IRREGULARITIES IN LANGUAGE STANDARDS
REGARDING SACRED WORDS

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Sacred words, the lexical units referring to the concepts of religion and man's relations with the Supernatural, comprise a specific semantic class which has peculiarities on different levels of the language and in the script. The basic feature of the sacred is its segregation from and opposition to the profane, that is, to the whole of everyday life. Sacred concepts and words reflecting them differ in different ethnic groups and historical periods. They have a wide lexical range from the names of animals and natural elements in the primitive state to the religious titles of ancient kings and abstract concepts, such as those peculiar to monotheism.

In modern physics, general relativity shows that matter curves the space around it, causing gravitation. Sacred words have a similar influence on the linguistic space around them, so to speak, by changing language standards in phonetics, morphology, syntax, etc. In my opinion, metaphorically projection of this physical term onto linguistics is a good way to get an understanding of the phenomenon described.

So the object of this research is linguistic irregularities taking place with the words and collocations of sacred meaning. My main idea is that the sacred character of a word affects its functioning in the language system. If the word *snake* becomes a sacred one for a particular nation, it will gain, as the natural result, certain peculiarities (*e.g.*, it may be tabooed). In contrast, *God*, which is probably the most sacred word in the languages that have it, might be de-sacralized in the speech of a nonbeliever; in the latter case it will become an ordinary word and may be replaced by a different one.

Any word can be sacred or non-sacred. This depends, first, on the dominant religious concepts of the nation reflected historically in its language and, second, on the choice of the individual who either accepts or rejects these religious concepts. Thus the problem of sacred words has both objective and subjective aspects.

Taking into account the growing feeling of national identification in many countries, which is a tendency opposed to cultural unification (both caused by globalization), it seems vitally important to study the deeper layers of national cultures. They always take their roots from religious concepts.

Relativity of Language Standard

A language standard is dual. On the one hand it is natural as a logical result of consecutive inner processes of the language system. On the other hand it is conventional as a product of deliberate choice between the possible alternatives, and their codification. Thus, "a language standard is a combination of the most stable traditional actualizations of the language system selected and settled in social communication" (N. Semenyuk, 337).

In S. Pinker (p. 353)'s terms, the conventional aspect of the standard requires prescriptive rules (prescribing what is "correct," normally the basis of native language teaching), and the natural one requires descriptive rules (describing the intrinsic tendencies of the language). "There is no contradiction, after all, in saying that every normal person can speak grammatically (in the sense of systematically) and ungrammatically (in the sense of non-prescriptively), just as there is no contradiction in saying that a

taxi obeys   the   laws   of   physics   but   breaks   the   laws of Massachusetts." (See also www.pinker.wjh.harvard.edu/articles/media/ 1994_01_24_ thenewrepublic.html)

An individual naturally assimilates descriptive grammar simply by the fact of being a native speaker of this or that language, whereas prescriptive rules are purposefully formulated and require effort to be learnt.

Therefore, the main criteria according to which native speakers give preference to a particular linguistic option are as follows:

1. **Capabilities of the language system**. Here, the mechanism of analogy is important. Although some irregular English verbs are moving to the regular group (*learn – learnt/learned, dream – dreamt/dreamed*, etc.), others still fail to produce forms of the past by analogy despite the visible resemblance with some regular ones (*cry – cried* but *buy – bought*).

2. **Stability of the standard**. So-called ungrammatical forms, however, are often very stable and hardly eradicable (*e.g.*, *ain't* in English, *la dije que viniera* instead of *le dije que viniera* in Spanish, and *ихний* instead of *их* in Russian).

3. **Frequency of use**. This criterion, along with that of stability, is also relative, because many frequently used linguistic options are considered incorrect from the prescriptive point of view.

4. **Practicability**. According to this criterion it is clear and unambiguous forms of expression that should be affirmed, and those which are unintelligible and hardly to pronounce, rejected.

