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Changes in the Language of the Reformed Church in the Second Half of the 20th Century: The Convergence of Oral History and Big Data²

Abstract.

The author's journey begins with a deep immersion in his traditional Protestant faith, where he was taught to thoroughly know both the Old and the New Testament. As he reflects on his faith, the concept of being a "stranger and sojourner" comes to the forefront, highlighting the feeling of alienation within the secular world.

The narrative takes an interesting turn when the author discusses the impact of changing political language on his perspective. The introduction of new political ideas and discourse challenges the previously straightforward worldview, leading to a sense of uncertainty in decision-making. Believers find themselves in a world with a multiplicity of perspectives that require a re-evaluation of what it means to "deny" or to make choices.

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In a changing social and political context, the narrative continually explores the intricate connection between faith and language. The author's experiences and reflections provide a compelling insight into the complexities of navigating a shifting spiritual landscape while grappling with the ever-evolving meaning of words and beliefs.

The second half of the article presents the results of a computer analysis of the vocabulary of two Bible translations that defined the language usage of the Reformed Church in the second half of the 20th century: the 1908 Károli and the 1975 New Translation. The analysis focuses on words that present difficulties in understanding due to their archaic or religious nature. As a point of comparison, it also showcases the vocabulary of the Gospel of John, where a mere 199 word roots constitute 80% of word occurrences.

Keywords: language of the church, Bible translation, vocabulary of the Bible, letter and soul, protestant language use

Defining the Perspective

"I have received a traditional Protestant 'initiation' into religion. I had to brush through the Bible frequently from an early age, making no significant distinction between the Old and the New. It was advisable and required to know equally thoroughly, the inter-relationships and the logical-temporal connections. . .

It has confirmed and developed my endeavour to always try to understand everything abstract – or even beyond the real – through the filter of earth, man, emotion, and history. To parallel John, let's say, with the Book of Kings or the Book of Judges. The complexity of the context, in other respects too, was and remains more credible to me this way. I.e. if there were so many contradictions in the matching, so much distant strangeness between the elements, that the unity – event, system, whatever – could be made open. That is, alive."

I have recognized my older self in the lines written in 1977³ by Miklós Mészöly, one of the remarkable figures of 20th-century Hungarian literature. The linguistic – mental – religious world of the 1908 Károli translation became for me as real, or perhaps more certain than the world in which we lived, and which we could only live in with a certain detachment. The remaining movement groups subsisted mostly as caricatures of themselves from the past regime. I was still initiated as a “kisdobos” (drummer-boy) and then a pioneer (in the youth organizations of the communist state, small schoolchildren were compulsorily admitted to these youth organizations), we had leaders and a compulsory tie at school ceremonies, but by then there was no longer any ideology behind it, nor any threatening power behind the organization. Although the Methodist congregation had been present in the country for almost a hundred years, it was only a sect in the eyes of the Hungarians who were suspicious of anything new other than the established churches; the isolated world of this congregation, with its incomprehensible set of biblical concepts, with its rhythm of life, its Sundays, its holidays, the constancy of its people and, ultimately, its self-identity, was more real. Of course, let us add, I had no choice. Evening prayers, whether I wanted them or not, would reach the edge of my bed, my very own den, and family lunches, dinners and celebrations would be interspersed with a world of hymns, Bible readings, and prayer. It became my most personal world.

In the “world” – in the ecclesiastical use of the word –, I always felt like a guest, a stranger. This became for me a peculiar, but perhaps necessary, interpretation of the phrase in Leviticus: “the strangers and sojourners” (Lev 25:23).⁴ The knowledge of naming that I have learned in linguistics did not yet tame for me the strangeness encoded in language into sociolectics. I had no friends, no common language at school, the small-talk of classmates and friends did not offer a competitive alternative to the Bible-bound worldview, to the perspective which got deeply rooted in me after reading. It provided a structure in which there was up and down, there was good and evil, there was sin, and

³ MÉSZÖLY, Miklós (1977): Biblia – bibliák. In: Mészöly, Miklós: *A pille magánya*. Budapest, Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó. 103.

