

# **Globalization and the Language of Worship: Is the Spread of English a Boon or a Bane?**

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## **Abstract**

Modern missions has long emphasized the importance of the heart language of a people for the Church. In this age of globalization, English is often put forward as a Lingua Franca for much of the world. Likewise, in recent years, there has been a growing use by Evangelicals of English as a tool for outreach and ministry. While most of us in missions have benefited at some point by the widespread use of English, what impact does English usage have in peoples' spiritual lives? Little has actually been done to explore how people are influenced spiritually by the use of English in the Church and in worship. This article is the result of study done in three contexts to begin to explore what impact if any the widespread use of English in the Church and missions has had in the life and thought of individual Christians. Is there a negative impact or crisis in the globalization of English in the Church?

**Key Words:** English in missions, heart language, spiritual life, worship

## **Introduction**

Globalization shapes our daily lives. One of its tendencies is homogeneity, pushing everyone to be like everyone else. This is evident with growing use of English as the world's common language. As an example, a website from North Carolina State University (NCSU) lists 54 countries in which English is the official language and/or the language of higher education (NCSU n.d.). The widespread use of English is particularly true when we speak of media and entertainment.

In evangelical churches around the world, English is often at the center of ministry. As a means for doing missions, the organization TEAM in 2016 offered over 150 opportunities to teach English and share the gospel around the world (Hurlbert 2016). The well-known Australian church Hillsong offers various ministries to its global following. Their college boasts of over 10,000 students from more than 65 countries; English proficiency is expected (Hillsong Church n.d.). Hillsong channel offers a variety of media all in English and states that, "As of June 2018, people from 183 countries have watched the Hillsong Channel" (Hillsong Church n.d.).

This increasingly global influence of English in many churches raises questions regarding the impact on those who use English as a learned language rather than a heart language for their spiritual life with God. This article seeks to start developing an answer to the question, "How are non-native English speakers influenced spiritually by the use of English?"

## **Importance of Language for Spiritual Life**

In this reality of the increasing use of English, we need to consider the influence of language on its speakers. How words are used and the meanings given to them depend on the cultural context. Each language is used with nuances that, until they are well learned, keep others from understanding the inner conceptual world of a people (Tucker 2013, 168).

To understand a language fully, it is essential to learn that language from within (Smith 1992, 31). When a person is learning a language, the processing of the language is limited by the lack of cultural understanding. Further, studies suggest that, since frames for language develop over time, there is a tendency to connect words to one's native frame unless the second cultural frames are well known (Luna, Ringberg, and Peracchio 2008, 291). Jim Harries points out that such linguistic extraction not only devalues the local language, but also that a native-English-speaking outsider's understanding of local meaning can be hindered even when interacting in English with a local person, since thought processes often reflect the local language even when expressed in English (Harries 2017). These challenges raise the question that, if one learns Christianity in an acquired language, and vocabulary and concepts are not readily available in the native language, what issues arise in gaining a true understanding of the gospel message? For example, native English speakers tend to fail to recognize the corporate nature of the Church as English does not have a distinct plural of "you," leading to interpreting such passages as Colossians 1:27 ("Christ in you, the hope of glory") from an individualistic perspective.

### **Why Does Heart Language Matter?**

One central theme of contextualization in missions is that new converts should become Christians through and worship in their heart language. Heart language is defined as "the language in which people feel most comfortable relating to others and thinking deeply" (Scott 2013, 38). According to Eleonora Scott—a Wycliffe translator—the reason for using the heart language is that people are thus

freer to share with God everything on their hearts. They grow deeper in their faith, feel God's presence with them and sense the kind of relationship that he desires. It prepares people for the intimacy that friendship with Jesus demands and creates a thirst for knowing more of God, which prepares their hearts for greater discipleship (Scott 2013, 41).

