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A Theological Critique of "Learner Autonomy"

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Abstract
Because words reflect the world of a person, Christian teachers of English are called to consider how the linguistic terminology they use intersects with their Christian values. In this article, I present theological issues with the phrase "learner autonomy" (LA). Drawing largely on the work of Kenneth L. Pike, I discuss an alternative to LA that I believe more clearly reflects a Christian teacher's theological commitments.

Key words: dynamism, grammar, Kenneth L. Pike, learner autonomy, phonology, reference, relationality, stability

Introduction

Words reflect the world of a person – assumptions, experience, sentiment. They also shape the thoughts and impressions of others through hearing and reading. This is simply a fact of language. As Kenneth L. Pike (1912-2000) once wrote, "Language bends us, moves us, drives us – or blocks us, holds us, binds us in a word-made mold" (Pike, 1981, p. 4). Language teachers, however, may forget this when it comes to the technical terminology that is embraced in their field. They might tend to think that technical terms are somehow neutral and that they can use such terms without having them infringe upon their own values and assumptions. Such a tendency, I argue, may not serve Christian language teachers well, for assuming the neutrality of a term in one context may mean tacitly accepting its negative connotations in another. While connotations can be tangential to a word's meaning in a separate context, this is not always the case. In what follows, I aim to establish this by examining the concept of "learner autonomy" (LA) from a theological perspective. Then I will suggest some next steps Christian educators can take to glean what is useful from the concept of LA while reforming it from a distinctly Christian perspective.[1]

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[1] This article is not meant to censure Christian missionaries and language teachers who have used "learner autonomy" and related concepts throughout the last several decades. Rather, I take this as an opportunity to reassess this terminology from an explicitly Christian perspective.

Learner Autonomy

"Learner autonomy" (LA) refers to a learner's self-determination and independence in acquiring and using the target language (Brown, 2007, pp. 92-93).[2] As Brown notes, LA is linked to a student's intrinsic motivation. This definition, taken broadly, is widely accepted in the field of English language teaching (Benson, 2007, p. 22).[3] In Harmer's (2007) popular textbook introducing the practice of TESOL, he writes, "To compensate for the limits of classroom time and to boost the chances for successful language learning and acquisition, students need to be encouraged to develop their own learning strategies so that as far as possible, they become autonomous learners" (p. 394). Such a comment conveys the general approval of LA within the field, as does Brown's (2007) treatment of LA as a "pedagogical foundation stone" (p. 70; see also Benson, 2007, pp. 21-22).

LA can be more readily grasped when one witnesses its manifestations in the classroom. Cotterall (2000) notes that fostering autonomy should include the following aspects:

- Students should be made aware of their own goals and objectives, and enabled to identify resources that will help them achieve such goals.

- Students should develop a simple awareness of language learning theory so that they can use this theory to identify strategies and tasks that will move them towards their goals.

- Students should reflect on their own learning experience. (pp. 111-112)

All of these aspects are meant to cultivate *self-directed learners* (Harmer, 2007; but note also Benson & Voller, 1997; Al-Busaidi & Al-Maamari, 2014; Benson, 2007).

Understanding what LA is can help us to see its practical effect in the classroom, along with its pedagogical purpose. As Al-Busaidi and Al-Maamari (2014) put it concisely, "[learner autonomy] is seen as a way to empower students and to make them responsible for their own learning" (p. 2051). Now, it is difficult to take issue with such a concept at first glance. What teacher would not want students to be intrinsically motivated to achieve their own language goals? And self-conscious, reflective learning is hardly a vice. Much of what is associated with LA appears to have only positive repercussions for the learner, and so it is not difficult to see why so many language instructors and researchers have embraced the concept of LA over the

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[2] See Benson (2007, p. 22) for a summary of definitions and developments of LA in the last several decades.

[3] There are, of course, variations and nuances across the field (Benson, 2007, p. 22; see pp. 23-24 on "levels" of autonomy that have been proposed over the years).

last several decades and have sought to foster it in both conventional and creative ways (e.g., Yu, 2013; Hu & He, 2013).