⁴ An instructive and very thorough analysis of this turn of events can be read by the literary historian Peter Dávidházi; see: DÁVIDHÁZI, Péter (2017): “Jövevények és zsellérek”. Egy bibliai fogalom pár nyomában. In: Dávidházi, Péter: *“Vagy jöni fog”. Bibliai minták nemzetiségítése a magyar költészetben*. Budapest, Ráció. 15–36.

there was righteousness, backed by the unquestionable authority of the Scripture, and the unattainable yet attainable reality of God, the one name described in so many words.⁵

It was in my adolescence that I became more closely acquainted with the Reformed Church although I was born into it on my mother's side. The church of the late 1980s was for me almost a step out into the world, surrounded by people who spoke my language and the language of the world at the same time; they were amazed to hear my homogeneous worldview emerging from my words, and I was amazed to hear their redundancies. It took me a long time to understand that the two halves were no more than a whole.

This was during the collapse of communism. We could see, think, and speak differently, we just were not able to. At home, we listened to Kálmán Cseri all day long on cassette tapes, the Reformed pastor of Pasarét in Budapest, and the old evangelist József Zimányi. Cseri was almost revered as a saint by many people, and I thought at the time that he called a spade a spade, even if he was too strict. Then I began to realize that he only called certain things by their names and kept quiet about others. A chessboard world featuring prophetic fervour. This was the meaning of unchangeable rules for me. But I did not enjoy Zimányi's evangelizing – it was always the same recipe: he would knock me down and then pull me out. Forgive me for my youthful critical judgement!

At that time, I was still banned from reading Esterházy, a labelled liberal writer, of words and thoughts that a good Christian was not even allowed to read. So, I did not know his precise description of this situation from *Harmonia*:

My father's mother taught him nothing but fine notions. She taught him that in the final analysis people are good and our Heavenly Father is watching over us. We must trust the world, and if someone throws a stone at us, we should repay him with bread. What follows from all this? The fact—and this lay at the heart of my grandmother's teaching—that bad words make no sense. They're empty. The bad that they posit does not exist.

⁵ Much later, I came across the great monograph on ritual by the American anthropologist Roy Rappaport, in which he gives a systematic description of the possible structure of the world interpretation produced by religious ritual (including, of course, the use of Scripture). RAPPAPORT, Roy A. (1999): *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. (Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology 110). Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 304–312.

When my father learned “bad” words from his village playmates, grandmother dragged him into the bathroom and, with some sadness and anger, would wash his mouth out with soap. My father couldn’t eat for days, and if he did, it came right back up. Then, when my father wasn’t even five yet, Grandmother passed away amid terrible suffering, her intestines got all tangled up and began to putrefy as if a horribly stinking animal were living inside her, like in a horror movie, and she became more and more one with this animal. They even had to move out of the house because of the smell. My grandfather was ashamed of grandmother dying, so they moved to another country, and my father was left high and dry with his torso of a vocabulary. He was incapable of saying anything bad about anyone because he lacked the words, and because he lacked them, he couldn’t think anything bad about them either. As a result, he was helpless. Others played tricks on him and laughed behind his back.⁶

As long as our religiosity also meant being anti-establishment, it was easy to accommodate our biblical worldview. Anything that did not comply with it, whether it was the remaining shreds of party ideology, evolutionism or materialism, was a lie, a fabrication, empty words without substance or meaning. How truly easy it is (on the linguistic representation of the world)⁷ to live in such a shadow culture! The simple Protestant life. The most important meaning-making factor was that it was essentially different, contrary to the worldview that was being taught. I well remember the anti-evolutionist lectures of the Adventist János Reisinger in the lobby of the then University of Horticulture: Faith as the negation of atheism.

And we felt it was a “created order” (we just could not name it that – P. S. since our synod adopted the term, we have a word for it), in which we agreed with that external worldview. Puritan sexual ethics was just the same. We did not have to deny it; we said the same things as the socialist propaganda, and somehow nobody was bothered. Likewise about the moral evaluation of work. The job title in the identity document as a proof of someone being a decent person, and the “K. M. K.”, the “notoriously unemployed person”. Like the Arnolfini couple in János Lackfi’s poem, we no longer

⁶ ESTERHÁZY, Péter (2000): *Harmonia Caelestis*. Budapest, Magvető. 69. English translation: ESTERHÁZY, Peter (2004): *Celestial harmonies*. Transl. by Judith Sollosy. New York, Ecco. 74.