Many contend that only as the gospel connects with the inner self within one's own cultural context does the gospel stop being foreign and is able to change the heart. Without spiritual understanding through the heart language, the argument continues, individuals do not fully own their faith and keep faith separate from other aspects of their lives, thus not fully identifying as Christians or growing as Christians (Maria 2015, 33-34). Linguist Ken Nehrbass, who studied individuals' comprehension of the Bible in acquired languages, while holding that monolingual speakers do need the Bible in their language, raises questions about the validity of assuming that the Bible is best understood in the heart language once a person has acquired a second language (Nehrbass 2014, 89). His study shows that at least comprehension of the biblical message was as equal in an acquired language as in the vernacular or heart language (Nehrbass 2014, 100). Another study conducted in South Africa points out that the use of English as a daily means of communication is an important consideration in a multilingual setting. The attitude and level of use of English is an important consideration as well (Adams and Beukes 2019). While the influence of the heart language is indeed strong and shapes inner beliefs and values (Deutscher 2010, para. 25), other evidence would seem to point out that moving out of the heart language does not constrain or keep the Christian from growing spiritually.

### **Worldview and Change**

Undoubtedly communicating in a learned language does not quickly achieve the same depth of understanding as in one's heart language. Achieving successful communication and meaning requires interacting at the worldview level where people hold understanding "about the world, life, God, and their relationship to it all" (Smith 1992, 34). Because worldview is accessed through language, Christians are concerned with gaining correct understanding of the biblical message through a comprehensible language.

## **Worship**

Worship is an important part of the process of spiritual growth and transformation. Thus, it matters how we worship. "Who we are 'at heart' and how we worship are deeply connected" (Hotz and Mathews 2006, 7). Our worship style is an important part of our faith and if it is not "connected to our inner lives, it can become empty and formalistic" (Hotz and Mathews 2006, 63).

Worship, however, is not a simple matter. Just as words cannot be simply translated, we have to keep in mind that worship holds cultural meaning as well (Hiebert 1985, 149-150). A simple example is by asking how a culture shows reverence, an important aspect of worship. Reverence can be shown by taking off our hats or shoes, or by bowing or standing. The form of reverence used by English speakers is normally often without awareness and thus may not connect in the same way with speakers of another language/culture.

This cultural location of language raises the question of the music used in worship. How does music connect with the worshipper? Just as the spoken message needs to be understood, so should music speak to the heart (Tucker 2013, 286). A recent *Christianity Today* article that discusses the use of English in German churches points out the complexity of worship music in our global world. One comment reflects that worshipping in English allows for a more "uninhibited" worship expression that is more globally connected (Chitwood 2020, para. 5). In this case, the local culture is seen as an impediment to the desired style of worship.

Worship is not complete without the Word, God's spoken message to us. God's Word comes to us both through preaching and direct reading of the Bible. The Word, received in either form, takes the biblical story and connects it to the meaning we find in our own lives (Hotz and Mathews 2006, 119-120). Ultimately preaching by presenting Christ to us "purifies us by the reworking and reweaving the limited, fragmented story of our lives into the grand normative narrative of Scripture" (Hotz and Mathews 2006, 136). Thus the Word also connects to our inner life, again showing the importance of a comprehensible language.

## **Where to from Here?**

It is the intent of the preceding discussion to show the significance of language in the Christian life and spirituality. A few points from cross-cultural communication help us cement the role of language in this process. First, each language is both limited and capable of being used to communicate God's revelation. Second, God is the communicator and is able to get his message across using language. Third, as Christianity takes on a cultural form it is God who is "speaking from outside of, and into, each culture" (Tucker 2013, 167). Ultimately Christian life and growth depend on God's action through the Holy Spirit in our lives.