But the appeal of LA does not mean that the terminology and its associated values should be embraced without critical reflection. As stated at the outset, words reflect the world of a person, and we must be careful to examine the world behind this term, especially when we consider the theological connotations for the word "autonomy" and how these connotations are related to the meaning of this term in language teaching. While LA has been used positively over the years and pairs well with a learner-centered approach, I will argue from the perspective of theology that the concept itself runs counter to linguistic assumptions that can and should be derived from sound theology and a biblically rooted understanding of language. A few of these assumptions include the view that language is by nature a relational behavior (inseparable from a network of persons), and that the bits and pieces within language are interdependent, so that language as a medium eschews the notion of autonomy altogether. To make my argument, I rely heavily on the somewhat dated but still highly relevant language theory of Kenneth L. Pike. While I will engage with a few other contemporary views in my critique, I will largely be drawing on his insights.

At the outset, TESOL instructors should note that the uncritical use of LA may have repercussions for both pedagogy and student development. In light of this, it is necessary to offer a theologically sensitive critique of LA that addresses both components (pedagogy and student development). However, before doing this, and because of the complicated nature of teachers' and researchers' interpretations of LA, we would do well to accept a particular definition before going much further. From this point on, LA will be understood more broadly as *a learner's self-directed growth in and independent use of the target language*. "Use" here would represent the micro- and macro-skills commonly attributed to each of the four skill areas – listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Brown, 2007).

To start, I will outline the background of the word "autonomy" in theology. This will bring out some of the connotations of this word and suggest conceptual relations between its use in theology and its distinct but related use in language teaching.

Theological Background for "Autonomy"

In orthodox theological circles, "autonomy" is somewhat of a dirty word. As is the case with the term in linguistic circles, the semantic range of this word in theology is fairly broad, but there are certainly core definitions that are worth noting. Here are a few definitions and uses of the term that clarify its theological meaning.

- Intellectual autonomy is the view that human beings have the right to seek knowledge of God's world without being subject to God's revelation. It first appears in the history of human thought in Genesis 3's narrative of the fall, in which Adam and Eve make their decision to disobey God's personal word to them. In their decision, they affirm their right to think autonomously, even to the point of contradicting God himself. (Frame, 2010, pp. 15-16)

- In a word, the unbeliever lives as if he were *autonomous*, subject only to his own law. Nobody can really be autonomous, because we are all subject to God's control, authority, and presence. (Frame, 2015, p. 22)

- The sinner seeks to be *autonomous*. He will, therefore, seek to set himself up as a judge over that which presents itself to him as revelation. (Van Til, 2007, pp. 225-226)

- The revelation of a self-sufficient God can have no meaning for a mind that thinks of itself as ultimately autonomous. (Van Til, 2008, p. 112)

- If we do not serve God, we will end up serving something, whether that is one of the false gods in ancient Israel, or the god of material success, or human pride, or simply autonomy. (Poythress, 2009, p. 107)

In these examples, autonomy is tantamount to *independence*, if a severely negative meaning is attached to that noun. Autonomy is willful rebellion against a sovereign God; to act autonomously is to act as if God does not exist, or he has not revealed himself, or if he has revealed himself, people are not required to submit to the authority of that revelation. But because Christians believe that God does exist and has revealed himself, both in the world around us and in Scripture, such independence would ultimately be illusory. The only being who is truly independent (autonomous) is the Trinitarian God himself. All else is dependent on him, and so any creature claiming autonomy is living in a fantasy. Likewise, because all things depend on God for their purposeful existence, nothing in created reality can be described as autonomous either. As Frame (2015) noted, "Nobody [and no thing] can really be autonomous" (p. 22). Given this truth and in light of the examples above, theological autonomy (TA) can be

understood as *a person's self-directed functioning and feigned independence from the Trinitarian God of Scripture*.

A few other points should be noted here with regards to TA. First of all, autonomy is understood in reference to God's revelation. Do special revelation (Scripture) and general revelation (the natural world, the human conscience) have any bearing on our ability to understand and function in reality – to act, reason, speak, and carry out a host of other human behaviors? The answer for most Christians is, "Of course it does!" But when pressed about *the way in which* it has a bearing on human behavior, responders are more hesitant. For a moment, just consider the bearing special revelation has on language theory and language acquisition. While this is not the place for a detailed investigation of such major issues, we might ask ourselves initial questions that are drawn from Scripture. How does the fact that God speaks, to himself in the Trinity and to his creatures, affect our understanding of what language is meant to do? If our answer is that language is ultimately a behavior that aims to unite persons, to bring them to commune with one another (Hibbs, 2016, pp. 5-8), then the notion of autonomy in language learning seems odd, at least from a biblical perspective. Autonomy stresses individual competence, not communal engagement. Or, in terms of language acquisition, if our communication is meant to be guided and shaped not only by the greater purpose of language (communion with others), but also by the redemptive work of Christ, who has called us into his one body, then how might we re-envision the way in which we expect others to learn a language such as English? If our ultimate pragmatic goal is to help people clearly speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), and if love is a patently interpersonal behavior, is the concept of learner autonomy – *independent* growth and use of the target language – a biblical tenet of language acquisition? These are the questions that lie in back of this article.