⁷ Cf. BANCZEROWSKI, Janusz (2008): *A világ nyelvi képe. A világkép mint a valóság metaképe a nyelvben és a nyelvhasználatban*. Budapest, Tinta.

knew “with whom this or that happened”, whose values and meanings the other took on. The meaning of “peace”, for example, was politically defined at the time, but it grew on us well enough.⁸

I knew the verses of the Bible quite well, and I knew the explanation of many of them (at least that is how I thought of it at the time, singular, definite article). It was easy to find words, phrases, stories for my black and white youthful truths. In becoming Reformed, I realized that there were other readings of the Bible than the one I was used to, but because of my age, I did not have to accept that this could be valid at the same time. My parents’ truths were replaced by my own truths. It was only right. The separation of growing up masked, postponed the more difficult confrontation.⁹

⁸ The complex relations between the generally available language and the religious language in the political space are dissected by Habermas, of which I will mention only one point of view not touched upon above: “Citizens cannot be expected to translate the political positions that result from their religious convictions into the secular language.” He calls this transposition in everyday contact an “institutional translational proviso”, which he considers a naturally manageable process. Unfortunately, he does not talk about how this translation happens, only treating it as a possibility: “have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life. In corresponding political debates, this potential makes religious speech into a serious vehicle for possible truth contents, which can then be translated from the vocabulary of a particular religious community into a generally accessible language.” HABERMAS, Jürgen (2006): Religion in the Public Sphere. In: *European Journal of Philosophy*. 14, 1. 9–10. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-0378.2006.00241.x. An American example in practice: “In June of 2008, Obama’s campaign actively targeted young evangelicals. The senator gave stump speeches in community halls and church basements and stressed the importance of social justice, *a concept that young evangelicals could identify with biblically*” [emphasis mine]. PIER, Penni M. (2010): Deities, Divisions, and Democrats. The “Political Left” and Religion. In: Weiss, David (ed.): *What Democrats Talk about When They Talk about God. Religious Communication in Democratic Party Politics*. Lanham, Lexington [no pages]. According to Christopher B. Chapp, “Religious rhetoric gains its unique political command because it is well equipped to resonate with individuals’ emotions and identities—two factors that, not coincidentally, are central to political persuasion.” See CHAPP, Ch. B. (2012): *Religious Rhetoric and American Politics: The Endurance of Civil Religion in Electoral Campaigns*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press. 4.

⁹ Gadamer words this reconciliation as follows: “Thus, we hold, the fact that our experience of the world is bound to language does not imply an exclusiveness of perspectives. If, by entering foreign language-worlds, we overcome the prejudices and limitations of our previous experience of the world, this does not mean that we leave and negate our own world. Like travelers we

Bible – Bibles

The title by Mészöly is suggestive. A statement of plurality. And this is a difficult milestone for many in the religion of One. For myself, as well. We also inevitably sense the power of language as a factor of art as soon as we reach its limit.

Bonum est confidere in Domino, / Bonum sperare in Domino. I remember what this meant in 1989, on the eve of the collapse of communism, for the crowd gathered in the Pécs Cathedral for the Taizé meeting. It was *Homologia*, a creed, irrespective of denomination; the song rang out like an exhilarating “shared word”. We experienced the simplicity of “we are”, without having to add “many” or “together”. We were there as Christians. I cannot remember to what extent this was a protest. Probably. But most certainly it was not merely that.

The situation was similar to the New Translation of the Bible. The issue was not raised until 1975. One Protestant translation was in use, the Károli translation, last revised in 1908. When the New Translation was published, my father collated it with the revised Károli translation and would point out the differences. His favourite was Isaiah’s verse on God’s way, which in Károli’s version read: “még a bolond se téved el” (Isa 35:8) / “the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein” (Isa 35:8 KJV), but the New Translation reads: “bolondok nem tévednek rá” / “And fools will not wander on it” (Isa 35:8 NAS). He could not decide which one was right, but he was sure that only one could be true. I was also confused by the single-column layout; it did not look like a Bible, so I would not read it, a distrust I still cannot shake off to this day even though the publisher changed it to double-column layout. That was obviously not the only thing that bothered me. I could not rename the Comforter to Advocate. I had already heard about the institution of criminal supervision, and comforting sounded more attractive.

And I remember well the introduction of the ecumenical translation of the Lord’s Prayer. It felt almost as a sacrilege as the tongues of the congregation twisted between the unconscious “ki vagy a mennyekben” and the intended “aki a mennyekben vagy”. (The

return home with new experiences. Even if we emigrate and never return, we still can never wholly forget.” GADAMER, Hans-Georg (1984): *Igazság és módszer: Egy filozófiai hermeneutika vázlatja*. Budapest, Gondolat Kiadó. 311. (English translation: *Truth and Method*. Translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London, Continuum. 2004. 445).

difference is similar to the difference between the traditional and the contemporary English versions “Our Father, who art in heaven” and “Our Father in heaven”.) Disrupting the rhythm, the earlier reverence was replaced by a sense of shame at the confusion.

