded in God’s love for and redemption of His creation. God’s love for his (now estranged) creation
and invitation into communion with himself is evident from Genesis 1 onward. The hospitality of God
in his mission is most clearly seen in Christ’s supreme sacrifice on the cross. Theologian Hans Boersma
declares that “the cross should be understood, first and foremost, as an act of hospitality” that
“represents an opening up of God’s very self to a world that has closed itself off from the divine
embrace” (Kaemingk 2018:182). The hospitality of God is foregrounded again in Revelation 19, where
all Christ’s beloved are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb.

Pohl (1999:8) claims that “Hospitality as a framework provides a bridge which connects our theology
with daily life and concerns.” Describing hospitality as “a lens through which we can read and
understand much of the gospel,” she adds that it is “a practice by which we can welcome Jesus
himself.” In her fuller treatment of hospitality as a Christian tradition, she notes that concerns about
hospitality to needy strangers gave rise to hospitals, hospices and hospitals. She also notes with
regret that as these institutions gradually became more professionalized through the ages, they
became less understood as a part of one’s personal life and moral obligations. Volf (1996) has
famously declared the centrality and applicability of God’s hospitality in these words: “God’s
reception of hostile humanity into divine communion is a model of how human beings should relate
to the other.” Boersma echoes his agreement that “Christ’s death and resurrection constitute the
ultimate expression of God’s hospitality and form the matrix for an understanding of all God’s actions
and as such the normative paradigm for human actions.” (Boersma 2006: 26)

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Christ himself is, of course, the ultimate model for both guest and host. Christ came as a guest and foreigner, born in a manger in Bethlehem, remarkably dependent on the hospitality of others for the span of his earthly life. At the same time, Christ served as the ultimate host, welcoming the poor and needy, calling out to all who hunger and thirst, bidding all who are tired and weary to come to him and find their true home.

We see that “hospitality” is a pervasive and powerful theme in the Bible and in missiology. How has this theme been applied to language-related issues?

Hospitality in Translation Studies and Bible Translation

The earliest published use of the phrase “linguistic hospitality” that this author can find is from an address delivered in 1997 by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, entitled “Translation as challenge and source of happiness.” Ricoeur concludes his address with the claim that a translator’s only happiness can come in accepting the notion of correspondence without total adequacy. Linguistic hospitality, he says, characterizes this realm “where the pleasure of dwelling in the other’s language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home, in one’s own welcoming house.”

Ricoeur noted the applicability of such an ethical model of hospitality to the spheres of politics and religion. Kearney (2019) explicates Ricoeur’s notion of linguistic hospitality as involving “a mediation between host and guest languages, [involving] a double duty … to remain faithful to one’s own language while remaining attentive to the novelty of the foreigner’s.” In order to avoid the “extremes of linguistic hegemony or humiliation,” Kearney continues, a good translator takes “the middle road of ‘linguistic hospitality’ where one honors both host and guest languages equally while resisting the take-over of one by the other.”

From the field of translation studies, and following Ricoeur, Maxey (2011) explored the metaphor of Bible translation as hospitality. Reckoning that there are few themes in the Bible so evocative and life-giving, he found it especially productive for helping understand Bible translation as more than just a linguistic activity--that is, one crucially involving cultural mediation, identities and power relations. Maxey expressed a preference for the concept of “host” community or language in place of the traditional “target” community or language. He also noted that simply identifying who is “guest” and who is “host” could become complex in Bible translation, even as in the biblical Emmaus story there is

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the complexity of the stranger who becomes the host at table to those who initially invited him in. Maxey (2013) further explored Bible translation as hospitality, pointing out that the metaphor may not always yield the “cozy expectation” of warmth and invitation. He pointed out that tensions can still arise between hosts and guests. Looking at contemporary Bible translation as an enterprise where translators typically come from the majority world with a great deal of power remaining in the hands of Western agencies, he recognized that an obliged host can become more of a hostage, while so-called guests who dominate the host exhibit unwelcome behavior. It is indeed possible, he said, to have “hostile hosts” and “unruly guests.”