## **Research Findings**

To gain insight into the impact of language on spirituality, I carried out research in three phases. In the first, I conducted a web-based survey to which 38 people responded. The respondents were asked to be self-limiting to these requirements: “that you be at least 18 years of age and that a second language has been a part of your Christian spiritual life for at least one year.” I was seeking not just those who have learned a second language, but those for whom that language has been an active part of their Christian experience. The second phase of this research was to interview three focus groups of adults at an Hispanic church that holds services in Spanish in a city in western New York. The first focus group was composed of those who indicated that Spanish is their first language. The second group considered themselves bilingual, and the third group consisted of individuals whose first language is English but can function in Spanish. The third phase sent an eight-question web-based survey to a pastor of an English-speaking church near Washington D.C. to distribute to individual adults in the church who self-identify as native Spanish speakers. There were six responses to this survey. The two surveys and focus group prompts used can be found in the Appendices.

The overall input came from individuals who identified as having seven different first languages. All adult age groups were included—though most respondents were younger adults. There was a range of time that they have been Christians, with the majority becoming Christian under age 18. The respondents were fairly balanced in how long an acquired language had been part of their Christian lives. Some in the first survey were native English speakers who have learned another language. Most became Christian through their first language, have grown spiritually mostly in their first language, and are moderately to strongly bilingual and multicultural, with 22 having English as their first language with Spanish and Korean Spanish speakers as the next predominant groups. I have not endeavored to approach these findings with statistical analysis but to look for trends and observations that can inform the work of missions and the Church in our increasingly globalized world.

### Feelings about God

In each of the surveys, respondents were given this prompt: “I feel the same way about God when worshipping in either of my languages.” The first phase’s survey results (see Table 1) seem to indicate that language does not influence how one perceives God and that the longer one is bilingual, the less difference there is. The most significant variation is among those who consider themselves as having the lowest levels of bilingual ability or are least multicultural.

Q10 I feel the same way about God when worshipping in either of my languages.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Difference	Agree	Strongly Agree
All (38)	3%	26%	18%	16%	37%
Most time in 2 <sup>nd</sup> lang (19)	0%	5%	5%	26%	63%
Grown most in 2 <sup>nd</sup> (9)	0%	11%	33%	11%	44%
Low bilingual	0%	50%	0%	17%	33%
Low multicultural	0%	36%	9%	36%	18%

One respondent’s comment seems to summarize these results: “An (sic) an intellectual level I connect better with my first language, but on an emotional level, I connect will (sic) with both.

When it comes to prayer meetings, even though I prefer to pray in my first language, I feel deeply connected with my brothers and sisters in my acquired language.”

The discussion with the focus groups in the Hispanic Church in western New York yielded similar result as the question listed in Table 1, with two individuals indicating that this is mostly true and four totally true. The predominantly Spanish focus groups indicated that there is no real difference. One person responded that “God is God, I feel the same about him” referring to using Spanish or English. The other two groups agreed with another comment that “It doesn’t matter what language the Spirit moves in...if you understand the language.” One exception was for an individual who saw the Hispanic church as more legalistic, so that individual prefers to worship God in English.

### **The Value of Worship**

All respondents in the first survey indicated that worship has value in both first and acquired languages (see Table 2). At the same time, there was a slight preference for the language most influential in their life. English speakers throughout the responses showed preference for English, while other language speakers were less tied to their first language. Also, as Table 2 indicates, those who were converted in, or have had more spiritual input in, their acquired language lean towards that language, which in this study was mostly English.

Q 20 I receive the most benefit spiritually from liturgy or public worship in my					
	First	(No Label)	No Difference	(No Label)	Acquired
All (38)	8%	22%	55%	8%	6%
English (22)	14%	36%	45%	5%	0%
All other (15)	0%	0%	69%	15%	15%
vert in 1 <sup>st</sup> lang (28)	11%	30%	56%	4%	0%
Convert in 2 <sup>nd</sup> lang (10)	0%	0%	56%	22%	22%
Grown most in 1 <sup>st</sup> (23)	13%	35%	48%	4%	0%
Grown in both (6) 3+3	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%
Grown most in 2nd (9)	0%	0%	50%	25%	25%

Most respondents in the focus groups indicated that public worship is equally valid in either language. This was especially true for songs. However, sermons were beneficial depending on one’s language ability. Interestingly, the more bilingual the respondents were, the more they viewed live translation as a barrier to understanding due to getting tied up in thinking about how they would translate the sermon. The respondents to the second survey sent to the D.C. Church likewise indicated that they are able to worship in English as well as Spanish.