Second of all, in addition to autonomy being considered with regards to God's revelation, autonomy is also closely related to epistemology: the study of how we know what we know. So, one might argue that the theological use of "autonomy" cannot be fairly associated with its linguistic usage. One cannot compare apples (autonomy in epistemology) to oranges (autonomy in language pedagogy and acquisition). However, this would be the case only if we insist on a narrow, compartmentalized view of human behaviors. But being is tied to thought, and thought is tied to language (Hibbs, 2015, pp. 37-39). What we assume and say about one has implications for the others. If we think autonomously (as if we were self-existent and independent creatures),

we are bound to view learner autonomy as a positive goal in language acquisition. And while there are redeeming qualities in the concept of learner autonomy, in this article I am arguing that, given its theological underpinnings, autonomy should not be a communicative goal for language learners. This brings us to the critique of LA itself.

A Critical View of Learner Autonomy

At this point, the issue is apparent: many teachers and scholars within the TESOL field claim that the concept of autonomy is a key part of intrinsic motivation and a necessary component of learner development. At the same time, orthodox, biblical theology avows that any notion of autonomy should be barred from use unless we are talking about God himself. In this vein, Van Til (2008) once asked, "When autonomy is over and over regarded as the root of all evil in theology, why then should it be welcomed in apologetics?" (p. 364). We might add, why should it be welcomed in English language teaching?

Yet, on a more concrete level, is there anything more than a theological commitment that encourages us to exchange the language of autonomy for terminology that better reflects Christian values and assumptions about God and language? After all, it would seem superficial for Christian teachers merely to say, "We do not like what the term connotes." While that may be true, the rejection of autonomy in linguistics must be more substantive than that. And that substance seems to come from the nature of humans as image-bearing communicators and the nature of language itself. If the people who use language and the structure of language itself eschew any notion of autonomy, then it would be strange indeed to continue using and promoting the concept of LA in English language teaching (Little, 2009, p. 223).

At this point, I would like to reintroduce a seminal article by Pike (1985), entitled "The Need for the Rejection of Autonomy in Linguistics." Pike (1985) was adamantly opposed to the notion of autonomy in language itself, not simply because he thought the term was vaguely at odds with his Christian beliefs. He used his theory of language, tagmemics, to draw this out.[4] I

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[4] Tagmemic theory, or tagmemics, is a linguistic theory developed by Pike in the context of 20th century American descriptive linguistics. It began with the principle of *observer perspectives* (particle, wave, and field) through which the *interlocking hierarchies* of phonology, grammar, and reference could be viewed. Within these hierarchies were *tagmemes*, contextual units comprised of four components: class (a group of items structurally replaceable by one another), slot (a unique position in a larger structure), role (a particular function within a construction), and cohesion (systemic relations that bind units together; for example, a plural subject requires a plural verb) (Pike, 1995, pp. 533-536).

feel that we must bring Pike's understanding of autonomy within language to bear on the notion of learner autonomy in the field of TESOL.[5]

The Observer and the Observed

To start, Pike's tagmemic theory rejected the bifurcation between people and language. In other words, there is no such thing as "pure" language – language apart from the people who use it (on this point, also see Benson, 2007, p. 31; Frame, 2015, p. 253; Van Til, 2007, pp. 37-38). He writes,

> A crucial characteristic of tagmemic linguistic theory . . . is its insistence upon a relation between observer and observed; between knower and the item known. Knowledge of autonomous items is denied. Knowledge is seen as a "composite" of an observer component and a component of item as observed.
>
> Tagmemics bridges the gap between person and thing by the concept of emic units [units of human behavior with socially-significant contrasts to other units based on their use] . . . . . The emic approach . . . leads to a rejection of observer autonomy and a rejection of thing autonomy. (Pike, 1985, pp. 42-43)

This is a bit abstract for those not versed in the rhetoric of Pike's theory or in Kantian philosophy, but essentially what Pike is saying is this: language can never be separated from the people who use it. Language is not autonomous because it is always tied to, and dependent on, the people who use it.