Linguistic hospitality and its practices

Having reviewed the theme of hospitality in the Bible and its use in missiology, as well as the use of the term “linguistic hospitality” in translation studies and in the field of Bible translation, it is instructive to see how others have employed the term. Pasquale and Bierma (2011:21) begin with the biblical injunction to love the foreigner, explaining that “Loving and welcoming the foreigner includes welcoming the foreigner’s culture and language. In practicing linguistic hospitality,” they continue, “we are doing just that: making room for the languages of others, welcoming those languages, and acknowledging that language is a vital aspect of a speaker’s identity.” They later note (2011:64) that hospitality should apply to dialects as well as languages: “What linguistic hospitality should involve is a tolerance of, interest in, and celebration of other dialects as legitimate linguistic expression, and as part of a larger tapestry of a language.” Kenmogne applies the term in a very similar way when he states to participants preparing for SIL International’s ICON meeting in 2020, “We need, in this world, to be exercising a bit more of what I have called ‘linguistic hospitality’, where we learn to create room for all the languages that people actually use.” In 2019, Kenmogne spoke of hospitality more broadly, yet referring to the same kinds of attitudes and actions, when he urged: “Let us envision a new day in education which is marked by a new form of cultural and educational hospitality, in which inclusive classrooms acknowledge the first language of each child, maximise the potential for all to succeed, preserve their identity, and contribute to a global community that maintains the richness of its cultural diversity.”

With these various and contemporary uses of the term in mind, I suggest the following as a minimal operational definition: “One practices linguistic hospitality by receiving others in ways that attend to their linguistic repertoire with respect to their identity and communicative needs.” Linguistic hospitality can be practiced in overlapping ways by individuals, communities and societies at large. Let’s look at each, in turn.

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15 “Linguistic repertoire” refers to the range of language varieties that can be employed by an individual or community. It may include one or more dialects of one or more languages.
Individual

On the individual level, one can practice linguistic hospitality by attending to the linguistic repertoire of others in ways that make them feel welcome and help lead to mutual effective communication. This begins by acknowledging the linguistic repertoire of the other. When the repertoire of one’s interlocutor varies from one’s own, exercising linguistic hospitality may be as simple as speaking slowly, enunciating carefully, using basic vocabulary and avoiding expressions and figures of speech that require a great amount of “insider knowledge” to interpret. These are all things any speaker can do with minimal effort, once aware of the need or benefit. Going further, individuals can offer practical assistance to help others understand and/or communicate in general or in particular situations. An example of this kind of linguistic hospitality might be to become a language tutor or “language friend” to someone seeking to learn a language that you know. Whether or not the participants in a conversation share the same repertoire, a large part of linguistic hospitality involves learning to listen well and speak graciously.

Community

A community can be defined as an identifiable group of individuals who share a given trait. A language community is thus defined as all the people who use a particular language. “Bird-watchers” might be another kind of community. Perhaps the most common way of defining a community is the set of people who live in a neighborhood or local geographic area which leads to a common identity. Different kinds of organizations and associations sometimes refer to their members as forming a community, and thereby seeking to promote a sense of shared identity, closeness and commitment. Communities practice linguistic hospitality in much the same way as individuals do. They attend to the linguistic repertoire of their members in ways that respect their identity and seek to help meet their basic communicative needs. Figure 1 below shows a striking expression of linguistic hospitality from the author’s own physical neighborhood. Written in the languages of three major sectors of the population in our city and state (if not in our immediate community), it is an explicit statement directed at those who do not use the majority language of English as their first or only language, as well as to those who do.
Communities of all kinds can exercise linguistic hospitality by making information as accessible as possible and interaction as successful as possible in all the languages represented by their members.

Societal

Linguistic hospitality on a societal level is practiced not only by individuals and communities, but is also reflected (or not) in the practices, policies and laws of the land. Educational policies that welcome and build on experience in the languages of the learner are examples of linguistic hospitality. Language learning classrooms, in particular, can be special places where hospitality is practiced, others are valued, and methods and attitudes are modeled that build on respect and lead toward greater understanding, seeking to bless while being blessed. Efforts to provide critical information to all citizens and residents of a country in a language they can understand, as well as providing interpretation for legal, medical and other services are practices of linguistic hospitality that contribute to the common good of the whole society. On a national scale, official recognition of languages—whether or not they are granted official or national status—is also an act of linguistic hospitality.

Opposites of linguistic hospitality

Unfortunately, it is almost easier to find examples of the lack of linguistic hospitality than it is to define its presence. What does this lack look like?