A comment from the first survey helps to understand what might be happening in this regards. “Some of the questions were hard to answer because it is not so much the language that matters in the word preached but the quality of preaching and not so much the language that matters in the worship and the singing of songs as the heart of worship and the whole atmosphere.”

Respondents in the second survey sent to the D.C. Church indicated that they are able to grow as well in English as in their native Spanish. Yet they also indicated that their deepest beliefs and their relationship with God are more closely tied to Spanish (see Table 3).

4. When I worship God personally/alone I prefer Spanish.				
No	A little	Average	Mostly	Totally
1	0	1	2	3
6. My deepest beliefs about God are more connected to Spanish than English.				
No	A little	Average	Mostly	Totally
0	1	2	2	1

Likewise, in the first survey the responses show that a first language is not necessarily the only way for spiritual life to take place (See Table 4). The evidence indicates that it is not just the language of Christianity that matters but also the content. The highest variations were between the English speakers and those with a low bilingual self-rank.

Q 12 There are parts of my spiritual life that are best met in my first language.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Difference	Agree	Strongly Agree
All	0%	3%	18%	32%	47%
English	0%	0%	9%	32%	59%
Low bilingual	0%	0%	0%	33%	67%

### The Value of the Heart Language

The first survey also looked at what aspects of spiritual life are preferred in one's first language, looking to see if it matters what is in one's first or heart language. Again, a respondent provided a helpful summary:

I love connecting with the Lord in both languages, but when I am tired or just...needy, verses and songs especially jump out at me in my first language and feel much stronger. I understand them in my acquired language, but they don't arrest my attention the same way as in my first. However, I often find new insights in my acquired language that can only be seen in a different manner of expressing the world and the Lord. Super cool.

While this representative comment supports the above conclusion that we can benefit from more than one language spiritually, it also focuses on the reality that some deeper-level matters work out best in one's first language. The general question regarding deepest beliefs reflects both ideas as well (See Table 5). The most interesting variations are the age at which the person became a Christian, and those who converted in a second language.

The only real variation is when a person has spent more time in, or has primarily grown spiritually in, an acquired language. Other questions relating to spiritual factors—Bible study, preaching, devotional reading, and doctrine—that are connected to more intellectual aspects and are more individually experienced indicate preferences for one's first language. The only consistent variation was when the respondent converted in a second language.

Q 16 My deepest level beliefs are most connected to my first language					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Difference	Agree	Strongly Agree
All	5%	18%	19%	34%	26%
Most time 2 <sup>nd</sup> lang	10%	16%	21%	32%	21%
Convert in 2 <sup>nd</sup>	20%	40%	20%	10%	10%
Grown most in 2 <sup>nd</sup>	22%	33%	11%	11%	22%
Convert under 18	0%	19%	16%	34%	29%
Convert over 18	29%	14%	14%	29%	14%

One respondent stated that at “an intellectual level I connect better with my first language, but on an emotional level, I connect will (sic) with both. When it comes to prayer meetings, even though I prefer to pray in my first language, I feel deeply connected with my brothers and sisters in my acquired language.”

Another comment adds insight to the dynamic of the varied aspects of our spiritual lives. “God knows everything and He works in our lives (sic) different than we do. He has given me abundant grace through different languages but the moment when I faced my God strongly was while I was praying in (first language) so I think they would may feel me more special anytime I pray in (first language) after that God still works in my heart with different language.”

For the respondents of the survey sent to the D.C. Church, the only prompt that showed a preference for Spanish was “When I worship God personally/alone I prefer Spanish,” with five of the six indicating mostly or totally. The focus groups seemed to give the most varied results, leaning towards the level of language ability.

