

# Brazil News



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Editorializing

## **On Seat belts and Air bags**

Science used to be “the systematic study of the structure and behavior of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment” (Oxford Dictionary of English).

Politics, on the other hand, were “the activities associated with the governance of a country, or area, especially the debate between the parties having power” (idem).

Science was science and politics were politics.

No longer.

In a promiscuous abuse of the laws of nature and of governance, politicians today are masquerading as scientists. And some scientists are corrupting their findings in exchange for political acceptance.

We begin with a term that not so many decades back wasn't part of our vernacular, but today is tirelessly splashed across the front page of dailies in bold print.

GLOBAL WARMING. For some it is the battle cry for immediate action to save the planet. For others it is a phenomenon that has occurred countless times during the ages in which such natural occurrences were either not recorded or lost to the ravages of time.

We are deluged by scientific findings of the tens of thousands of tons of man-made pollutants that are spewed into the atmosphere daily. To some this represents the apocalypse of mankind. Others remind us of volcanic mountains that in aeons past doubtlessly darkened portions of the earth with clouds of ashes scattered by winds. (Global cooling?)

The phrase attributed to Billy Graham to “Go to the church of your choice,” directed to those who were converted during his evangelistic campaigns, can now be applied to today's hot issues (climate being punningly “hot”):

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Go to the politicians (read as: to the political party) of your choice.

Go to the scientists of your choice.

Go to the news media of your choice.

Or even, Go to the geographical area (state) of your choice.

We will have at our disposal truckloads of arguments to bolster the position we have chosen. Yet, with our gray matter already on overload, it seems a bit insensitive to increase our cerebral burden with something about which we can really do nothing. Possibly the greatest demonstration of wisdom can be found in the proverbial ostrich, that buries its head in the sand and tunes out the surrounding world.

### THE PANDEMIC

Another hot issue, but differently from climate change, on which we can hardly assume a neutral stance. Worldwide over five million deaths are attributed to the covid virus. Contrary to global warming, this is not an issue that we can approach by burying our head in the sand. Facts are facts – or at least they used to be.

When I was a youth some 60 decades ago, polio was a very real threat. One of my high school classmates walked with a pronounced limp because of a bout with polio as a child. The world was overjoyed when in the mid 1950's Sabin and Salk announced breakthrough vaccines that granted protection against the dreaded poliomyelitis.

We could go into detail about smallpox, diphtheria, cholera, and many other highly contagious diseases that historically killed millions worldwide until the development of immunizations. Today there are vaccines for measles, mumps and other less known diseases that pediatricians routinely prescribe for their patients. These vaccines are so successful that we forget that without the prick of a needle or a few small drops, there would be many small mounds of earth in our cemeteries.

I have no recollection of ever hearing of organized resistance to immunizations that save lives – until recently.

What has changed?

“You’re not my boss!” When small children are at play, it isn’t unusual for parents to hear one shout at the other, “You’re not my boss!” If this unfortunate behavior goes uncorrected, it is possible that one day this delectable expression will be directed toward the parents and eventually toward society.

(I remember well the day, when seven or eight years old, I tried a watered-down version of this outburst on my mom when she was giving me some clear direction on proper behavior. I said, “Isssssss thaaaaaaat soooooo?” What happened next convinced me that to say it only one time was once too many. Unfortunately, my mom is no longer around to apply her methodology on today’s society.)

Until not too many years ago the north star of logic and common sense orientated men and women as new situations or crises arose and important decisions had to be made. This gave them the ability to analyze objectively the end result of their choices. Thus, as medical science announced new life-saving vaccines and procedures, there was no hesitancy. No laws had to be enacted to force compliance.

Things are no longer this simple. It is now considered to be a constitutional right

to be one's own boss. This goes far beyond the subject we are now addressing. Society believes it is their constitutional endowment to decide what is right and what is wrong. Laws that for decades were accepted as right and just are now challenged in court. Individuals do not see themselves as above the law, but "as the law". This is the adult version of "You're not my boss!" toward authority.

Is there an explanation for this new mentality?

There are, in fact, a number of contributing factors. For sake of brevity we return to the original thought of the reversal of roles of politics and medical science. Increasingly, the attitude toward the pandemic is defined on party lines or the influence of populist leaders (see the previous issue of BN). By using the "findings" of unscrupulous medical authorities, politicians are becoming de facto medical authorities. Worldwide, this has resulted in hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of needless deaths.

