



Analysing Religious Discourse

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This book was conceived and partly written BC (before coronavirus), and partly during the crisis (evidenced by mentions in the chapters on *Interaction*, *Institutions*, and *Education*), and will be read PCE (Post-COVID Era) in a world that is already being described as a 'new normal'. If this proves to be the case, then many of the insights into religious discourse presented in this book will provide a basis for the new interpretations that will one day prove to be necessary.

Linguistics is used to 'new normals'. Indeed, a recurring theme in this book is the way linguistic paradigms of enquiry have shifted over relatively short periods of time, from diachronic to synchronic in the early decades of the twentieth century, from formal structure to social context in the later decades, and from description to explanation as the new millennium approached and the field of pragmatics added a fresh perspective to the study of discourse. This latter topic is especially important. It comes to the fore in Lu and Shurma's chapter on *Rituals*, with its use of the notion of pragmemes to throw light on the choice of language formulae in rituals, but it surfaces in several other chapters:

- in relation to gesture (Turner, *Multimodality*): 'gestures . . . serve pragmatic functions, highlighting key areas of the message and direct the hearer's attention to particular elements that the speaker deems important';
- in relation to translation (Wilson): 'an understanding of translation is only as good as the linguistic and pragmatic theory in which it is embedded';
- in relation to inter-religious dialogue (Wolf): 'Another area that has so far been under-researched is the application of Pragmatics categories to analyses of inter-religious language'.

It lurks beneath the surface in the others, even though they may not explicitly use the term. All the writers in this book invite us, in one way or another, to ask the question 'Why is religious language the way it is?'; and pragmatics, as a branch of linguistics, evolved to focus on exactly that.

As with every other theoretical concept addressed in this book, pragmatics has several definitions. Mine is as follows (Crystal, 2020, and elsewhere): 'the study of the choices people make when they use language in particular situations, the reasons for those choices, and the effects that those choices convey'.

This definition helps to explain the many approaches to be found within the subject. The content listings of any two textbooks on pragmatics can look very different: some focus on a description of the choices themselves (as in stylistics), some on the reasons (as in psycholinguistics, with such notions as intention and relevance prominent), and some on the effects (relating formal features to such social variables as age, gender, role, class, and occupation). The notion of situation has also to be explicated, for it includes synchronic and diachronic (historical) dimensions, the latter involving change that is both long term (such as, in the present context, the differences between the English of the King James Bible and that of the present day) and short term (such as the switch from Latin to the vernacular in Roman Catholic liturgy in the second half of the twentieth century).

The study of religious discourse within linguistics hovers somewhat uncertainly above all these facets, and its character has changed over the years, reflecting the academic fashions of the time. In the 1960s, the focus was descriptive: what formal features identify religious language? A generation later and the focus had shifted to the social function of these features. I reflect this shift myself in two papers on the language of liturgy in Roman Catholic and Anglican settings, one written in 1964, called 'A liturgical language in a linguistic perspective' and one 25 years later called 'A liturgical language in a sociolinguistic perspective' (see References). In the first, the focus was solely on the syntax (word order), morphology (word structure), lexicon, phonology (sound system), and graphology (orthographic system) of the genre. In the second, the focus was on the functions that these features convey, using the kinds of categories that today are very familiar (and reflected in some of the chapter headings in this book): to convey information, signal identity, express emotion, initiate changes of state (performatives), sanction historical traditions, facilitate thought, maintain community rapport, and provide aesthetic appreciation. In the interim, of course, the formal features had themselves changed, with new translations and liturgical practices altering the norms in both denominations.

There is plenty to describe in religious discourse, for the phonology (especially the prosody: Hammond, 2015), grammar, and lexicon of this variety makes it one of the most distinctive in any language, as is evident when samples from different genres are stylistically compared (as in Crystal and Davy, 1969). Such descriptions, however, have inevitably been partial and selective, exploring only certain kinds of texts, or certain time periods. Also, most of the published accounts in those days focused on English, with only occasional reference to other languages. Rare indeed to see a description of religious discourse in a language from outside the Indo-European family (an exception is the collection of papers in Samarin (1976), where we find Telugu, Hebrew, Zuni, and other languages comfortably co-existing).