One final comment demonstrates our ability to function across languages and grow spiritually, while reinforcing the importance of our first language.

Even though I am fully bilingual, have a degree in my acquired language, have been ministering in my acquired language for 24 years and am very capable in it, I am still more comfortable reading and learning in my first language although I might even say I am more comfortable teaching in my acquired language because it is the primary context in which I teach. But personal stuff, reading, hearing sermons...reading for pleasure or relaxation//English for sure.

The importance of the heart language is further supported by question 14 from the first survey (see Table 6). The responses indicate that this only changes when a person spends more time or has converted in a second language. Length of time in a language does make a difference. The evidence would indicate that the more one is involved in a second language and culture, the less that person’s faith is dependent on the heart language.

Q 14 I have grown the most spiritually in my first language.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Difference	Agree	Strongly Agree
Grown most in 1 <sup>st</sup>	0%	0%	9%	39%	52%

Grown in both	0%	17%	67%	0%	17%
Grown most in 2 <sup>nd</sup>	22%	44%	22%	11%	0%
Lowest multi	0%	0%	9%	36%	55%
Highest multi	7%	19%	26%	22%	26%
Low bilingual	8%	0%	8%	33%	50%
High Bilingual	4%	19%	27%	23%	27%

## Conclusion

This study has endeavored to look into the relationship of language with spiritual life. In particular, the article seeks to start to answer the question: How are non-native English speakers influenced spiritually by the use of English?

A few tentative conclusions can be drawn:

1. God is bigger than language and is not limited by language. He is God and can be known through any language.
2. As the acquired language proficiency of the believer increases, there is less importance placed on the language used and more on the content of the communication.
3. The last area of spiritual life to adjust to an acquired language is personal time with God, either through reading or prayer.

What do these conclusions say to our concern for globalization and the spread of English in the Church and in ministry? What we have believed all along is true, one's heart language matters. However, with proper guidance and discipleship, the use of English does not preclude a genuine relationship with God for non-native English speakers. Nevertheless, we still need to keep working to provide materials and worship opportunities in heart languages as some will not come to Jesus outside of their heart language.

Undoubtedly further research is needed. More people and more demographic groups need to be studied. Examples include those who are more recent converts and those who convert at a higher age and through a second language. Also, finding respondents who have basically left behind their first language as Christians would be interesting to study.

As a result of this study all involved in missions can be motivated in two ways. First, we should keep encouraging the Church to function in the heart language of the people. Second, and most importantly, God will speak to the hearts of all who listen to Him, no matter which language they choose to use in their spiritual growth. He is God of all languages.

## Appendix 1

### Web-based survey

Your participation in survey is voluntary. The only requirements are that you be at least 18 years of age and have been involved in a second language for at least one year as a part of your Christian life development. Completing the survey indicates your voluntary consent to participate in this research. Click next to continue, close the survey if you do not desire to continue.



The background for this study comes from the study of missions. In the field of missions study it is a widely held assumption that the gospel message is most effective in one's heart language. A heart language is the language in which one is most comfortable, and/or the language of one's home. Little research has actually been done to understand how Christians perceive the impact of language on their spiritual life and development.

For the purposes of this research the term "First language" will be used to refer to the heart language or the language with which you have primarily communicated in your home. "Acquired language" will be used to refer to the language which you have added and which has been a part of your Christian life growth. In this survey the word bilingual will be used in reference to your ability to function in both languages; and multicultural will be used in reference to your ability to function in both your own culture as well as a culture of your acquired language.

There are two main sets of questions. The first section focuses on aspects of each respondent's identity.

Identity Questions will seek basic information about you as a responder in order to make comparisons between participants. This is general information and is not intended to be able to identify you. Also responses will be anonymous and no attempt will be made to identify any responder.