As we review the last one hundred years, it is absolutely unconceivable that each new life saving vaccine or medical procedure would have been rejected by a third of the population and its efficacy challenged in court. We can only shudder to imagine what life would be like today if this would have taken place.

As we attempt to get, or keep, our balance on this issue, we must remember that mistakes have been made by medical professionals. The world has become a classroom in which sometimes the best approach to complex, mutating viruses must be learned by trial and error. To accuse the medical profession of incompetence is a slap in the face of highly dedicated professionals who work tirelessly, risking their own lives, to assure the well-being of billions.

Is social distancing necessary? Are masks useful? Should vaccines be gratefully accepted as a modern day miracle? Or as a threat greater than the virus itself? If we do nothing will it all just go away?

The common denominator of the choice we must make is clear. Are we going to place our lives in the hands of scientists or politicians? Please answer the following questions and reach your own conclusions:

- When your child falls out of a tree and lies unconscious on the ground do you call 911 or the city hall?
- When you develop symptoms of covid infection do you call your physician or your congressman?
- When you begin having daily headaches and dizzy spells, do you contact your family physician or the governor of your state?
- Do you believe that social distancing, wearing a mask and vaccines are...
  - 1) For your own protection?
  - 2) For the protection of others?
  - 3) Both of the above?
  - 4) Neither of the above?

It is said that two men met , one wearing a mask and the other without. The one without opened the conversation.

"I'm not wearing a mask and am aware of the possible consequences. I take full

responsibility for my actions. You, on the other hand, are wearing a mask and are protected. So neither of us should complain.

The other replied, “Let’s suppose I am an alcoholic and have the unfortunate habit of driving while under the influence. I am aware this puts me at risk and assume full responsibility for my actions. You, on the other hand, never drink and drive. This means you too are safe. After all, your car has seat belts and air bags. So neither of us should complain.” ▲

(Incredibly, shortly after finishing this article, I found the following news item in The Washington Post. It confirms what has been said about how polio vaccine was accepted. If interested, type into your browser: **Washington Post The school that pioneered polio shots will give kids the corona virus vaccine, too**. Then click on “The school that pioneered polio shots will give kids the corona virus vaccine, too”. It will show you how times have changed.)

## Linguistics

### **The Mother Tongue and Other Tongues**

At the beginning and middle of the last century many Mennonites were bilingual. Not unusually, German was the mother tongue and English the other tongue.

I don’t know how many spoke original German, as spoken in Germany. My grandparents spoke German, probably a hand-me-down of the original. They also spoke Dutch, and here I insert that it troubles my sensibilities to call Dutch a language. It hardly even qualifies as a hand-me-down. I won’t attempt to pin a name to this mode of communication.

So far as I know no book or serious (not even non-serious) exposition was ever written in Dutch. It has no grammatical rules, no established verb conjugations, and of course, no dictionary. Thus, in defiance of all rules of conventional grammar, the illiterate could speak Dutch just as fluently as someone who has an advanced education. Indeed, I suspect in some cases, more fluently. Amazing, to say the very least.

Even more amazing is that Dutch speaking folks absolutely loved this mode of communication. They wouldn’t exchange their Dutch for Greek or Latin or Spanish or Italian – not even for the real German. Dyed-in-the-wool Dutch adherents can express absolutely anything in Dutch better than in English. But, there is a caveat that needs to come to light.

Dutch is so expressive because when in doubt on how to say something, it shamelessly hijacks English words or phrases. These immediately became part of the Dutch lexicon.

During World War II, Navajo Indians were used to transmit top secret radio messages in their native tongue. Contrary to what we are discussing, the Navajo

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language was so pure and unadulterated, free of hijacked words, that it was impossible for those intercepting their communications to decode them.

Not Dutch. Not by a hundred miles. Anyone with a working knowledge of the English language can pretty well get the gist of what was being said.

I never spoke Dutch, but understood it perfectly (really makes no sense), but when we cousins would be in a huddle to tell stories, and it was time for my girl cousins to make their contribution, they would say a few words in Dutch. That was the signal to edge our heads into the middle of the circle so they could talk in a stage whisper. It was melodramatic. And even I, who don't label Dutch as a real language (maybe reluctantly only a step-mother tongue), must admit that those stories told in hushed, conspiratorial tones, would leave us glued to our seats – that is, if we could have managed to remain seated.