And then everything got accelerated: the Easy-to-read Translation in 2003 and then the Károli translation by Veritas Publisher in 2011; and I am only mentioning two of so many. Suddenly there was a sense of freedom, of being able to do everything. In church use, two was already too many (the New Translation of 1975 was almost imperceptibly replaced by its 1990 revision: two did not turn into three), and it became more than enough. (Most certainly, this was after the 20th century, but it is a good indicator of the direction.)¹⁰

From the “one God”, “*akinél nincs változás, vagy változásnak árnyéka*” (Jas 1:17, Károli 1908) / “with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning (Jas 1:17 KJV)”, following the rules of logic, or at least we may feel so, it would follow that His word, His revelation, is also one. A serious crisis for theological students is the loss of the myth of the “original” in the process of familiarizing themselves with the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures. There is no single one. Not everyone can bear this burden.¹¹

As long as the Bible was the source of the worldview contrasting the official state order, these issues were not emphasized. From that perspective, it was one. As the number of viewpoints, and thus the number of reference points increased, it was no longer possible to formulate the answer as a protest. (Well, it is possible, but it just does not make sense.)

¹⁰ The hardest step was, however, when I had to find the words as one of the translators of the Revised New Translation published in 2014. I felt at the time that my language was “worldly” for this, that it could not even express a fraction of the worldview that was emerging in me, in my language, in the meanings of the text.

¹¹ Peter Dávidházi, who is not a theologian, also raises the question of “why it is awkward to question the differences between textual versions”: “Sooner or later, the transcendent identity of the final authority would be eroded, inevitably raising the question: if the Lord’s message is given to us in so many different formulations and can be understood in so many different ways, how much is this Lord master of his word, and whose is the final word: his or the translators’ and editors’ the transcendent law’s or the tongues’, God’s or man’s?” DÁVIDHÁZI 2017, 17.

Letter and Soul

I have been tempted to borrow the title *Nyelv és lélek* [Language and Soul] from our great 20th-century writer Kosztolányi, and with a reason. (Tempted? A biblical word again. Perhaps I would have done a disservice if I had?¹² At least the word suggests it is better that way. We shall find out.)

The difference for me refers to the distance between the signifier and the signified, word and meaning. Nevertheless, this way the Pauline “kill”¹³ is hardly understandable; it would be easier to explain it in the literal sense, yet the spirit does not lead me to it. (But this is no longer literal. Or maybe it is.)

The loss of guidance is perhaps more apparent in the diversity of Bibles, but it is not the rise in the number of words that makes me uncertain but the decline in meanings.

This has a very simple dimension. As the childish worldview that was once given to us is shattered, gone, replaced by nothing. The generation that still has a deep feeling of loss is trying to fill this void, selecting from imported worldviews, on economic, religious, psychological (or psychiatric) grounds. The younger generations can hardly feel the absence. Or they may feel the loss, but they have no idea what is lost. So, all that the denial of which gave meaning and significance to biblical words is lost, and along with it the meanings. No great loss, one might say, but let us not underestimate the sustaining power of the system! And let us not forget how many times our Christian ancestors, our confessing ancestors, have been led down the path of apophatic theology, of not knowing what to affirm!

Another part of this loss, perhaps not unrelated to the first, is the uncertainty of life’s choices. How clear it is what it means to “refuse to deny” as long as one is forced, as long as one is clearly stirred to deny. In freedom, in the many possible paths, it is hard to tell which the path of denial is.

¹² The very mixing of the members of the *casus mixtus*, the conditional clause, is a biblical audacity, a failure to allow for precise decodability. Or even the presupposition of plural intelligibility. This is also a Reformed feature.

¹³ 2Cor 3:6.

And here again I would refer to Esterházy, who in his novel titled *Corrected Edition* recalls Mark (9:40) paraphrased by János Kádár, Secretary General of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party and Minister of State: "On 10 December, at a meeting of the National Council of the Patriotic People's Front, Kádár uttered his famous words: Whoever is not against the Hungarian People's Republic is with it, etc. (On this issue, Christ took Rákosi's position, Matthew 12:30: Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.) This Kádár utterance signalled the beginning of the Kádár era, by the clock."¹⁴ After the collapse of communism, this permissiveness has become pervasive, making the meanings that were previously "easily" (i. e. unambiguously) attached to biblical words, fluid.