5. **Cultural and historical factors**. In spite of the fact that one linguistic alternative is stable, frequent in use, practical, and fits in the capabilities of the language system, a different one that may be given preference thanks to tradition. That is why one should always keep these factors in mind.

6. **Authoritative sources**. Normally, authoritative sources would be the classics of the national literature. Yet this criterion is not self-sufficient because this kind of literature may still include:
– grammatical forms characteristic of a different period in history and contemporarily obsolete,
– dialectal forms, and
– deliberate ruptures of the standard for the purpose of expressiveness (*e.g.*, to characterize through speech).
None of the criteria described is enough to choose a linguistic option as a standard. It is only a combination of them with the first and the fifth ones being of primary importance that constitutes a rule. As for sacred words, however, the most powerful criterion is the last one because as soon as an option in question goes well with the capabilities of the language system, the undisputable authority of the sacred text will trump the rest of the criteria making the option stable, frequently used, and culturally approved.

To sum up, although the very existence of a linguistic alternative is a product of the natural tendencies of language development, the standard enforcing the choice of one of them is a relative concept, for it is based on many criteria which depend on the individual.

Now, here follow some of the examples of linguistic irregularities around sacred words which I have detected in several languages.

Script

In Church Slavonic, *God* had two spellings, a full one – *БОГЪ* – which designated a pagan god, and an abbreviated one – *БГЪ* (with a special mark, ~ *titlo*, tilde) – which referred to true God. *Angel*, *apostle*, and other words could also be written in two ways, speaking of God's or the devil's servants respectively. Very likely this practice dates back to the old Hebrew tradition, where there were no letters for vowel sounds because consonants and vowels have different grammatical roles in Semitic languages.

In the ancient Egyptian language, the pronoun of first person singular *I* had one phonetic form – *i* in transliteration – but various representations in the script depending on the status of the speaker. An ordinary *I* was marked by the hieroglyph , whereas figures regarded as divinities: "I the god" or "I the king," were designated as or . Dr Carl Masthay, who read this paper for corrections, argues that my point in only half valid because, according to him, these two glyphs are just determinants not actually carrying a pronominal sound. At the moment, I can neither accept nor refute this point. There were also special hieroglyphs for a noble *I*, a female *I*, etc. (Sánchez, pp. 44-45; Петровский, *с*. 120) At least three cultural conclusions may be made in the light of this fact.

1. Social stratification was very important in ancient Egypt as demonstrated by a range of signs for different hierarchical degrees: a god, a king, a noble, an ordinary man.

2. Religious concepts were intrinsic to the mentality of an Egyptian as seen in a special designation for a divine first person singular.

3. Egyptians believed in the divine nature of the supreme authority because a god and a pharaoh were represented by the same hieroglyph.

All of these conclusions agree with what is known about Ancient Egypt. It is also worth mentioning that the whole of the ancient Egyptian script like those of many other nations was regarded as something sacred. The very word *hieroglyph* in Greek means 'sacred carving'. It is for religious reasons that Egyptians for 3,000 years deliberately preserved their sophisticated system of writing. That was a combination of ideographic, phonetic, and determinative signs.

Phonetics

In Russian, *Бог* (God) is the only word where the final [g] is pronounced as [h], whereas the rule requires voiceless [k] (*cf. утюг* [ut'uk], *сапог* [sapok]). The explanation is that it is the last word persisting in the old standard, which was a result of Ukrainian and South-Russian influences on Moscow Church pronunciation and consequently on literary language.

Morphology

Article. In Germanic and Romance languages the definite article is not normally employed before the word *God* (German *Gott*, Swedish *Gud*, Spanish *Dios*, French *Dieu*, Italian *Dio*, Portuguese *Deus*), speaking of One God, though this is actually the case when it should be used, according to the rule. "If we say that someone or something is *unique* – that there is only one, or that it is the only one of its kind – we use *the*." (Hewings, p. 114) Maybe this is because *God* is regarded as more of a proper name rather than as a common noun.