So much for that. We fast-forward to Brazil.

Portuguese and Spanish are first-cousins-once-removed. And here is something for which I have no explanation. Educated Brazilians, who of course speak Portuguese, can understand almost everything these first-cousins-once-removed are saying. But, most Spanish speaking Latinos, can understand almost no spoken Portuguese. And even stranger, the majority of them are incapable of learning fluent Portuguese. They learn how to adapt their Spanish enough to where it becomes understandable. But their accent... step aside folks! It's enough to make the needle of a seismograph twitch nervously.

A few of us who moved to Brazil spoke Spanish. We had studied some Portuguese before moving, so that served as a crutch when we got here. Even so, we stepped on the gas and learned Portuguese as fast as we could. Pages could be written about the linguistic mishaps suffered by a bunch of foreigners who did their best...

My dad-in-law, Denton Burns, and his family, moved to Brazil some months before we did. That, of course, made him an undisputed linguistic authority. But, after we had been here for some weeks, I noticed that when he introduced me to his Brazilian friends, he would say, “Este é o meu gênio.” He meant to say that I was his son-in-law. One day I said to him, “Pop, I don't believe that word ‘gênio’ means what you think.”

“And just why not?!”

“Well, as I understand it “gênio” means genius, and not son-in-law. You are telling people I am your genius.”

It happened that our little conversation occurred on the “fazenda” of the people from which we purchased our first tract of land. The owner's wife was close by. He turned to Dona Ana, and in his most positive voice asked, or almost demanded, “O Charles é meu gênio?” (Is Charles my genius? – meaning to say son-in-law.) Either she didn't understand a word he said, or her analytical skills were severely impaired, for she vigorously nodded her head, indicating that I indeed was his genius. Triumphant dad-in-law continued introducing me as his sapient son-in-law. Quite frankly, that is one of the nicer untruths that have been told about me through the years.

(The correct word for son-in-law is “genro”)

Today most of those living in our communities are either native Brazilians or

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the children or grandchildren of North Americans who moved to Brazil. As can be imagined, most speak Portuguese – some more fluently, some less.

In Brazil, especially among the more educated, English spoken fluently is the golden key that unlocks the door to endless opportunities. For an adult to learn a foreign language – any foreign language, even “Dutch” – fluently enough to be confused with a native speaker, is more difficult than to become a doctor, or a lawyer, or an engineer...

In fact, to acquire a truly workable knowledge of a second language as an adult (children can do it effortlessly) is not easy and usually requires years of effort. A “workable” knowledge means being able to face almost any new situation without getting the shakes. Mistakes are still made, but they don’t detract from the message. Interestingly, there are those who fluently speak corrupted Portuguese (or possibly any other acquired language) without an accent.

Each language has its own pitfalls. Except for those who extensively study the language, usually for linguistic purposes, I doubt if one in a hundred dominate the intricacies of the Portuguese subjunctive verb mode. Even less, if any, totally dominate gender sensitive nouns, pronouns, adjectives and adverbs. Embarrassingly, even native children navigate this without a slip.

A truly native speaker is one who learned the language as a child and for whom it is the mother tongue. Let’s talk about this a bit...

A mother tongue is not learned. It is absorbed, a systemic process. A case in point is the little two-letter word, “it.”

Children know how to use. Comes naturally. Why should be difficult for people learning Portuguese, for example? Or doesn’t make sense to you? Get? Yep, in everyone of those sentences the little word “it” was missing. In Portuguese that is perfect grammar, for it does not use the equivalent of “it”.

Portuguese, on the other hand, has the gender sensitive words. The little word “the,” is either masculine or feminine, *and* singular or plural. So are nouns and pronouns. On the human anatomy the...

head (a cabeça) is feminine and singular,  
neck (o pescoço) is masculine and singular,  
eyes (os olhos) are masculine and plural  
nose (o nariz) is masculine and singular  
tongue (a língua) is feminine and singular  
arms (os braços) are masculine and plural,  
legs (as pernas) are feminine and plural  
And so on, ad nauseam.