I have talked to a great extent about the changing meanings that emerge against the background of a given medium, as if I were forgetting the body of words, but this is far from being the case. "Once again, I am amazed at how important the form of a word is in a language, in all languages, the thousand and thousand unconscious, musical connections that awaken in us at the sound of it, and give it colour, heftiness, perhaps more than the object, the concept it is meant to signify."¹⁵ The diversity of statements encouraged me to accept the diversity of meanings.

I became fond of Károli's cross-references at an early age. I did not need to be taught *sui ipsius interpres* – driven by the joy of discovery or following the logic of the sermons, I followed them involuntarily, as if following a trail of beaten pins. Before, I often considered it a mistake to disagree, accepting logic as the only possible connecting force. It took me many years to begin to feel and appreciate the "hundreds of thousands of unconscious, musical connections" little by little.

And the meaning is not there without the body of the word anyway. But I will talk about that when I shall be talking about vocabulary.

¹⁴ ESTERHÁZY, Péter (2002): *Javított kiadás*. Budapest, Magvető. 161. (Somewhere Esterházy revised it, too, indicating that both versions are Christian, but I am unable to find it now.)

¹⁵ KOSZTOLÁNYI, Dezső (1999): *Lélek és nyelv*. In: Kosztolányi, Dezső: *Nyelv és lélek*. Budapest, Osiris. 101.

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs

I should be also writing about the language of our hymns since our congregations use them in the worship, but I can only give you an account of my complete inaptness. Hence, here, I can only point out the hiatus, the shortfall. Having followed hymnal reforms from afar, I am nevertheless grateful to our predecessors for setting the boundaries of the biblical canon and to the fact that the Scripture is somewhat protected by its prohibition of addition and removal (Rev 22:18). It seems that pruning the “apocryphal” shoots of the hymnal treasure and preserving its precious heritage – even if I am only concerned of linguistic aspects – is an equally delicate task. These hymnic lines, with their melodies, could be a defining element of the linguistic image of our faith, yet little attention is paid to the role they play or could play in the articulation and teaching of the contents of faith.

[After reading through the draft, a friend of mine expressed his total incomprehension: how does the second part of the essay follow on from the first? He felt I owed the reader an explanation. Let us see. The condition we tried to describe in the first part, the dwindling of meanings, is expressed in biblical language in the relationship between faith and deeds. (I think of faith here as a reality born out of hearing the Word. The empty church buildings show that although the biblical words, phrases and sentences are there, in reality the corresponding meanings (“actions”) are missing. There are many words, little that can be experienced of this reality (cf. James 2:18)). This is the devaluation of the language, the loss of its utility. Some of the missing meanings can be characterized by the denial of visible reality, but it seems that this kind of exclusion of the gaps of reality has been appropriated by the “world”, by the dominant political rhetoric, so if the Church does not want to identify with it, it is forced to look for other ways. The path I am following is to return to the “ABC”, i.e. to the elementary units of language, the words. By letting go of meaningless sentences, ecclesiastical phrases and by revisiting the ways in which meaning is produced, we can perhaps learn to say what is, whether visible or invisible.]

Vocabulary

What I have written about so far, strung together on a chain of experience, is largely knowledge determined by feelings, or at least loaded with them.¹⁶ What can be the subject of scholarly investigation? Mostly the word itself and its use.

Since the text of the Bible translations in use is one of the determining factors and norms of church language usage, we have taken the change in this usage as a starting point for examining the changes in vocabulary.

For the Károli translation of 1908, József Baranyi prepared a printed concordance,¹⁷ but in order to ensure the same methodological framework, both the New Translation Bible revised in 1990¹⁸ and the text of the Károli translation of 1908 were processed with the *magyarlanc 3.0* software¹⁹ issued by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Research Group on Artificial Intelligence of the University of Szeged. The research is based on the digitized text provided by the Hungarian Bible Society, and the obtained data were then processed²⁰ with the *AntConc* concordance builder app.²¹

The procedure was exactly the same in both cases:

First, verse and chapter numbers, section headings, book titles, and cross-references were removed from the biblical text, and the resulting text file was saved without any formatting (.txt format). The second step was to upload the prepared text files in

¹⁶ Recognizing and admitting our own biases and involvements is a necessary part of scientific work. Among the methodological conditions of my linguistic dissertation, the consideration of arguments warning of the limitations of the scientific study of language was emphasized, and I have written about these in more detail there. See HANULA, Gergely (2016): *Anyaszentnyelvünk. A „szent nyelvek” és a fordítás*. Budapest, Argumentum. 7–8.