Now, when people use language, they choose what Pike called *observer perspectives* through which to see the world, including language (Pike, 1982, pp. 19-38; 1993, pp. 43-54). There were three perspectives that he developed throughout the course of his career: *particle*, *wave*, and *field* (Pike, 1972, p. 129; Poythress, 2009, pp. 56-57). He applied these perspectives to the areas of grammar, phonology, and reference. This is important to note because Pike's rejection of autonomy in linguistics was built on these foundations. For Pike (1985), autonomy manifested itself in linguistics as the assumption that "some area is sufficiently separable to be accessible for study in independence of other parts of the language system" (p. 35). Grammar,

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[5] As a reviewer of this article helpfully pointed out, Pike was not alone in his rejection of autonomy in linguistics. It is well known that he was reacting to the approach pioneered by Noam Chomsky, whose language theory separated language from its real life contexts. Others in the field of cognitive linguistics, such John R. Taylor, have similar critiques of Chomsky and would, it seems, side with Pike on certain points. See Taylor (2007, pp. 572-579) for a helpful summary of the features of Chomskyan linguistic theory and the reaction of cognitive linguistics to it. Taylor also suggests enquiries that might be made concerning autonomy in linguistics (pp. 579-581).

for example, could be considered independently from phonology, or phonology from reference, or reference from grammar, and so on.

Certainly, we can study a linguistic unit in relative independence from a larger context. For example, in the sentence, "Words reflect the people who use them," we can isolate the initial clause, "Words reflect the people," and analyze it semantically (what does it mean for "words" to "reflect"?), phonologically (is "words" stressed in this clause, or "reflect," or "people," or all three?), or referentially (are we talking only about content words, or also about function words?). This would be a particle perspective of that linguistic unit; we fix the boundaries of our inquiry and *choose* to see a linguistic unit *as if* it had neatly defined borders.

But at some point our neat borders of analysis are going to break down and become fuzzy. For example, a semantic analysis of the initial clause would quickly lead us to the conclusion that we must examine what comes immediately before and after that clause in order to better understand what the author means by "reflect." Potential stress patterns in this clause would be indicated by the focus of the surrounding context. But the addition of the relative clause, "who use them," would affect this pattern. The precise reference of the term "words" would, we hope, also be clarified by the immediate context. But because we are now drawing on information from outside of the initial clause, we would be using the wave perspective: examining a *nucleus* (the initial clause) while being informed by the *margins* (both before and after the nucleus).

And yet we could not stop here. The field perspective would have us examine the larger patterns and relations of the discourse as a whole. Where does this declarative sentence, "Words reflect the people who use them," fit in relation to other units of the discourse, and to the discourse as a whole? Where, across discourse units, does the author tend to place a declarative statement, and what sentiment, in particular contexts, lies behind the declaration? Chastisement? Exhortation? Argumentation? The field perspective reminds us that we often must "focus on the network or 'field' of relations between various parts of language. This focus offers a *relational* perspective on language" (Poythress, 2009, p. 55). We have in mind here not only discourse relations, but also lexical relations within a semantic field (e.g., the relation of *reflect* to *indicate*, *mirror*, and *point to*), as well as grammatical relations (e.g., the relation of *reflect* to *reflected*, *reflecting*, and *reflection*), and phonological relations (e.g., the accent patterns for *refléct* vs.

péople; the lowering of intonation at the end of the words *reflect* and *them*, signaling the completion of a clause).

There are two critical points to consider here, one theoretical and the other theological. (1) No observer perspective (particle, wave, or field) is adequate by itself. In Pike's (1985) words, "We need . . . to reject the autonomy of any single perspective of particle, wave, or field (or autonomous static, dynamic, or relational views. . . . Instead we seek a set of complementary approaches" (p. 38). While we can temporarily focus on one perspective, we cannot do so to the exclusion of the others. This leads to the second point: (2) these perspectives are overlapping and interlocking (Poythress, 2009, p. 57), and they are such ultimately because they are rooted in the Trinitarian God of the Bible. The particle, wave, and field observer perspectives interlock and presuppose one another because each of the persons of the Trinity has intimate communion and interpenetration with the others without threatening or eclipsing the personal distinctions. The persons of the Godhead are not considered in isolation from one another. They are distinct, certainly, as the creeds of orthodoxy have always maintained, but they are also *one* God. We will discuss this theological concept later in the article (for background on this, consider Frame, 2013, pp. 479-481; Hodge, 2013, p. 462; Bavinck, 2004, p. 302; Kelly, 2008, pp. 489-493).