The second set of questions asks about your perceptions regarding language and your spiritual life; focusing mainly on aspects of worship. This section is subdivided into two parts. The first deals with general and the second more specific spiritual life questions.

Section 1 - Identity: The answer options vary between questions, please consider the options carefully.

Your age 18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56 and older

How long have you been a Christian? 1-2, 3-5, 6- 10, 11-20, 21 or more years

The age at which you became a Christian under 12, 12- 17, 18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56 and older

For how long has an acquired language been a part of your Christian life 1-2, 3-5, 6-10, 11-20, 21 + years

The language through which you became a Christian first, acquired, equally both

The culture in which you have grown the most as a Christian first, acquired, equally both

Personal level of being bilingual (1-5) minimally bilingual, equally functional in both cultures

Personal level of being multicultural (1-5) minimally multicultural, equally functional in both cultures

The language you consider to be your first language English Other language (option to write language)

Section 2 - Spiritual life questions:

Please read the instructions for each part, as each part has a different type of response type

#### Part 1 - General Spiritual life questions

These questions focus on broad concepts regarding your spiritual life. Indicate your response that ranges from you strongly disagree with the statement to you strongly agree with the statement. The middle would indicate that there is no real difference.

I feel the same way about God when worshipping in either of my languages

I have benefitted spiritually by having worshipped in two or more languages

There are parts of my spiritual life that are best met in my first language

I benefit most in my Christian life when worship is in my first language

I am most comfortable worshipping in my first culture

I have grown the most spiritually in my first language

If I had to choose, I would live my faith in my first culture

My deepest level beliefs are most connected to my first language

#### Part 2 - Specific worship related questions

These questions focus on specific areas of worship and your Christian life. Indicate your response on a range from whether the statement is most true for your first language or most true for your acquired language. The middle would indicate that there is no difference between languages.

I benefit the most spiritually when studying the Bible in my

I benefit the most spiritually when singing in my

I receive the most benefit spiritually from hearing preaching in my

I receive the most benefit spiritually from liturgy or public worship in my

I receive the most benefit spiritually from personal or private prayer in my

I receive the most benefit spiritually from public prayer in my

I receive the most benefit spiritually from devotional readings in my

I receive the most benefit spiritually when Christian doctrine is expressed in my

If you would like to add a comment, do so in this space.

### **Appendix 2**

#### Prompts used for the Focus Groups

Discussion prompts for the focus groups:

Our goal in this discussion is to understand how using an acquired language influences worship and spiritual life.

1. Talk about this church and the role of both English and Spanish.
2. Talk about worship and spiritual life among this congregation.
3. Earlier I did a survey, and some from this church may have participated. It seemed to indicate that
  - a. benefit from public worship in both languages
    - worship, singing no clear preference
  - b. most people grow more spiritually in primary language
    - bible, preaching, devotions best in primary language
    - what about prayer (not in survey)
  - c. Feel the same about God in either language
    - deepest faith is tied to first language

How can a church meet the spiritual needs of people with two or more languages?

### **Appendix 3**

Survey sent to D.C. Church

1. I am comfortable worshipping in English in Church
 

No	A little	Average	Mostly	Totally
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2. I would prefer to worship God in Spanish in Church
 

No	A little	Average	Mostly	Totally
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3. I am able to grow spiritually worshipping in English in Church
 

No	A little	Average	Mostly	Totally
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4. When I worship God personally/alone I prefer Spanish
 

No	A little	Average	Mostly	Totally
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5. I feel the same way about God when Worshipping in English or Spanish
 

No	A little	Average	Mostly	Totally
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Comment option: Please explain any ways in which you don't feel the same about God.

6. My deepest beliefs about God are more connected to Spanish than English
 

No	A little	Average	Mostly	Totally
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7. I believe that my relationship with God is best using
 

Spanish	Mostly Spanish	Both are the same	Mostly English	English
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What else would you like to tell me about worshipping in English Compared to Spanish?

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