

Language

This final talk is about the difficulty we all have with the social implications of what we say, both as children and as adults. When I was young we lived in Australia because my Father had been lent to their Navy just before the war. My Mother was always amused at the way I spoke "Strine" to our mates and English to her. She was very keen to give us both an English accent. She was quite successful with me but less so with my young brother - as she found out when our Father met us on our return from Australia. We were in a crowded wartime bus and Peter's Strine voice could be heard by all (whether they wanted to or not). My Father (in full Naval uniform) was trying to help him remember their last meeting a couple of years before. Suddenly Peter electrified the bus by announcing "I remember you, You was in bed with Muvver." The roar of laughter showed that this was just what the other passengers expected from a sailor.

It is very easy for parents to forget that the way their children speak are echoes of words they have heard from their parents or friends without fully understanding the meaning or implications. I am sad when I hear toddlers being told off for having used swear words of which they did not understand the meaning. In the early days of learning to talk the child can only guess the meaning from the context - which can be difficult enough even for adults. One of the important ways in which Quakerism differs from most, if not all, other religions except possibly Buddhism, is that we do not attach critical importance to specific words or phrases. We believe that to understand words fully, you must be inspired by the same spirit as the one who spoke them. We value the Bible, and indeed many writings from earlier Christians - and indeed others - but we do not see them as authoritative, as the final answer. All need to be tested against that loving Spirit which we find most clearly in Jesus.

The only one who ever really understands what is meant, is the speaker. We must learn to be gentle with one another and not be ready to take offence with what we hear because it is very probably only an approximation of what the speaker means to communicate. I hope that some of the things I have said this week will have made you pause for a moment's thought, even if you didn't agree with me. Thinking about these questions is the way to grow in understanding.