¹⁷ BARANYI, József (1995): *Konkordancia a Károli Bibliához*. Budapest, Veritas.

¹⁸ The 1975 edition has not had a digitized version.

¹⁹ ZSIBRITA, János – VINCZE, Veronika – FARKAS, Richárd (2013): *magyarlanc. A Toolkit for Morphological and Dependency Parsing of Hungarian*. In: *Proceedings of RANLP*, Sumen, INCOMA. 763–771.

²⁰ <https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconcl/> (accessed on: 3 March 2023).

²¹ I would like to thank my PhD candidate Dániel Tóth-Gyóllai for his help in performing these operations.

the *magyarlanc* program.²² In Morphparse mode, the output for each word was rendered in the following layout: word, syllable, word type, grammatical analysis. The resulting word column data was scanned into *AntConc* using the Word list tool to obtain the concordance, with the “Type” and “Freq” columns providing the raw material for manual verification.

The input dataset described above was a corpus of 597,000 words for the 1908 Károli and 585,000 words for the 1990 New Translation.

The result for the 1908 text is a list of 25,207 lines (mostly roots) and for the 1990 text a list of 23,783 lines. During the manual checking, the numerals and proper names were removed from the list,²³ and then we checked the results of the machine identification line by line. The manual checking left 11,431/11,680 (1908/1990) root lines, which shows a variation of approximately 50% compared to the results of the machine analysis.²⁴

We need to be cautious when assessing the deviation. It is clear that the machine word definition is not suitable for the recognition of archaic verbal suffixes, archaic nouns phrase suffixes. This was mostly the case with the 1908 Károli translation; however, this represented only 1/5 of the 50% deviation. The other, even more numerous errors were due to the lack of uniform spelling (e.g. the alternating spelling of long and short vowels, the archaic spelling of “cz” instead of “c”, etc.). The most numerous, however, occurred because the software did not recognize the nominal suffixes (for instance: *utadat*, *utadon*, *utadra*, *utai*, *utaid*, *utaidról*, *utaiért*, *utaimat*, *utaimra*, *utaira*, *utait*, *utaitoknál*, *utak*, *utakon*, *útja*, *útjából*, *útjához*, *útjai*, *útjain*, *útjainkat*, *útjaira*, *útjairól*, *útjait*, *útján*, *útjának*, *útjára*, *útját*, *útjától* – the machine processing listed them as individual roots).

²² <https://rgai.inf.u-szeged.hu/file/57> using the corpus on magyarlanc 3.0 (accessed on: 3 March 2023).

²³ For 1908, we found about 4,500 lines of proper name roots, for 1990 about 4,000 lines, but in most cases the program did not recognize the suffixes, so the total number of occurrences is more relevant: about 30/27 thousand (1908/1990, I will give the data of the two texts in the following). The numerals (not counting the possible occurrences of the numeral “one”) occur in significantly smaller numbers (4,500/4,100).

²⁴ The large number of corrections carried out during the manual checking was certainly not always consistent (e.g. adjectives from place names were included in the list as a rule, but in some cases inconsistent classification may have occurred). To ensure traceability of the check, I will also publish in the future the data tables documenting the corrections.

In both texts, there was a significant difference in the count of participles and gerunds in relation to the verb root (these were determined by the program as separate words).

It has become clear that the result can only be used with strong limitations, taking into account both the shortcomings of the machine operations taught in the different language and the possible shortcomings of the verification. However, the 50% deviation in the result indicates that the language of the text differs significantly from the language used in the contemporary Hungarian texts²⁵ known for the software. A surprising result is that, in the end, machine recognition was no more efficient for the 1990 text than for the 1908 text.

