

Consensus

Volume 42
Issue 2 *Living through COVID-19, looking
beyond COVID-19*

Article 7

7-25-2021

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Recommended Citation

Driedger Hesslein, Kayko (2021) "The Accented Word," *Consensus*: Vol. 42 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol42/iss2/7>

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The Accented Word¹

Kayko Driedger Hesslein²

One of the joys of this past year of innumerable video calls has been the many opportunities to gather online with people all around the world. Meetings and conferences are no longer restricted to those who have the means and time for international travel, but are available to all who have access to the internet, a far greater proportion of the world's population. Over the past twelve months, I have met people in Tanzania, Ethiopia, Norway, Iceland, Columbia, Argentina, Australia, Malaysia, South Korea, Germany, and Switzerland. While I have been privileged to travel to a few of these countries in person, there is no way that I could have managed all of them in the last twelve months, and so I have delighted in the opportunities to take virtual trips to all of these different countries, even if I am restricted to a view through a screen.

These meetings have brought home to me (in a very literal sense as my work computer sits on my office desk in my house) the beauty and blessing of the diversity of humankind. When people are able to keep their video on, I am struck by the visual variety of faces distributed in equal-size boxes across my screen. Shades of black, brown, white are arrayed in front of me, and I have come to realize how monotonal (as in single skin tone) my world was before COVID-19 moved us all online.

More fundamentally, I have also come to realize how monotonal (as in single voiced) my world had been before now. Sometimes people would need to switch off their video and use only audio and so, in this past year I have heard English spoken with accents from Kiswahili, Icelandic, Spanish, German, Korean, and Amharic. And just as the variety of skin tones have been brought joy to my eyes, the variety of accents have brought joy to my ears.

It wasn't until I spent this past year listening to so many different voices that I began thinking seriously about the ways in which words are given different weights depending on the accent of the person speaking them. Words spoken by one voice are received more authoritatively than the same words spoken by another, even when we cannot see the faces of the ones speaking. We carry subconscious biases not just in the ways we see, but also in the ways we listen.

It was out of this realization that these words for the Dubrick Lecture took shape.³ The church, particularly Lutherans, gives a great deal of authority to words, and to the Word, but more so to words that are fixed in unaccented print than to those that are fluid verbal encounters between speaker and hearer. They are dedicated to all those whose voices have been dismissed, denied, or silenced in the church.

¹ This was a presentation at the 2021 Dubrick lecture at Martin Luther University College. This work was crafted on and presented from Treaty 7 land, which is the land of the Blackfoot (Piikani and Siksika), Kainai (Blood), Stoney-Nakoda (Bears paw, Chiniki, and Wesley), and Tsuut'ina Nations, as well as the land of Métis Region 3. Nine residential schools existed on Treaty 7 land.

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³ I am also deeply grateful to the attendees of this year's PANAAWTM Conference (Pacific-Asian, North American-Asian Women in Theology and Ministry) for the online chat that provided the clarifying "a-ha!" moment that set this lecture in motion.

My mother is from Japan, and my father was born in Germany, and I was born on Treaty 7 territory in Calgary. My mother immigrated to Canada when she was in her 20s, and pretty much learned to speak English after her arrival. My father immigrated to Canada as a displaced person from Germany when he was five, and also learned to speak English here, although as a child, not an adult, like my mother. The language of my house growing up was English, as was the language of my church. As we would say, my mother tongue, and my worship tongue, was English.

Except that apparently, it wasn't. It wasn't until I was an adult that I heard the story of my mother tongue. It turns out that from the moment I was born, my mother began speaking to me in *her* mother tongue, her mother's tongue – in Japanese. She sang Japanese songs to me, and spoke to me all those words that mothers speak to their babies, in Japanese. Until I was three.

And then, as the story goes, she stopped, because I began speaking Japanese words to my English-speaking babysitter, who didn't understand me. And because, at the time, it was thought – or she was told – that children who grew up learning two languages simultaneously developed language delays. As I was the child of two immigrants, my parents wanted me to do well in school, and so the Japanese words, the mother tongue of my mother, was muted. Only the English, foreign to her, remained.

As an adult, the loss of my mother's mother tongue is a grief, both experienced and anticipated. When my mother dies, I will no longer be connected with my family. I cannot research my ancestors in Japan because I cannot read kanji or speak with my extended family there.

I fear that one day my mother, in her last days, might speak to me in the language of her childhood, in *her* mother's tongue, and that I will not understand or be able to respond.

This loss is also haunting. When I hear Japanese, it is familiar, comfortable, it resonates in my bones, but I have no idea what the words mean. I know a few words here and there, the phrase, "*iko iko, Kayko-chan,*" which means something close to "there, there, little Kayko," is curled in my heart, although oddly when I remember it, it's in my dad's voice. My children have Japanese names, tattooed in fact on my arm, because I cannot lay that language to rest. I know when I speak their names to other Japanese people, I do so with an accent, as a Westerner, and yet I keep trying, hoping that some ancestral ghost will shape my tongue to say the vowels properly, hoping that my own accent will not serve to estrange me from those who are "my people."