Those days? These limitations are still being felt, as illustrated by comments in the present book:

- on the study of sacred texts (Vermeulen): 'very few studies actually focus on the language of the text as their main topic';
- in the context of trans-linguaging (Wolf): 'questions that concern the original religious texts in Hebrew, Greek, Arabic, and Aramaic are often written about in English. More attention could be paid to how these ancient languages and the way they are used in a given context affects our ability to engage in dialogue across languages';
- in relation to conceptual metaphor (Richardson): 'not enough focus is given to how particular conceptualizations are affected when they are expressed in English rather than the original source language'.

The dominance of English is clearly a concern, voiced in several contributions, such as Dorst:

it is not uncommon in both publications and conference presentations on metaphor (in any text type) to present only idiomatic English examples without the original language data and any kind of intermediate gloss translation . . . Studies on metaphor in Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and other spiritual schools of thought may not reach the centre of metaphor scholarship – as published in A-journals and presented at large international conferences – if these researchers are not working with English data or publishing in English.

When it comes to 'future directions', a stronger comparative linguistic presence in the study of religious discourse has to be a priority. But even within English, there is evidently much to be done by way of description. A comparative stylistic perspective is needed here too, as illustrated in Wilson: 'the translator of religious discourse needs to focus on how religious language works, which will involve investigation into how religious language differs from other kinds of language use'. It is inherent in the notion of diglossia, addressed in Rosowsky's chapter on *Community*, where we encounter different varieties of English whose linguistic relationship warrants further investigation (the devil lies in the detail – here, what is involved in 'might vary slightly'): 'in Anglican English-speaking congregations, a particular religious register of Standard English arguably prevails in sermons, hymns and in other domain-specific genres. This register's linguistic proximity to Standard English might vary slightly from one context to another but no one experiences it as an incomprehensible or alien variety'. It is there again in Turner, which argues for a multimodal analysis of ritual: 'how spiritual belief is conveyed, not only linguistically but through a conjunction of other modes such as movement, gesture, posture, sound, and image'. It also has a diachronic dimension, as pointed out in Warner in relation to the notion of

interdiscursivity: 'the construction of meaning does not happen in isolation but in relation to prior texts and the ever-evolving social influences of culture and ideology'.

Above all, hypotheses about religious discourse need to be tested – not only by the use of case studies, well illustrated in this collection, but by the use of corpora. In a sense, corpora have always been with us – any collection of sacred texts can be viewed as a corpus – but the kinds of corpus now routinely available in linguistics allow fresh kinds of investigation, as seen in several chapters of this book: the use of keywords (S. Pihlaja) or collocations (Lu and Shurma, Richardson), and above all in Dorst, where we see how a theoretical notion (conceptual metaphor) can be tested against a corpus of actual discourse. The author concludes: 'We need a better understanding of what real believers do with metaphors in actual discourse – what these metaphors mean to them and how they adapt and shape the metaphors' meaning in line with their cultural values and expectations, personal experiences and communicative purposes'. The role of a corpus is critical here. Individual intuitions can generate hypotheses a-plenty, but only a present-day corpus can test them. (That temporal adjective is important: early twentieth-century corpora contained only a few million words, whereas corpora such as the Bank of English mentioned in Chapter 14 have billions.) And the testing needs to be global, especially when we are dealing with a domain of usage that claims universal relevance. Corpora such as the Corpus of Web-based English (GloWbE) will prove to be increasingly valuable in this connection (for a site giving details of corpora see the references: Mark Davies).

It would be satisfying if a study of an aspect of religious discourse could be called definitive. But the ever-present fact of language change militates against any such naivety. Experience teaches us that whatever religious discourse was like last year, it is likely to be different this year and to be different again next. This is a theme introduced at the very beginning of this book (Warner): 'religion is very much a dynamic entity, and it is always changing through the ways that people experience it ... Neither religion nor interaction are static entities, and this fact is what makes them both fascinating and challenging to study.' The point is taken up in other chapters, such as Rosowsky, where the notion of a 'linguistic repertoire' is challenged 'by conditions of rapid change in patterns of human mobility and modes of communication (including electronic ones)'. This chapter also draws our attention to an especially intriguing aspect of change: 'the growing use of English for devotional purposes, leading to an even greater variety of discursive interactions, modes and genres through which young people negotiate their religious and linguistic identities'. Once upon a time, linguistic change

was thought to be a relatively slow-moving process. Not any more. The Internet has seen to that.