Grammatical, Phonological, and Referential Hierarchies

Pike paired his rejection of the autonomy of any observer perspective with the rejection of the autonomy of the three major "hierarchies": grammar, phonology, and reference. Our comments here can be brief, since we have already introduced an example and seen how elements of a triad interconnect and overlap.

For the sentence, "Words reflect the people who use them," there are obviously grammatical constituents: nouns and pronouns (*words*, *people*, *who*, and *them*), verbs (*reflect* and *use*), and a definite article (*the*). These constituents are part of a larger grammatical hierarchy that includes phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, and larger discourse units. Each element within the hierarchy is dependent upon those around it for meaning and significance (Pike, 1985, p. 41). So, within grammar, no unit in the hierarchy is autonomous.

There are also phonological features of our example sentence: phonemes (the *s* in *words*, indicating plurality), consonant clusters (*rds* in *words*; *ct* in *reflect*), long and short vowels (the *oo* in *who*; the short *e* in *them*), stressed syllables, stressed words, and patterns of intonation

across a clause. As with words in the grammatical hierarchy, "sounds do not exist, as relevant to speech communication, except as components of larger groupings of sounds" (Pike, 1985, p. 41). Within phonology, there is no autonomy of units.

Lastly, in our example sentence there are referential features: objects or phenomena in reality to which the words of the sentence point. *Words* in this sentence likely points to units of oral or written discourse; *reflects* points to a physical meaning (e.g., *water reflects the sky*) that has been adapted metaphorically, and thus points to the phenomenon of "indicating" or "suggesting." *Use* refers to the array of pragmatic ends to which the words can be put. As with grammar and phonology, referential units of language are intelligible only in relationship to the rest of the referential world. References form a web of relations, not independent objects. So, within the referential hierarchy, there is no autonomy of units.

Now, in addition to these hierarchies having no internal autonomy, they also have no external autonomy. By this we mean that no hierarchy stands by itself; each is integrated with and presupposes the other hierarchies. Take away the grammatical units, and there is no phonological or referential data. Take away the phonological units, and there is no grammatical or referential data, and so on and so forth. These hierarchies are mutually dependent upon one another (Pike, 1985).

In short, for Pike (1985), "Things are not autonomous. Ideas are not autonomous. The universe is not autonomous. Linguistics is not autonomous. We are hooked – together" (p. 49). Language is not autonomous because the observer perspectives people use to view language are interdependent and reject the notion of autonomy, as do the grammatical, phonological, and referential components of language itself. Pike's (1985) approach, then, "leads to a rejection of observer-autonomy and a rejection of thing-autonomy" (p. 43).

Pike, we should note, is not alone in his critique of autonomy in linguistics. Even proponents of LA in the TESOL field have begun to question its validity and usefulness. For example, Nunan (1996) has warned others that autonomy cannot be considered absolute.

> Autonomy is not an absolute concept. There are degrees of autonomy, and the extent to which it is feasible or desirable for learners to embrace autonomy will depend on a range of factors to do with the personality of the learner, their goals in undertaking the study of another language, the philosophy of the institution (if any) providing the instruction, and the cultural context within which the learning takes place. (p. 13)

What Nunan has said about LA in terms of its desirability and the cultural context applies to Christians in the TESOL field, especially those who, like myself, work for a Christian institution. I would add here that the "personality" of all learners is relational because every learner, from a Christian perspective, is a creation made in the image of a relational God – a God who relates to himself in three persons.

Others, such as Benson (1996), have noted that evaluations of autonomy, even by its adherents, "are by no means universally positive" (p. 27). He also suggests that, "Autonomy is a multifaceted concept with political, psychological and philosophical ramifications. Its application in the field of language learning is highly problematic . . ." (Benson, 1996, p. 27). We could add here that it also has significant theological ramifications. Yet, perhaps even more relevant to us is a third point that Benson (1996) makes: "Nobody has yet succeeded in developing a version of autonomy that specifically takes into account of the nature of language and language learning" (p. 27). This article is aiming to do precisely that: to take into account (from a Christian perspective) the nature of language and language learning as primarily relational. Language learners are dependent on one another to build communicative skills, and language itself is comprised of interdependent hierarchies.