And so when people ask me, "what's your first language?" I say English. It is, after all, my mother tongue. It's the language my mother ended up teaching me. My mother tongue was taught to me with an accent.

The same is true for my worship tongue, for my God words. I learned "Now I lay me down to sleep" at home, from both my parents, one with a barely distinguishable German accent and one with a more accented Japanese accent, from people who had to learn those words, "Now. I. Lay. Me. Down. To. Sleep." through translation, interpreting them into their mother tongues so as to understand, and then translating them back into *my* mother tongue so I could.

This was the case especially for my mother, who learned her God-words in what was distinctly *not* her mother tongue. She became Christian after she met my father, and so she learned her words for God in English, from people that – to her – spoke with accents. The Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, the word of Luther's Small Catechism – all these words

were taught to her by (white) others, who were not her mother. To her, they were words spoken and heard with a "foreign accent." But she worked hard at it, and she learned them, and they became her words. And the language she worships in, the language with which she talks to God, that she prays in, is English.

And so they became *my* words, these words of faith: God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit. Taught to me in my mother tongue by my mother, in her not-mother tongue.

As someone who now speaks a good many God-words, who teaches and preaches these words of God to others, I wonder how they are heard: Do others hear my words of God as if I speak with an accent? As if the way I speak is foreign – either because I am new to the place, or because they are? Because we all speak with accents, inherited from our mothers and absorbed from those around us. Each of us speaks with our own unique accents.

Our accents can be comforting to some, a reminder of their parents and their parents' parents. But they can be alienating for others, who must struggle to understand. I don't want to romanticize or fetishize accents, after all, to make the foreign "exotic," because that is still a form of Othering the stranger. Accents can make it very difficult to be understood, both for the listener *and* for the speaker. When we know we are speaking with an accent, we have to constantly work so that we are not misunderstood. We have to find several words to replace the one that becomes unintelligible. We have to rearrange our sentences to give priority to the important words so that our listeners might understand, even if it sounds strange to us. To make oneself understood through an accent is tiring work.

But it *is* important to recognize that we each speak our God language with accents. We each speak of God, and to God, with several accents taught to us by our ancestors, shaped by the communities we belong to. Our accents even change as we move from place to place. And threaded throughout is the shared accent of our humanity. After all, we do not speak God's mother tongue. Our words about God, our God language, our worship language, is accented by our createdness, our earthiness, our humanness. It is foreign to us. God's words must be translated before we can truly understand them: In Scripture, God usually sends an angel to do that interpretive work: the archangel Gabriel has their work cut out for them. "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26 NRSV), and we, in turn, offer our own humanly-accented translations and interpretations of God's words to others.

And so the question arises: How can we worship with words that we recognize are accented? To one another, to God.... How can we speak our worship language when we know that our words might be mistranslated, misinterpreted by others? Or maybe even unintelligible to others?

To begin, it helps to recognize what accents *we* speak with. More specifically, to learn what accents make it hard for others to understand as we communicate God's word, what accents make it hard for others to understand as we speak God's language? As I said before, we speak with as many accents as we are individuals, both inherited and picked up along the way: we may speak with accents of whiteness, of German-ness or Scandinavian-ness, we speak with settler accents, with accents of ableness, of Christian supersessionism over Jews, we speak with the accents of our genders, and our sexual orientations. And these human accents can make it difficult for others to understand our God-words.

Take for example, the accent of whiteness. Our Christian language is deeply steeped in the contrast of light and dark. The first word God utters is, "Light." Jesus is the light of the

world. Joy comes in the morning, as Psalm 30 says that weeping comes in the night, but joy comes in the morning, as light breaks. Holden Evening Prayer, dear to so many of us, including myself, asks God that the light scatter the darkness. We pray that the light of Christ may make our darkness bright.

And yet when we speak these words of dark and light with an accent of whiteness, with an accent of European or Scandinavian ancestry, these words are heard differently. Because our white accent takes light and equates it with good, and takes darkness and equates it with sin, and evil. And the Good News that we think we are proclaiming, that God lifts us out of despair, that God is the source of our joy, that Christ brings us through death to new life, these words are *heard* as proclaiming that people with light skin are people of new life, people of good, people of God. Our words are *heard* as proclaiming that people with dark skin are people of death, people of sin, people not of God. And here's the thing that is difficult: *it doesn't matter what we are intending to speak, because our accents get in the way.*