Perhaps the most obvious opposite of hospitality in general is hostility—a decidedly unfriendly reception of guests or strangers. Ill will toward others, especially those who are markedly other in some way, is common in our broken, fallen world. We naturally suspect and fear the stranger. This combination of fear and suspicion naturally manifests itself in language attitudes and behavior. How many times, when we cannot understand what someone is saying in another language, do we

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presume that the content is negative or hostile towards us? This kind of fear may make us want to prevent the use of other languages. The directive to “speak English!” (or whatever language) then comes more as a threat instead of an invitation to dialog.

The phenomenon of negative attitudes toward particular language varieties leading to formal and informal policies against their use is common throughout history. While it may be permissible in some situations to restrict the use of a certain language--for example, when a foreign language teacher discourages the use of languages other than the one being studied in the classroom--to do so across the board in educational or other contexts can also be an act of oppression. One of the more memorable acts of linguistic oppression in recent history was the establishment of schools for native American children in the 19th and early 20th centuries, where the explicit purpose was to extinguish the indigenous language of culture of children forcibly removed from their families in order to assimilate or “educate” them into the surrounding dominant Euro-American culture of the United States.17 Although it was possible to come up with high-minded, honorable-sounding rationale for such forced programs, we now look back with shame and horror on the violence and injury done.

Explicit hostility is a clear form of inhospitality. A more subtle form is neglect. Failing to recognize the presence and value of the other can, in the long run, become as damaging as outright hostility. There is a neglect born of unintentional ignorance of the other, a neglect born of “willful refusal to acknowledge” the presence and value of the other, and a long continuum between the two. On a personal level, we are probably all “innocently unaware” of the situation of many of our neighbors and their linguistic needs. How can we be held responsible for what we have never seen or known? But there is also the possibility of self-absorption to the point that we willfully disregard the presence and value of our neighbor, thus escaping any sense that we might be called on to help meet their need. The sign in Figure 1 above is a clear attempt to acknowledge the presence and value of others. Those who intentionally ignore, or worse yet seek to prevent others from seeing or attending to the needs of others, engaging in another form of inhospitality.

Summary and Suggested Actions

Hospitality--the friendly reception of the other--is at the heart of God’s mission. Hospitality is an expression of the heart of God and provides a framework for understanding his mission and a motivating model for our interaction with others, especially for those interested in furthering meaningful development, education and Scripture engagement among the language communities of the world. Linguistic hospitality refers to receiving others in ways that attend to their linguistic repertoire with respect to their identity and communicative needs. We have very briefly reviewed what this looks like on an individual, organizational and societal level. I conclude here with just a few suggestions for those who desire to practice linguistic hospitality.

17 These sorts of schools have their counterparts in many countries beyond the US, including Canada, Australia, the former Soviet Union, and more.
Individually, we can recognize the value of all people as being made in God’s image by recognizing the language varieties they speak as expressions of themselves and as intricate, legitimate means of communication. We can be friendly toward the use of other languages, resolving not to assume ill will or intent when we cannot understand what is being said. We can resolve to speak carefully and graciously, especially with those who do not fully share our linguistic repertoire. Further, we can take positive steps to help others understand information and express their identity, needs and desires when we share the same language environment but not the same linguistic repertoire.

On a community or organizational level, we can first and foremost practice linguistic hospitality by recognizing the value of our individual members and their linguistic repertoire. We can find ways to make information more easily accessible, and participation in community life more possible and effective. This will include such things as allowing for the most effective languages of communication to be used in different contexts. Practically, it means at least making important information accessible in languages of wider communication that serve the community. It further means encouraging and fostering language and culture learning on the part of both “guests” and “hosts”, however those roles are determined in different contexts.

On a societal level, we begin by being individuals and communities who practice linguistic hospitality. We promote attitudes and policies that recognize the value of all members of a society and that make room for different languages and cultures to thrive. We attend to the linguistic repertoire of the broader society as expressive of its members’ identity, and seek laws that make education and basic services accessible to all, as effectively as possible.

Those of us who are especially attuned to language issues and minority language communities will find special motivation in recognizing the centrality of hospitality in God’s mission, and special fulfillment in learning to practice linguistic hospitality in our own lives, in our organizations and communities, and in broader society.
References


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