With regards to this final point on the nature of language, if neither persons nor the language they use is autonomous, what is the pedagogical impetus behind using the terminology "learner autonomy," and how might this negatively affect our own teaching as Christian educators?

Potential Effects of Assumed Autonomy in Language Pedagogy

The goal behind LA is functional independence at a certain level of proficiency in the target language. Couched in this vocabulary, LA seems harmless, at worst; virtuous, at best. But, based on the truth that words reflect the worlds of a person, we should be puzzled as to how Christians and one of the most critical human faculties (language) could be pushed toward a concept that is utterly opposed to their nature as interdependent and relational. In light of this, it is not inappropriate to consider potential problems Christian language teachers might face with regards to pedagogy and student development if this terminology remains in use. What follow are initial thoughts about these problems based on my own observations as a language teacher.

My hope is that these problem areas might lead to further research in the field of Christian English language teaching.

Learner Isolation and Anxiety

Because autonomy suggests independence and self-sufficiency, one of the potential negative effects of LA is that learners may experience an increased level of isolation and attendant anxiety. The more LA is pushed, the more teachers might encourage their students to think of themselves as isolated, separate communicators who receive little to no help in the expression and negotiation of meaning. This can ultimately lead to increased anxiety in the learner, because he or she is pressured to develop a certain proficiency level *apart from other students*. In my own teaching, I have seen instances in which students at a lower proficiency level were marginalized from the group and expressed increased anxiety due to such marginalization. They became more anxious test takers, more doubtful of their communicative abilities, and less aware of their communicative strengths. LA is related to such a phenomenon. Students who cannot "go it alone" are *left* alone, and this may be linked with an emphasis on, or at least a refusal to challenge, the assumptions espoused by LA.

There is, of course, truth to the standards that LA is driving towards. Students, for example, will not have their peers with them at a job interview. They need to be somewhat stable in their ability to communicate accurately and effectively with other speakers of the target language. But in this example, the interviewer is there to receive and negotiate meaning with the speaker. The context of communication is relational. In other words, there is no such thing as autonomous pragmatics; language use always occurs in relationships, and that means that someone else is always with the non-native speaker, trying to understand and communicate. "Communicative autonomy" is a contradiction in terms.

Compartmentalization of Grammar, Phonology, and Reference

Another potentially negative effect of LA is the encouraged compartmentalization of the grammatical, phonological, and referential hierarchies. If we drive learners toward autonomy, there would be nothing to keep them from expressing their so-called "self-sufficiency" in an attempt to compartmentalize and control such hierarchies. This may result in various communicative errors for the student.

If elements within the grammatical hierarchy were treated as autonomous, then errors such as the following would be likely: "Since the fall of Adam and Eve, the effects of sin are all around us."[6] The tense of the linking verb seems correct to a student who has compartmentalized the hierarchical component of verb tense. The effects of sin can be seen all around us in the present, so "are" seems correct. But the verb tense in this sentence is dependent on the word "since," which establishes that action in the past has a bearing on the present. So, we would write "the effects of sin *have been* all around us." Compartmentalization of elements within hierarchies can often lead to inaccuracy or lack of clarity.

Similar problems would occur in reference and phonology as well. Word stress in the previous example depends on the referential context (what the words are meant to "point to"). Different stress and intonation patterns would be used depending on whether this sentence occurred in discourse on (a) how long sin has been corroding creation; (b) how obvious it is that sin is a real problem for us; or (c) how extensive the effects of sin are. Constituents within these stress and intonation patterns would be dependent on the stress and intonation of other elements in the sentence, paragraphs, etc.

With regards to phonology, a question often has rising intonation at the end, but this intonation must be matched by the grammatical form of a question: we need to say, "How *is* life affected by the fall?" not "How life is affected by the fall?"