You see, when *we* speak about light and dark, with white accents, with European and Scandinavian accents, taught to us by our parents, our pastors, our teachers, and their pastors and pastors and teachers, we think we're simply saying "light" and "dark." But for people whose parents and grandparents have been specifically told that their skin was too dark, for people whose not-so-distant ancestors were enslaved because their skin was dark, because that was *not* being made in the image of God, they can hear our inherited accents of racism. To people who have been told that fair skin is more desirable, that their dark skin is dirty, the words, "Let your light scatter the darkness," are heard very differently than we intend them. It doesn't matter what we mean to say, our accents get in the way. What we think we are saying is not what is being heard. We are meaning to point to the hope and joy and inspiration that Christ brings, we are meaning to convey that death is not the end, and that despair is not totalizing, that our Creator continues to create and that God's project of life-giving is ongoing. But when spoken in voices accented with whiteness, with generations of colonialist ancestry, what is heard is light people scattering the dark savages, what is heard is the history of the white civilization of Africa and indigenous North America.

And, of course, we could say that people need to listen more carefully, but we are the ones who proclaim the Gospel with an accent. We are the ones who speak God's words through our own translations, our own interpretations, our own histories. We speak the names of the Bible's patriarchs and matriarchs, of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, of Jacob and Rebecca and Leah, with Christian accents, foreign to those who speak Hebrew and call them *Avraham and Sarah, Itzak and Rivkah, Jakob and Rachel and Leah*. We speak the words of the Lord's Prayer with accents, we can only guess what language it was originally prayed in. The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds were not written in English, but translated and interpreted in oh-so-many ways. Luther's Small Catechism was not written in English, though we teach it that way. And even though we know this, it takes strangers to remind us of this, because we no longer hear "accents" in the voices we have grown up with. It took my husband to point out that my parents have accents. I believe him, but I still don't hear them.

There is an accent I speak with that weighs heavily on me, because I know it gets in the way of certain people understanding me when I try to speak God's words of inclusion and welcome. I'm speaking with that accent right now, and I am guessing that most of you don't hear it because you speak with it, too. Almost all Christians do, I find Lutherans

especially do, although maybe that's because this is who I spend the most time with. And that is the accent of abledness.

We *speaks* the Word, and we *hear* the Word. My accent is one of speaking and hearing abilities. I assume that when I talk about hearing my mother's words, and that when I talk about speaking words of God, that you actually understand and can relate to me. I assume that you, too, have experienced hearing with your ears and speaking with your mouths. But this assumption, this accent of mine, makes it often impossible for people with speaking and hearing disabilities to understand the Gospel when I communicate it. Because when I say, God "speaks" to us and we "listen" to that Word and are transformed, people for whom hearing does not come easily, if at all, must translate that metaphor, must interpret it all over again for themselves.

And that's if they even comprehend it at all. For people for whom the airwaves hitting their tympanic membranes do not actually translate into meaningful concepts, whether for biomechanical or neurological reasons, I might as well be speaking ancient Sumerian, or binary, or in hieroglyphs. For those who have not yet learned even their mother tongue, for those who have reached a point where they can no longer understand any language at all, they cannot understand my word about the Word, they are left behind when I proclaim that the Word transforms the listener.

And yet this accent is pervasive, especially in the Lutheran church. The hymn that defines us, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, contains that line which stirs my heart, but which literally falls on deaf ears to others, "one little word subdues him." (And, as an aside, even to use the phrase "falling on deaf ears" as a metaphor for stubbornness or refusal to obey, refusal to "listen," is one more way in which our accent of abledness gets in the way of communicating God's inclusiveness.)

In our liturgies, we elevate the spoken words, "Body of Christ, given for you; Blood of Christ, shed for you," without noticing our accent of speaking and hearing. We proclaim that the Holy Spirit *calls* us forth, we teach our preachers to speak the Word-that-transforms so that people can understand, without reflecting that some people cannot actually *hear* those words, that these words are just sounds, if that. I can't even communicate this concept to you without my own accent of speaking and hearing abledness coming through.

More painfully, we use phrases like the one I just mentioned, "falling on deaf ears," or even "turning a blind eye," to describe when someone does not allow themselves to be moved by God. Our accents of abledness communicate that *not* hearing or *not* seeing the message of God is a choice, that it is a moral failing of the recipient of that message. We don't stop to consider that perhaps the messenger is the one at fault.

Because, like all "native speakers" of any language, a phrase that really requires its own unpacking through a decolonial lens, we come to think that our accents are normal. Should be normal for everyone. They come to be so normal that we think we don't have one. We are surprised when someone points it out. I didn't know that the way I pronounce, "House of God," was different until I was in the States, and my American seminary friends told me I was pronouncing it, "hoose of God." I didn't notice that the way I picked up pronouncing "God" when I was down there was different until I was back in Canada, and my Canadian pastor colleagues told me I was pronouncing it, "Gahd."