Online communication is another 'new normal'. Whether we call it 'electronic' (as in Rosowsky), 'computer-mediated' (as in relation to identity creation in Ringrow), 'digital' (as in B. Pihlaja), or by some other name – Netspeak, Cyberspeak, Netlish . . . – the fact is that the arrival of this new medium of discourse has changed everything. From a world where language study focused routinely on only two major mediums of linguistic communication, speech and writing (I say 'routinely' so as not to forget the study of sign languages), within one generation we encounter a third, and the emergence of a new area of research, Internet linguistics (Crystal, 2011). Online discourse is different, in that it blends the two traditional modes (as when we *write* emails, but talk about having an email *conversation*) and offers novel communicative techniques (such as hypertext linking) and opportunities (email, texting, social media . . .). It's not an exaggeration to say that all previous linguistic generalizations, based on analyses of traditional speech and writing, have to be re-examined to see whether they hold up in online situations. In some domains, there is little evident change (many Web pages are like any traditional piece of writing); in others, there is a more radical shift, as in the new conventions that characterize short-messaging services (such as texting abbreviations and Twitter hashtags). New stylistic varieties have emerged, such as blogging and instant messaging, and we see new trends in spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, along with a great deal of new vocabulary. And – as more than one Internet article has been headed – 'we ain't seen nothin' yet', for the online medium has hitherto been predominantly graphic, and we have yet to see the flowering and the linguistic consequences for discourse of 'voice over the Internet'.

All of this is being sensed by several contributors to this book. In Chapter 6, we read of 'the proliferation of rhetorical contact by a wider variety of rhetors on and via internet'; in Chapter 7, of the Internet as an 'agent of change . . . where the translation of religious discourse flourishes', especially with the increased availability of major texts and online translation tools; and in Chapter 16, in relation to identity, where digital religious communities are seen alongside non-digital communities as 'a key area for linguistic researchers to explore, especially in terms of how language helps construct and maintain such communities, and how language conveys key beliefs and key identity markers'. These communities were once viewed as fairly stable, but in Chapter 3, we are given a different view, prompting the rethinking of linguistic repertoire as 'tied to membership in relatively stable speech communities': 'Instead, global conditions of migration and new communication technologies may allow (or constrain) participants in moving between various more or less short-term group formations across the lifespan.' In Chapter 18, our attention is

directed to sacred texts, where, despite the 'fragmentary and ephemeral' character of online reading, there are likely to be effects in terms of meaning production that need investigation, 'looking, for example, whether Jonah's experience in the fish results in another meaning for the text when read in a digital form'. The comparative issue arises again: 'Rereading may also differ in digital and non-digital contexts, such as whether the digital sacred text is read or rather listened too or viewed. Meaning construal work could also be affected, with the addition of background knowledge with hyperlinks, adding knowledge many readers do not have when reading a sacred text on paper.'

Also noted is the arrival of the cellphone (Rosowsky): 'the now ubiquitous use of the mobile phone to access, download and store liturgical language resources . . . allowing for liturgical language practice to be supported in an ever-increasing range of contexts and situations'. The point is explored in detail in the chapter on *Media* (S. Pihlaja), where the contributor points out that religious believers 'now read their sacred texts on their phones, with apps providing them with personalised devotional readings or alerting them to the call to prayer or guiding them through mediation practices'. A very important point follows: 'Seeing a clear delineation between a person's online and offline religious practices has become increasingly difficult and there is little reason to believe that in the short to medium term, the integration of technology in the day-to-day interaction of religious believers is likely to become less pronounced.' The conclusion is inescapable:

The analysis of media texts and the processes of mediatisation must therefore be central to any study of religious discourse, at least in understanding the contexts of interaction. As mobile technologies continue to proliferate and become increasingly integrated into the social world, the processes by which they change, manipulate, and adapt to individuals must be at the forefront of religious discourse analysis.

It is indeed going to be a brave new world, which has such media in it. It is not simply that the use of electronic technologies is becoming routine – as Rosowsky puts it, 'a regular part of some acquisition practices with software, data projectors and iPads mediating the liturgical languages of various faiths'. Rather, there has been a shift: 'the move from the communal experience to the individual one. Traditional liturgical language practices have centred on communal rituals and ceremonies. The move to an online religion experience has often resulted in a more private experience.' Just as fundamental is the view we read in Lytra concerning 'the increased significance of digital technologies in sustaining and transforming language use and in creating new religious practices and identity options'. We are encountering 'the development of more individualised forms of religious expression and the concomitant fragmentation of traditional religious authority', a development that raises questions

regarding 'what might count as authentic religious practice in the twenty-first century' (Lytra, *Ethnography*). In the Post-COVID Era, as one might now say.