Gender. Gender is a grammatical category which reflects ancient mystical views of natural objects and animate beings.

In Latin many names of trees and geographical entities have the termination *-us* characteristic of masculine nouns, still being feminine in grammatical agreement, *e.g.*, *laurus alta*, *cedrus magna*, *Aegiptus antiqua*, etc. This is probably a consequence of regarding them as birth-giving beings, whereas the masculine gender of rivers' names may have had roots in them being viewed as something which fertilizes the soil.

The names of the fruit, however, are neuter: *malus* (an apple tree), *malum* (an apple). It is also notable that in Russian none of the trees' and plants' names is neuter except for the very words "a tree" (*дерево*) and "a plant" (*растение*) because they are opposed to the particular species as generic terms (Одинцов, pp. 65-66.)

Another grammatical gender peculiarity connected to religion is the fact that in the languages of Christian nations *God* is a masculine noun though the human terms of gender are, of course, inapplicable to the nature of the Supreme Being. For example, in Germanic languages, the word *God* changed its gender from neuter to masculine when Christianity had been accepted (*Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*, p. 440). This is, apparently, a result of describing God as the Father of mankind.

This concept is so strong that it may even break the standards of regular gender agreement. As a consequence, semantic agreement takes place instead of the grammatical one. In one of the Orthodox morning prayers in Church Slavonic, past verb forms related to the word *Троица* (the Trinity) are masculine, whereas the noun *Троица* is feminine. Gender is always reflected in the past of the verbs in Church Slavonic, Russian, and some other Slavic languages. "*От сна восстав, Благодарю Тя, Святая Троице, яко многия ради Твоея благости и долготерпения не <u>прогневался</u> еси на мя, лениваго и грешнаго, ниже <u>погубил</u> мя еси со беззаконьми моими, но <u>человеколюбствовал</u> еси обычно и в нечаянии лежащаго <u>воздвигл</u> мя еси во еже утреневати и славословити державу Твою.*" (*Канонник*, p. 6)

In Greek gender has been used to differentiate between the nature of God (neuter) and his Person (masculine), *e.g.*: ο ων – "the Existing One". Masculine, a translation of the Hebrew *Yahweh* in Septuaginta. But: εγω και ο πατηρ <u>εν</u> εσμεν, **"**I and the Father are one" (*John* X, 30). Neuter, here it is important that Jesus is of one divine nature with his Father, God. (Чурсанов, p. 100).

Case. In modern Russian, there is only a small group of nouns preserving the regular form of the vocative case*, e.g.*, *Боже* (o God!)*, Господи* (o Lord!)*, отче* (o father!)*, друже* (o friend!), and some others. They all are restricted in use to religious or poetic texts, and only two of them are employed in everyday speech (often as interjections), namely *Боже* and *Господи*.

In Latin, the declension of the name *Jesus* is another irregularity. In all the oblique cases, except for the accusative, it has just one form, *Jesu*. Here it is, compared to a regular word of the fifth declension:

Case	*A regular word*	*Jesus*
Nom.	exercitus ('an army')	Jesus
Gen.	exercitus	Jesu
Dat.	exercitui	Jesu
Acc.	exercitum	Jesum
Abl.	exercitu	Jesu
Voc.	exercitus	Jesu

The Macedonian language provides one more example of case exceptions. Macedonian is an analytical language and has lost its inflexions. Nevertheless, four words – *човек* (a man), *Бог* (God)*, Господ* (the Lord), and *ѓавол* (the devil) – still have an optional relict form of the oblique case which ends by *-а*, as follows: *човека, Бога, Господа, ѓавола*. (Усикова, p. 143) All of these nouns may be included in the semantic field of spiritual life.

Person and number. The use of *thou* in English and respective verb conjugation ("thou hast," etc.) is a good example of how archaic forms find their last shelter in religious texts.