And yet our call is to recognize and to decenter *our* accents as normative when we speak God-language. To decenter *our* way of pronouncing the name of God, *our* way of proclaiming the Gospel, as the one everyone should understand and use. Our call is to

recognize that our mother tongue, our God tongue, is not the mother tongue and especially not the God tongue of those who hear us, and to stop insisting that it should be.

I haven't listed all of the accents with which we speak. There are many more, as many as there are languages in the world, I suspect. We speak with accents of gender, of Christian supersessionism, of sexual orientation, of family. We very often can't hear them ourselves, instead relying on others to point them out to us. I invite you to share the multiple accents you hear in yourself and in others in your small discussion groups after this. But my intention this morning is not to create a list, but rather to point to the broader picture that we *all* speak with accents.

Because this is not to say that accents are a problem, as I hope you understand. I hear a German accent and it reminds me of my paternal grandparents. I hear a Japanese accent and it brings me back to my visits to Japan as a child, when I had no idea what was being said, but still felt surrounded by the love of my maternal grandparents. The point is not to speak without an accent, but to speak knowing that we all have one. The point is to engage in that work of being mindful that we speak the holy mother tongue, the divine language, the words of God, with accents. To become comfortable with expressing ourselves as a second language speaker does, assuming that we will not always be immediately understood, that our meanings will need to be interpreted working to find ways to say the same things using many different words, participating in the struggle to express God's love to the world. The point is also to have patience with the accents of others, to know that they, too, are struggling to speak God's words as God would. To remember that they might not hear their own accents, just as we don't hear ours. To be gracious in interpreting and translating, and maybe even to learn new words for God as we do so.

What accent would Jesus have if he were speaking to us in our midst? Whether he were speaking in English, or German, or Swedish, whether he were speaking in Mandarin, or Tagalog, or Siksika, you can be sure he would be speaking with an accent – something resembling the accent of a modern-day Israeli or a Palestinian. English was never his mother tongue.

By the same token, the church has *never* spoken God language, worship language, unaccented. Our spiritual ancestors, the Christians of the early Church, themselves spoke largely with accents. The very first Christians were almost exclusively Jewish followers of Jesus, who, forty years after his death and resurrection, fled into the Diaspora after the destruction of the Second Temple and the razing of Jerusalem. Their mother tongue, their God tongue, was Hebrew, not the language of the places they carried the Gospel to. Paul, travelling to the church in Rome, in Thessalonica, in Corinth, spoke the words of Christ with an Israelite accent, with a Pharisaic accent.

And even amidst all this, I am reminded of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14 that even as we speak in tongues, our words about God always need interpretation. Even as we speak in foreign divine languages, we need translation. We need others to translate for us, we need to translate for others. We need multiple words to take the place of just one. We need multiple speakers, as on the day of Pentecost, each speaking with their own accents, what must have seemed like chaos but was really Babel in reverse, a cloud of heavenly tongues, speaking the language of God, with human accents, united in their difference.

And where this leads me to in the end is that there is something about holy speech that *always* needs translation, that always needs interpretation. We never have and we never will, until perhaps the eschaton, worship with our words unaccented. Divine speech will always come to us, and through us, through human tongues.

But then again, perhaps it is the other way around, that human tongues, mother tongues, accented words, are as holy as the tongues of the Spirit. And that the accented Word, when recognized as such, can be experienced, if only in part, as a word of welcome.

Siyisgaas. Thank you for listening.

The COVID-19-initiated move to gathering online has provided an opportunity for a great deal of reflection on what it is to be community together. Video conferencing has a democratizing effect: everybody's video box is exactly the same size, arrayed in non-hierarchical rows, with no "front" of the room or raised stage from which speakers address their listeners. People attend from the safety, comfort, and accessibility of their own spaces, knowing that they can mute a speaker or even walk away from the computer altogether if the words they hear are threatening or hurtful. Vulnerable people don't need to fend off unwanted intrusions into their physical space, bathrooms are exactly as we need them to be. "Public" speaking becomes easier when we are surrounded by the sights, smells, and sounds of our own homes. We can speak as hosts to those listening, rather than as invited guests in someone else's space. We can be braver to speak the truth from our own grounding, rather than tiptoeing around words so as not to offend our host. We are freer to speak with the accents of our mothers and fathers without fearing correction.

As we slowly reintegrate physical gatherings into our lives, our COVID-19 reflections will hopefully shape the ways in which we recreate physical community. What are ways in which we can recreate the democratization of speaking that we have experienced online? How can we provide safe and comfortable spaces for those whose homes are the safest places they know? How can we support people to speak more confidently in their own words and with their own voices? I would suggest that as we continue to experience online gathering, we seize the opportunity to notice who is speaking now that wasn't before, and to what they are saying that might be different to our ears; soon enough we will be gathering in-person, and unless supported, those voices might once again fall silent or go unheard.