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Preview Response

# HOW YOU TALK DETERMINES HOW YOU'RE TREATED

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I found this Brief on Justice stimulating and timely. This is a core issue for us as Christians and scholars. I do however feel some discomfort – for reasons I am not yet clear on in myself - about grounding justice primarily in 'rights'. This is not my area of expertise, but the rights discourse seems to run a risk of being rather egocentric, perhaps too much of a reflection of a Western Enlightenment focus on the individual. I wonder if a biblical approach to justice needs to be based more in Gospel concepts of doing to others as one would be done to, of care for the neighbour, of behaviour towards 'the stranger' (in Old Testament terms). I realize that Nicholas Wolterstorff frames rights in terms of giving them to others, but I feel there is something more to be said on orientations to self and other here.

In my field of sociolinguistics, language as used in society has a strong justice aspect. Individuals and societies make judgments on other individuals and groups on the basis of their language. How you talk affects how you are regarded. Language is always given a social value, whether that be prestigious (say, French in postcolonial contexts) or derogatory (say, African American English). These judgments are often the basis of social injustice. They may control the kind of job someone gets, or the school someone goes to.

Within the field of sociolinguistics, many scholars – and many of these are Christians – focus on language as a potential tool of disadvantage, for example in education. Language is often mentioned in human rights charters, and one approach within sociolinguistics field is even called 'Linguistic Human Rights'. This includes the linguistic dimensions of how individuals and groups are portrayed in media representations.

There are biblical examples of the operation of language injustice. The story of Babel has been used to classify multilingualism as a curse and denigrate it and its users as dysfunctional. The reactions to Peter's accent in John's account of Jesus' trial show the distinctiveness of the Galilean dialect – note that Peter and presumably Jesus both spoke with a socially marginalized and denigrated accent.

Sociolinguistics is one of those fields where interaction is absolutely central to its concerns – one approach is even called 'interactional sociolinguistics'. There can be no language without listeners as well as speakers, and interaction is the key site of study in the field, the main source of data, and a principal locus

of description and theorization.

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