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September 13, 1957

Mrs. L. Allen Higley  
University Gardens, Apt. A-2  
Newark, Delaware

Dear Mrs. Higley:

I have just returned from two months in Europe during which it was my privilege to attend several very inspiring conferences of the International Council of Christian Churches and also to participate in an International Congress of Orientalists in Munich, Germany at which thirteen hundred scholars from all over the world were present. There were most interesting discussions of archaeological and Biblical matters, and I was extremely glad to have the opportunity to take part in it.

Your letter of August 21st interests me greatly. To call language "man's greatest achievement" is actually rather ridiculous. If we were to call it man's greatest asset, or man's greatest possession, that might be a better title.

There is no evidence from a purely naturalistic viewpoint to show how language originated. Many theories have been formed but they clash with one another. There is no agreement upon them. In primitive areas in many sections of the world, people are found speaking languages differing utterly from one another. These languages, however, are often highly developed, sometimes far more complicated than the languages that are used in more developed areas. It would seem to me to be quite evident that the human being has in himself a potentiality for language. He is not born with the knowledge of any particular language or type of language but with a language gift which is lacking in animals. He has the possibility of learning a language and becoming able to express even quite abstract ideas in it. A child learns the language from hearing people talk, and before many years is able to express quite complicated ideas. This is true even in the most primitive lands. Even if animals constantly hear human beings talking, they do not acquire a similar ability beyond a very rudimentary extent.