PCE. This is where I came in. COVID-19 is a perfect illustration of the rapidity with which the process of social, and thus linguistic, change can happen. It is already anticipated in Gao and Thondhlana, in the context of faith in education, where the writer suggests that one result of the crisis could be that religion 'may play a more pronounced role in people's lives'. Already, by June 2020, there were reports of shifts in behaviour as a result of the move to online events. In the world of literary festivals, for example, the Hay Festival, held every year in the small town of Hay-on-Wye in Wales, usually attracts a physical audience of several thousand, but online for the first time, as a result of lockdown, the audience was around half a million. Priests and ministers streaming services were also reporting an unexpected increase in daily attendance – something for which there was clear evidence in the attendance analytics – and articles were being written about the development of creative thinking to promote what is being called 'home liturgy' (as in Lamb, 2020). Communities have found new ways of coming together using such technologies as Zoom, with traditional liturgical practices, such as homilies, prayer groups, and hymn-singing, being given a novel online incarnation. I found myself engaged in just such a development, as a consequence of places of worship being in lockdown, that would have been inconceivable just three months before: constructing a website for an audio reading of liturgical texts (www.lectionaryreadings.com). The consequences for religious discourse are unpredictable and have yet to be explored. But it is already possible to see some of the linguistic issues.

Anyone who has taken part in a conversation or discussion group online will already have had experience of some of these issues. The crucial factor is the lack of simultaneous feedback – the listener vocalizations (*mhm, yeah, huh?*), body movements, and facial expressions that form an essential part of face-to-face conversation. Without these to give speakers a sense of how the interaction is going, they feel isolated and their speech is affected as a consequence. In a one-to-one interaction, such as via Skype, unpredictable time-lag alters the dynamic, leading to uncertain pauses and overlapping speech. In a multi-participant setting, such as a Zoom room with gallery view, a speaker cannot maintain eye contact with the people in the various screens, turn-taking cues are either absent or need to be established artificially by the host (such as: if you want to speak, raise your hand), and there is the ever-present visual distraction of idiosyncratic movements and interruptions in the home settings – even auditory distractions, at times, if the participants' microphones aren't muted. To use a term from sociolinguistics, there is no *accommodation* – the feature of behavioural interaction that describes the way participants in a conversation influence each other (sharing accents, gestures, stances, choice of dress, and so

on). Discourse situates the speaker to speak a particular language.

An ethnographic approach, as reported in Chapter 1, is dialogue, what speakers do in an isolated home party. Is there a pause? Speak the language of the response made by the speakers who rely on affirmations (Auer, 1970). Correspondents respond? In response, should they do? Speak without vocalizations in the congregation. The liners to 'speak for' are able in a new and not at all clear.

The same issues arise in the celebrant giving an address to elicit a reaction (cross), how does the celebrant take part in an address pointed out in Chapter 1 in any religious address. In any religious address, aspects of that address does the substitutive? Will they stand to the east? Will they have been given linguistic clothing the occasion in the person? One would

I wouldn't go to church in Mass wearing the National Theatre. sermons, I've found

But I did get down

An extreme case asked to exchange community. B

on). Discourse situations involving unison speech – as when a congregation unites to speak a prayer – are especially affected.

An ethnographic study of the new situations, along the lines of the one reported in Chapter 3, would be of particular interest. In a setting where there is dialogue, what should the leader of worship do? Leave a pause for the isolated home participant to give the expected response? And if so, how long a pause? Speak the response aloud? And if so, at what speed? Play a recording of the response made by a reader? The issue is especially problematic for speakers who rely on vocal response, such as the formulae that elicit listener affirmations (*Amen! Alleluia!*) in some spontaneous sermons (Rosenberg, 1970). Correspondingly, in such settings how should isolated listener/viewers respond? In response to a greeting, such as ‘The Lord be with you’, what should they do? Say the response (‘And with our spirit’) out loud? Think it without vocalization? Ignore it? Some ministers say the response on behalf of the congregation. Some utter only the longer responses, leaving the short one-liners to ‘speak for themselves’. There is great diversity of practice – inevitable in a new and rapidly evolving situation – and the long-term effects are not at all clear.