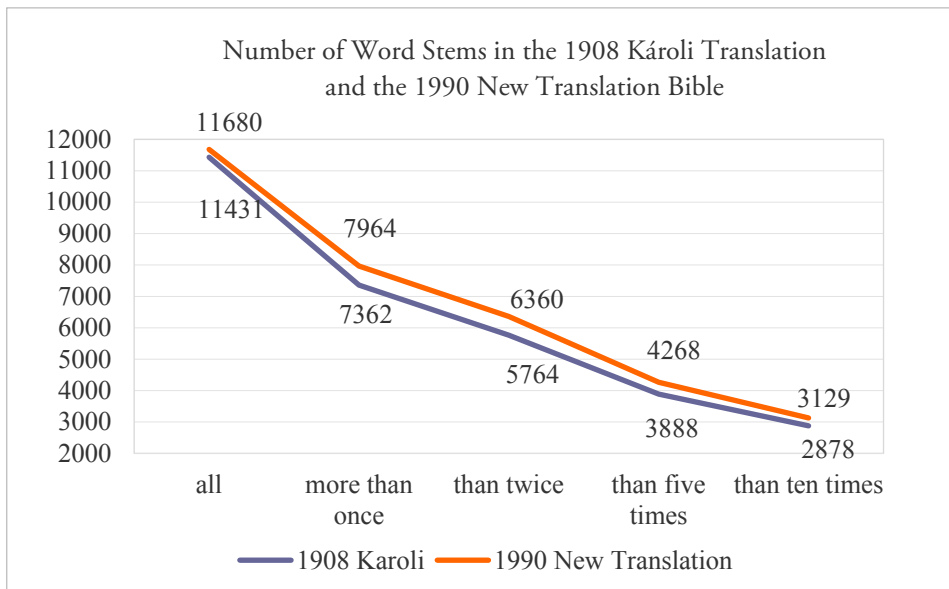


Figure 1. *Number of Word Stems in the 1908 Károli Translation and the 1990 New Translation Bible*

²⁵ “The Szeged Treebank is the largest fully manually annotated treebank of the Hungarian language. It contains 82,000 sentences, 1.2 million words, and 250,000 punctuation marks. Texts were selected from six different domains, ~200,000 words in size from each. The domains are the following: fiction, compositions of pupils between 14 and 16 years of age, newspaper articles (from the newspapers *Népszabadság*, *Népszava*, *Magyar Hírlap*, *HVG*), texts in informatics, legal texts, business and financial news.” (The informative summary is my own translation). <https://rgai.inf.u-szeged.hu/node/113> (accessed on: 1 October 2023).

The graph shows that roughly one third (35%/32%) of the nearly 12,000-word vocabulary of these corpora of nearly 600,000 words occurs once in the text. If only those occurring more than twice are counted, the vocabulary is thus reduced to approximately two-thirds. If we examine – by subjective choice, as a sample – the list of words that occur at least ten times (in the 1908 Károli, this is 2,878 word roots), we find that just over a tenth of these (299) are so old that they may be difficult to understand, either because of the way in which they have changed meaning or because they have become obsolete.²⁶ The same analysis was carried out for the 1990 revision of the New Translation, where 39 of the 3,128 words occurring at least 10 times were found to be archaic.

I have also tried to identify the words that, because of the religious nature of the text, have a particular meaning that may be difficult to understand for those with little or no knowledge of the Bible, but the classification has shown very different results after repeated attempts. Some words do not occur in the common language (different from biblical language), while others – and this is the most numerous category – are used with a special meaning other than in the common language. The result on the above samples was between 100 and 150 words in each case. There is a minimal shift in the range of these words between the two translations, with new terms that are closer to the vernacular being used in some cases.

Compared to the full picture, each book may use a significantly different vocabulary. A typical example is the Gospel of John (1908, according to Károli), which, with its 16,000 words, is a sample worth being studied. In this volume, it uses only 1,192 words, 500 of which are used only once.

²⁶ The selection was based on my own judgement – which is why I am publishing a good third of the list in the Hungarian version of the study – to show which words I feel are difficult for today's reader to understand. The detailed Hungarian word lists can be found in the Hungarian version of the article.