In the Romance languages, there is an opposite phenomenon of addressing God, the Holy Virgin Mary, and saints in the second person plural, *e.g.*, French "*Je vous salue, Marie*"; Spanish "*Acordaos, oh piadosísima Virgen María*" (*Misal diario y vesperal*, p. 97). Italian has "*Voi, mio Dio, siete misericordia infinita*" (San Vincenzo Pallotti, p. 43.), etc. This is probably the result of projecting the social hierarchy of the age of absolute monarchies onto the heavens.

A note should be made that the second person singular (Spanish *tú*; French, Italian and Portuguese *tu*; Russian *ты*; Greek *σύ*; etc.) is regarded, psychologically, as a sign of intimate relations, with the form of address by the second person plural being quite a late phenomenon.

Tense. The use of the present perfect in the English phrase "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again," as well as the Spanish one, "*Cristo ha resucitado*," may be considered an irregularity since they refer to a particular and fixed event in the past which took place almost 2,000 years ago. The perfect aspect in these quotations most likely means that Christ's death and resurrection is the beginning of a period which still continues (the Christian era) and has an effect on the speaker's life.

The Russian Easter greeting, *Христос воскресе* (Christ is risen), is also a grammatical curiosity. *Воскресе* (instead of *воскрес*) is a form of aorist, one of the four past tenses in Church Slavonic. That does not exist in modern Russian. The frequent use of this archaic form is evidently due to the Church tradition.

Lexis

Here is just a short list of lexical peculiarities of sacred words:
- the phenomenon of taboos and euphemisms (*e.g.*, substitution of ancient kings' names by descriptive titles, as in Egyptian *pharaoh* – 'big house'. See Kemp, p. 63)
- the influence of the sacred meaning on the history of a word (*e.g.*, the use of *church* and *chapel* in Ireland. See Joyce, pp. 143-149)
- word choice (*e.g.*, between *domnus* and *Dominus* in Church Latin. See Desessard, p. 31; Дворецкий, p. 266)
- the combinatory capacity of sacred words and its effect on their lexical surroundings (*e.g.*, the difference in the titles *Holy Virgin Mary* in English and *Пресвятая Богородица* – 'Most Holy Birth-Giver of God' – in Russian, because of her virginity being emphasized in the Western tradition and her being the Mother of God in the Eastern one)
- the vitality of sacred words in fixed phrases of everyday use, even in societies under atheist propaganda (*e.g.*, *С Богом* – 'Godspeed', *Господи* – 'O Lord', *Боже мой* – 'O my God' in the texts of Soviet writers. (Мокиенко, pp. 197-198)

Syntax

The examples of this level are, first of all, syntactic loan translations, that is using constructions of one language in the text written in a different language. The reason for that is the authority of sacred languages, *i.e*., the original languages of sacred texts. Because of the fear of losing a minute detail of the original, translators have often preferred to produce loan models, regardless of their possibly sounding unintelligible in translation.

The Bible, in many languages, is full of various Hebraisms and Graecisms. *Genesis* XXII, 17 in King James's Version is an instance of the former. "*In blessing I will bless* thee, and *in multiplying I will multiply* thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore.*" The words in italics are loan translations of the Hebrew absolute infinitive, which has an intensifying meaning. (Ламбдин, p. 253. See also www.textexcavation.com /infinitiveabsolute.html) So, the phrase may be translated as, "I will *surely bless* thee and *greatly multiply* thy seed."

Conclusion

On the basis of the examples described, it seems well grounded to affirm that irregularities of a linguistic standard regarding sacred words do really exist on different levels of a language. Their main reasons, most likely, are, first, the subconscious aspiration to segregate sacred objects and words designating them from everyday ones and, second, the tendency of archaic features to become concentrated in the field of the sacred because the latter is regarded as something inviolable, and while the language develops new standards, the sacred lexis preserves old ones. Analyzing these peculiarities ethnolinguistically, one may come to interesting conclusions about the respective national cultures. However, it is not yet time to say whether this phenomenon is a linguistic universal or not. The answer to this question remains a matter for further research. Dr. Carl Masthay, who vetted this article, agrees with this.

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