

Foreword to Valerie Hobbs, *An introduction to religious language: exploring theolinguistics in contemporary contexts* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

The study of language always needs two perspectives, which are sometimes summarized under the headings of 'structure' and 'use'. The first looks at the nuts and bolts - the sounds, spellings, structures, words... The second looks at how these elements are put to use in real situations. Some people talk about a 'bottom-up' approach for the first and a 'top-down' approach for the other. Or 'micro' and 'macro'. The terminology varies, but the insight is constant: the study of a language, dialect, or - as in this book - variety (or genre) needs both, and the trick is how to bring them together. Should one start at the bottom and work up, or the other way round?

Rare indeed is it to find both perspectives neatly integrated in the study of a genre, but that is what this book manages to do. I have found my understanding of religious language greatly enhanced by the combination of the two perspectives. How has Valerie Hobbs done it? By placing the notion of context centre-stage. And by recognizing one of the central facts about language variation: that there are no sharp divisions between the conventionally recognized genres. Language users pay little respect to boundaries. We may hear echoes of sports commentary, advertising, journalese, science, law... in everyday conversation at any time, and any one of these varieties might borrow from any of the others. And so it is with religious language.

But on what a scale! I already knew that the language used within the confines of a particular religious text regularly bursts its cerements and can be encountered in all sorts of unexpected settings, from advertising to zombie films. I brought together hundreds of examples in my *Begat*, an exploration of the influence of the King James Bible on the English language, written for the 400th anniversary. But what I did not do in that book, and which is done so beautifully here, is to step back and see how that kind of diffusion leads us to a deeper appreciation of the role of religious language in life and thought. As Valerie Hobbs puts it in her final chapter, she wants to propose 'a theory of religious language which extends beyond the language of devotion for a sacred supernatural to the depth and breadth of language that encodes what we value and what hate and fear the most, both as individuals and as communities.' In my view she has admirably succeeded.

Much of the success is due to the way she has brought corpus linguistics into the arena. I have not seen this done before, except sporadically in the occasional article. Certainly never in an introductory book, and so systematically. Yet it is essential, for it provides the empirical basis for observations that otherwise would be ungrounded impressionism. It is easy enough to claim that religious language, however defined, spreads into other domains. The trick is to prove it in ways that go beyond the anecdotal. Her exploitation of the various corpora is a major feature of this book and provides the kind of evidence we need to test hypotheses about the presence of the sacred in everyday life. And an extra level of conviction comes from her own anecdotes, which - in its references to such topics as Brexit and Donald Trump - adds an up-to-date dynamic to her argument that corpora dating from a few years ago cannot provide. 'Contemporary' is another important word in her title.

But there is a rhetorical dimension to all this. All studies of language varieties are, in their individual way, minefields, for as soon as we ask why a variety is the way it is, we encounter questions to do with the nature of society that go well beyond the linguistic. Valerie Hobbs does not shirk addressing these issues, and it is the honest and open-minded account she gives of the way people vary in their use of and response to religious language that is a hallmark of this book. It is all done with an enviable clarity of exposition. I especially like her thematic anticipations and recapitulations, her thoughtful follow-up questions, and her reiteration of signposts to show the reader how the argument is evolving. She is somewhat apologetic about



doing this, but she does not need to be, for it helps readers to keep their heads above water, in a subject where it is all too easy to drown.

I have learned so much from *Religious Language in Contemporary Contexts*. It is a book that takes the study of religious language to a new level. Having worried a few years ago about where theolinguistics was going, I am now convinced that it has a bright future.

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