The same issues arise in relation to nonverbal behaviour (Chapter 5): if the celebrant gives a blessing, or some other gesture that would normally elicit a reaction from the participants (such as a bow, or the sign of the cross), how does the isolated viewer behave? And if a viewer intends to take part in an online service, what preparations would be made? As pointed out in Chapter 6, ‘the material world remains a mediating force in any religious practice, organizing adherents’ language use’. So which aspects of that world are to be replicated in the home environment? And does the substitution of these affect the nature of the religious experience? Will they stand or kneel as required? Will they position their body relative to the east? Will they make use of icons? And, to take an example that has been given linguistic expression in the neologism *upperwear* (that part of the clothing that can be seen on screen), will viewers ‘dress up’ for the occasion in the same way as they would when attending the event in person? One writer reported her experience (Jones, 2020):

I wouldn’t go to church in my PJs but, I must confess, I’ve sometimes been to a virtual Mass wearing them. And, just as I’d pause the livestreamed Coriolanus from the National Theatre, mid-act, to put the kettle on, I do the same at Sunday Mass. Some sermons, I’ve found, are better with a strong coffee in your hand.

But I did get dressed, and even put on lipstick, to attend the papal weekday Mass ...

An extreme case is what to do at the point in a service if a congregation is asked to exchange a ‘sign of peace’, or some similar act of solidarity with the community. Before lockdown, when the coronavirus risk was becoming

evident, people were already being advised not to shake hands or kiss, but to use some other gesture, such as a socially distanced namaste – a replacement that has been given a lot of publicity due to its increased use in political and other settings. What does an isolated viewer actually do, if the celebrant initiates it? Or will awareness of the problem mean that this kind of interaction is to be omitted? And if omitted, what is the effect on the viewer's overall sense of participation in the event? The closure of places of worship means that activities involving physical contact (such as the taking of communion, the use of water, or the sharing of an object such as a candle) are impossible – and even when these places reopen, there will be measures in place to maintain some sort of physical distancing, at least for the immediate future. What happens to the discourse at such moments? Discourse creativity can be the result. Traditional formulations may need to be adapted, or new prayers composed, to give participants a sense of presence in the truncated service.

The point is especially relevant when we consider the way these issues relate to young people, especially in religious situations where the average age of the worshippers is high. How is this generational gap to be bridged? The online encounter with religion will not in itself present young people with a problem, for this is their world. They are well used to an environment where the screen is central and books or other written texts are marginal. The problem is a pragmatic one: how to present religious discourse in such a way that it is intelligible and appealing. And who is to take responsibility for devising these fresh approaches? The senior members of a faith community are typically not in the best position to advise, for they grew up in a pre-Internet era, and for many, the new technology is alien. For them, books and traditional written texts are central and the screen is marginal. There may even be antagonism to the new medium – or to the language used within it, just as there was in the early 2000s, when text messaging received a largely negative response in the media (Crystal, 2008). And indeed there are challenging problems in working out ways in which the screen can be incorporated into situations of worship without disturbing the sanctity of the events. But the problems have to be faced, for they are not going to go away. The observation in Lytra applies: 'if as educators we wish to honour all children's languages, literacies, heritages and histories and we are committed to supporting and sustaining inclusive and pluralistic pedagogies then more attention needs to be given to children's religious practices and identities'. This now has to include a respect for their use of digital communication.

In a PCE world, everyone may find themselves becoming increasingly dependent on digital technology as a means of maintaining communication among a dispersed community or one which has been locked down. It will not be enough to explore what happens in public places of worship. As the editor says in his introduction to this book: 'Everyday interaction, where institutional

discourse is worked out and used in real life, is harder to track and trace, but its position within religious belief is essential for understanding how religions emerge, develop, and change over time.' In the case of digital technology, there are well recognized issues of how to obtain reliable data without contravening considerations of privacy. We need much more information about the ways in which this technology can be used to best effect in the various domains of religious discourse in these circumstances, and – even more important – about the attitudes of worshippers to this technology. Although it's good to see moves in this direction (Pihlaja, 2018, Rosowsky, 2017), I sense a sequel, one day: *Analysing Online Religious Discourse*. I think that will probably solve it.

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