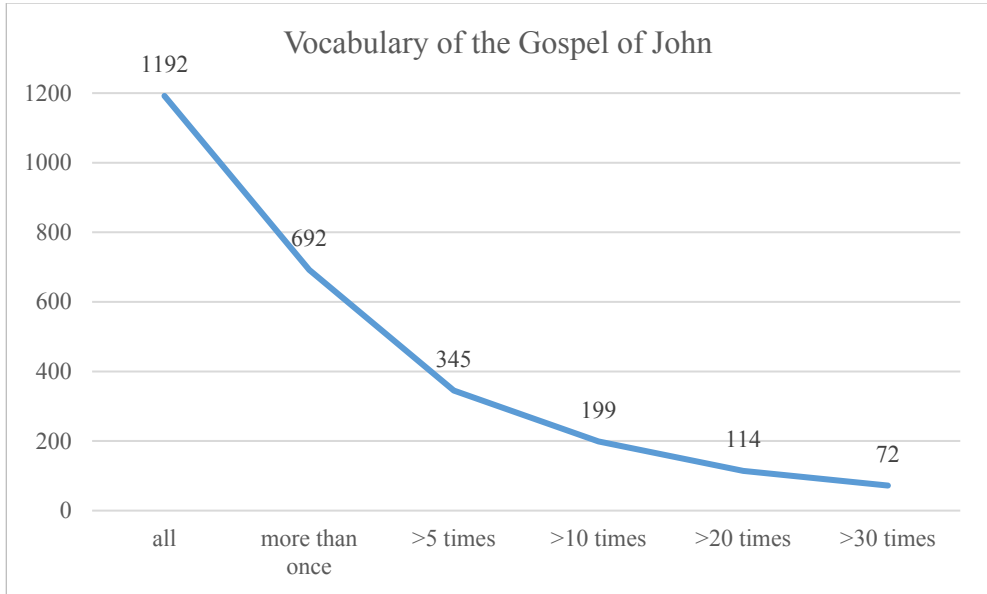


Figure 2. Vocabulary of the Gospel of John

It appears that John uses 700 words for about 95% of the 16,000-word Gospel and 200 words for about 80%.²⁷ If we exclude the words that have no meaning in themselves (articles, pronouns, conjunctions, and adverbs), John uses the following 121 words to express 4/5 of what he says (listed by frequency of occurrence): *van, mond, atya, megy, lát, jön, hisz, Isten, ad, tanítvány, felel, világ, tud, egy, zsidó, ember, tesz, úr, szeret, szól, élet, beszéd, ismer, vesz, akar, fiú, küld, vele, cselekedik, hall, bizonyosság, fia, beszél, nap, cselekszik, fog, igazság, marad, név, eszik, kenyér, lélek, nagy, víz, asszony, hal, idő, születik, világosság, áll, elküld, elmegy, juh, keres, Krisztus, óra, sír, sokaság, szolga, bűn, eljön, farizeus, hely, kér, dolog, test, ünnep, igaz, megtart, örök, szem, vak, dicsőség, jó, kéz, jár, király, dicsőít, előtt, hoz, írás, kimegy, meghal, törvény, visz, halál, ír, követ, láb, próféta, templom, főpap, kell, megismer, meglát, száll, él, gyűlöl, hallgat, jel, keresztel, megmarad, menny, mester, szó, tanít, testvér, vet, anya, bizonyágtétel, hajó, köz, szombat, talál, akarat, bemegy, cselekedet, föld, gyümölcs, iszik, nép.*

²⁷ Not counting a total of 522 occurrences of 41 proper names in the Gospel.

Ágnes Nemes Nagy, the Hungarian poet and literary translator of the second half of the 20th century, writes in her essay collection *Szó és szótlanság* [Word and Silence]:

They say that the poet is a designator. And it is true. It would follow that the vocabulary and designating are closely connected. The greater the vocabulary, the larger the range of naming options, the greater the poet. Not quite so. Science also designates, and it designates with great precision. It says, for example, aliphatic halogen compounds. Or it says: *Corydalis cava*. Or it says: *parerga* and *paralipomena*. But that is not what poetry is about. Vocabulary is an advisable but not a decisive poetic quality. Poetry, it seems, is not about acquainting but rather revealing.

I do not think that multitude is a decisive factor in religious language usage either, but perhaps by dealing with words we can get closer to answering the question of how words participate in the construction of meaning.

Beyond Words

The next step is to look at how words are connected: syntax. The much-blamed – and attempted to be weeded out of the vernacular by labelling it as ungrammatical – suffering structure, the *passivum divinum*, and its avoidance, the multiple compound sentences and their fragmentation – many questions arise involuntarily about church language and its variation. In doing so, I will also take the text of the Bible translations as a starting point and hopefully arrive at the specifics of the spoken language used in the church. The working hypothesis is best formulated as a question: is there a specific syntax for spoken/church language? Through an understanding of the specificity of biblical language usage, this work aims at a better understanding of the language use of the church in its biblical language and the cultivation of this language.

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