Little American children grow up knowing how to use “it” perfectly, without anyone teaching them. Little Brazilian children grow up using gender and number perfectly, without anyone teaching them.

That, folks, is an example of what the mother tongue is all about. Learn as a child and never make a mistake. Learn as an adult and never attain this perfection. Here on the Colony, those who learned Portuguese as older children or adults – even the most

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proficient who have expended a lot of time and energy to learn correctly, occasionally slip up (including the editor of this little paper).

You can't learn a mother tongue or ever speak it perfectly. Only become really good at imitating it.

For decades international airline companies did their best to hire Mormons. Because of their intense proselyting programs abroad, learning foreign languages was a priority. Thus their services were at a premium in their public relation desks.

We don't have the practice of emulating the Mormons. But that doesn't mean we can't learn from something they are doing right. If we are going to be perfectly honest, our lack of emphasis on linguistics is costing us dearly. No one better than the Mission Board, or missionaries themselves, to calculate how many accumulated months and years are lost on foreign missions where missionaries must learn a new language from scratch.

There have been a flurry of inspirational youth rallies lately. If a little pep talk could be given, asking the youth if they have ever considered learning a foreign language. The Mission Board or Tract Board could be consulted beforehand about which languages would be more useful. Optimistically, groups and chats could be formed with emphasis on a particular language. This would not, of course, mean that they would eventually spend time on a corresponding mission. But it could prepare them to be fill-ins when missionaries were on furlough, or aid in the literature program.

Sad stories could be told about how missionaries with only a rudimentary knowledge of the language were obligated to use translators with little or no Bible knowledge, nor of the Mennonite culture. As the missionaries became more proficient in the language, they discovered they had been using tracts and Sunday School material that at times didn't even resemble the original.

Now a word to anyone who wants to, or needs to, learn a foreign language.

Rule 1: Learn your mother tongue WELL. Have a functional vocabulary, become acquainted with the rules of grammar. Speak correctly.

Rule 2: See rule 1.

Rule 3: See rule 2.

Rule 4: Absorb yourself in the language you are studying. Read your Bible in that language, pray in that language (the Lord is polyglottal and will understand), when someone is near who speaks that language, don't miss a chance for a conversation (or ask questions about some doubts you have).

Rule 5: Read. Read. Read. Read children's stories. Read progressively more advanced stories. Study the history and culture of the people speaking the language you are hoping to learn.

Rule 6. Never stop learning. The moment you conclude you know enough, be assured you don't.

No one asks you to learn your own mother tongue. It's a gift.. But to learn other tongues, that takes an effort. This effort can become a gift to others. In fact, the Bible calls it the *gift of tongues*. ▲

## Diligence

*[I just ran across an article published in BN no. 7, from December 1991. I am going to excerpt a few paragraphs.]*

The Bible teaches diligence in all things... [We] seem to have come up with the idea that this doesn't include correct speech...

Sloppy language has absolutely no redeeming quality...

Why should speaking as correctly as possible be a conscience matter?

It is by our words that we tell the Good News of Salvation. Can you think of one reason why this should be done sloppily?

Someone who speaks sloppy English will also be sloppy in a second or third language. To know English correctly is a tremendous help in learning a foreign language...

If we don't speak correctly we can't expect our children to speak correctly. If language isn't important, neither is math. Nor are multiplication tables. Nor is spelling. Through correct speech we have the opportunity of teaching our children diligence...

If you are thinking of someday going to a foreign field, or if you are thinking about learning a second language to be useful in answering letters the Tract Board gets from foreigners, begin by studying English grammar. Learn more than work-around solutions. Learn the rules. Learn what the different verb conjugations are called. Learn the different parts of speech. Learn the rules of punctuation. Learn to spell correctly. Everything you learn in English will have value in a second language...

There is no such thing as a born translator or interpreter. One is born with the gift, but it needs to be developed. Do your best to develop it in your native language before becoming involved in a foreign one...

## Changes

Recently we mentioned that a site is being developed for BN publications. It should soon be on the air. It will contain the text version of the current edition, and gradually add back issues. Also, we hope to have an audio version for those with visual problems. We will keep you informed of developments.

## Correction

In BN212, page 3, third from last paragraph it reads: "I have approximately 40 megabytes of data stored on my computer SSD drive..." It should be 40 gigabytes.

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