A New Proposal

More can be said, but I believe the critique is clear at this point: the notion of LA introduces problematic assumptions about the nature of people and language. What Christian English language teachers need is a set of terms that can describe learners in a way that is (a) theologically sound, (b) pedagogically useful, and (c) pragmatically accurate (reflecting the way in which language actually functions). Rather than using the term "learner autonomy," I propose that Christian teachers use a triad of terms to develop learner growth in a target language: *learner stability*, *learner dynamism*, and *learner relationality* (Pike, 1993, pp. 47-54; Poythress, 2009, pp. 51-56). These terms are felicitous with Christian assumptions about people and language, help teachers better guide and direct their students, and reflect the way language is used in reality.

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[6] This example, along with the others in this section, are based on actual student errors.

Learner stability (LS) is related to some of the positive insights of LA, such as students taking initiative in the classroom, tracking their progress towards focused learning goals, and looking for opportunities to use the target language outside of the classroom (Brown, 2007, pp. 70-71). All of these elements presuppose the student being "stable" at appropriate depths within the grammatical, phonological, and referential hierarchies. "Appropriate" here depends on the student's communicative context. For example, a learner without a clear understanding of modal verbs in English can be misunderstood as rude or demanding by a native English speaker. "You give me your phone" sends a very different message from "May I use your phone?" In this sense, the learner might be considered "unstable" in that he or she cannot stand on his or her own feet in conversation. So, students need to be taught goals for stability in various contexts. Below is a brief list (by no means comprehensive) of what LS might involve (Brown, 2007, p. 259).

- Throughout the class, learners work with the teacher to discover their areas of greater and lesser stability in grammar, phonology, and vocabulary. This might include noting a weakness in question formation or phrase structure, but a strength in lexical breadth; capitalizing on a student's strong sense of body language while setting specific goals for syllable and word stress; or targeting vocabulary acquisition and collocations.

- Learners practice noticing grammatical, phonological, and referential features of language in new contexts. Students may listen to a lecture and record questions about intonation patterns. Or, they might try to use a certain number of vocabulary words in the next course paper they write, or underline new vocabulary they encounter in another article or book. The important thing is that such practice take place *outside* of the classroom and that there is follow-up, which leads to the next item on the list.

- Learners reflect on their practice in a "Learning Journal" (Harmer, 2007, p. 400). This will also help them to learn from their errors, or, in Brown's words, to let their errors work *for* them (Brown, 2007, p. 268). Students can also write down when they feel that they are unstable, i.e., at a loss for how to communicate. Such situations will lead them, once more, to work with the teacher in identifying an area of strength or weakness.

- In conjunction with the teacher, learners end a course by developing a "Stability Strategies List." The purpose of such a list is to provide strategies to help the student regain stability in the event that he or she encounters a "de-stabilizing" communicative event. For example, if a student is unable to understand a course reading, the student might go through several steps to build active and passive vocabulary, thus working towards comprehensibility.

The benefit of LS is that it presupposes community and engagement with others, not autonomous functionality. Learners can be stable without being autonomous. In fact, since

learners can never truly be autonomous, stability is the highest goal attainable. While we must affirm that learners should "be fully aware of their own strengths, weaknesses, preferences, and styles, and be able to capitalize on that metacognition through the use of appropriate action in the form of strategic options" (Brown, 2007, p. 261), we cannot treat such "awareness" and ensuing action as autonomous. *Others* must help us to become aware of strengths and weakness, of preferences and strategies.

Learner dynamism (LD) reflects the student's growth and progress. Learner stability will turn to learner stagnation if there is not growth in targeted areas. Setting goals is perhaps the obvious way to address LD. These goals, again, can be categorized as grammatical, phonological, or referential (lexical). A student struggling with the correct use of prepositions might set a goal of memorizing twenty verbs and twenty nouns followed by prepositions, along with a list of ten transitive verbs followed immediately by a direct object. A student struggling with pronunciation might select several key words (chosen based on the student's context and in relation to frequency in that context) to practice pronouncing throughout the class.

Similar goal-setting can be done with grammar. In the past, I have given students a chart of the thirteen most common sentence structures in English, along with examples and a list of verbs they can use for each structure (Biber, Conrad, & Leech, 1999, pp. 141-152). Students then fill in their own sentences based on the examples. They can set goals to use certain of these sentence structures in an actual course paper.

Learner relationality (LR) refers to (a) a learner's ability to see relational components within the grammatical, phonological, and referential hierarchies; (b) a learner's ability to use grammar, phonology, and reference in a way that reflects their interdependent and interlocking relationship; and (c) the ability of the learner to relate to other speakers in the target language. The following list illustrates potential goals for LR. (Each goal is marked with "a," "b," or "c" to indicate which component of LR it references.)

- The learner can use various forms of a word grammatically (LR_a). Here, students practice their ability to be conscious of the relation of word forms to a grammatical "slot" (Pike, 1982, p. 75). For example, the student can use *redeem*, *redeeming*, and *redemptive* appropriately in a given sentence.

- The learner's word stress clearly conveys the intended meaning (LR_a). Word stress is understood in a relational context, within a pattern of intonation. The learner can select a few intonation patterns to practice using in order to express nuanced meaning.

- The learner can write and speak questions grammatically (LR$_b$). Here, the interlocking relationship between grammar and phonology is brought to the fore. "Can I do this?" requires not only the placement of the helping verb before the subject, but also rising intonation on the phrase "do this."

- The learner can use selected words with appropriate collocations (LR$_b$). Here we see the interlocking relationship between reference (vocabulary) and grammar. While collocations can be considered a lexical issue, the "use" of the vocabulary words and their appropriate collocations requires a stable understanding of grammar.

- The learner can appropriately engage in discussion on a theological topic (LR$_c$). This goal involves turn taking, recovery strategies (self-correcting), appropriate pausing, etc. Each of these skills requires "relational competence," i.e., knowing when and how to exchange discourse with others.

LS, LD, and LR are – like the grammatical, phonological, and referential hierarchies – interlocking and interdependent. They must all be present in a learner in order for that learner to function in the target language. When one is in focus, the other two are in the background.

Recalling the beginning of our discussion for this section, we can say that, first, these terms – learner stability, learner dynamism, and learner relationality – are *theologically sound* because they are rooted in the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. Throughout Scripture, God the Father is described as changeless and immovable. He is the unbegotten *I am* (Exodus 3:14). The world is a burning wick in the wind, but God is light eternal. He is utterly stable, the one "with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (James 1:17). Stability in learners presupposes the stability of the Father.

The Son is eternally and necessarily begotten or "generated" from the Father. He is the *speech* or *word* of God (Bavinck, 2004, p. 273). The Word, as Son, is the dynamism of God, who is renewing all things (Revelation 21:5). Dynamism in learners presupposes the dynamic Word of the Father.

The Spirit *proceeds* from the Father and the Son. He associates the Father and the Son in eternal fellowship. The deep association between the Father and the Son, a "mutual fellowship and indwelling," is what "reflects the character of God the Holy Spirit, who indwells us" (Poythress, 1995, p. 192; Bavinck, 2004, p. 278). This association and fellowship is what grounds the relational (interconnected) nature of language. So, learner relationality presupposes the Holy Spirit, who relates the Father and Son.

Ultimately, LS, LD, and LR are interconnected because the persons of the Godhead have such intimate communion that "each is in each, and all are in each, and all are one" (Augustine, *De Trinitate* 6.10, quoted in Collins, 2001, p. 211). In the Trinity, there is a perfect concinnity of stability, dynamism, and relationality. We have, in other words, theological grounds for the concepts of LS, LD, and LR.

Second, in addition to being theologically sound, these terms are pedagogically useful because they better reflect the multifaceted nature of the learner. Human observers (i.e., language users) and language itself both eschew autonomy. People are more complex than a balance of dependence and independence. They are creatures who make choices. Language, as well, is more complex than a tool for communicative control; it is an unfathomably deep faculty rooted in the Trinity, and each component within it is dependent on others for its meaning and significance. Knowing this as Christian teachers, we can guide learners towards stability in their most relevant communicative contexts (LS), help them identify areas for growth (LD), and teach them to see the interconnectedness of the grammatical, phonological, and referential elements of language as they strive to relate with other creatures made in God's image (LR).

Third, these terms are pragmatically accurate. Language in use presupposes the grammatical, phonological, and referential hierarchies. Every instance of language offers an opportunity to see how components within these hierarchies are interdependent and how each hierarchy contributes to form, meaning, and use.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that learner autonomy (LA) provides an opportunity for Christian teachers to reform the use of terms within the field so as to reflect their theological commitments. This is an exercise for Christian teachers in striving to "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). In addition to leading to other areas of further research, this article, I hope, encourages Christian teachers to begin exchanging "learner autonomy" with terminology that better reflects their theological stance with regards to the nature of creatures made in God's image and the nature of language itself.

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