13. The Language of Religion

4. Literature (in Auswahl)
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1. Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics, the study of language in relation to social realities, examines religion only because it is another domain of human behavior where language is an important component. Its primary allegiance is to linguistics, the science of language. Within this discipline it has its own goals and methodologies. But because it is socio-linguistics, it draws from and contributes to a wide range of studies. It will be useful to summarize what is meant by a sociolinguistic examination of religion, for when we talk about 'the language of religion' or 'language in religious practice', we mean something quite different from what philosophers and theologians mean by these expressions.

The way people use language is our concern. (Speech, instead of language, might be a more appropriate term if it were not for the fact that every means of linguistic expression must be examined, the written no less than the spoken.) Linguistics deals with the complex system of rules (the grammar) that permits a set of speakers abiding by the rules to verbally interact with each other. In contrast, sociolinguistics studies the ways speakers select products of their grammar (one might call them texts or discourse) according to social variables. Sociolinguistics is concerned therefore with choices or decisions that speakers make (a) where the linguistic code (or grammar) permits and (b) where these choices have cultural significance. — It is axiomatic to our approach that speakers of all languages, according to the patterns of their respective speech communities, have many ways of speaking that require selection, according to what — in a given setting — may be obligatory or more appropriate. (The meaning of any choice is, of course, a separate problem.) Even in a monolingual community there are different ways of talking. If there is a formal manner distinct from an informal, it differs, for example, in vocabulary, sentence structure, and diction. There are frequently other options as well: different dialects (rural vs. urban, working class vs. middle class) or different languages. In a broad sense, any of these ways of talking can be called a language; and if it is consistently used with religion, it would be appropriate to call it the religious language. The linguistic repertoire of a community is only one of its sociolinguistic dimensions. Another set of variables is represented by the genres of discourse: conversation, narrative, prayer, divination, or sermon, for instance. These have linguistic features that submit to careful analysis and description.

In another sense, then, a religious language is the product of the intersection of language variables of different sorts within this one domain of human experience. It is this localization of ways of using language in a given sphere of social action that attracts sociolinguistic attention, for we expect to find here, as elsewhere, linguistic means responding to social motivation and having cultural meaning. The motives for linguistic choices stem from such factors as place, time, topic of discourse, participants (role of speaker, nature and size of audience), or nature of
the speech act. One needs only to think of different sorts of Protestant prayers to begin to understand how these variables intersect with each other to produce such prayer events as invocations, blessings, and meal-time prayers. For meaning we need only find a recognition of what is deemed appropriate. It may be acceptable in a given Protestant church to use contemporary pronouns while praying in Sunday school, but the main worship service requires the use of *thee* and *thou*. For every speech community, whether it be a whole denomination on a national scale or the congregation of one church in this denomination, there are taken-for-granted expectations for the way language will be used and for what purposes: at ritualized worship services, weddings, funerals, or hospital visits by the clergy, for example. — If sociolinguistics brings a new perspective to religious studies, as indeed it does, we should expect to learn more about the nature of religious practice: how it is structured and how it relates to other aspects of a given culture; and we should surely refine our generalizations about universal religious practices. This is not a premature hope, for we already have a promise in this direction in a number of publications (Samarin 1976).

Sociolinguistic studies of religion seek to determine the way in which language is exploited for religious ends. We start with no different assumptions. For us religion is no unique domain of experience; we do not begin our examination of religious language expecting to find here what we might not find elsewhere. Whatever validity we might claim for religious propositions, we insist on the inescapable fact of the thoroughly human, therefore common and accessible, mediation of religious experience. There are theologians in the Christian tradition who accept the human mediation of religious faith through language but who also claim that language serves religious ends. They go even further to insist that language is transformed or is adapted to the expression of religious propositions. Religious language is therefore unique; it is more than ordinary language serving a religious purpose. Then they take the product and make it a tool, using language not only as a hermeneutical device for the explication of religious assertions but even as a means to defend their validity. Language is crucial in contemporary theological discussion. — Sociolinguistics may have some bearing on religious language as philosophically understood. For the time being, however, our goals are modest. We aim for a kind of ethnography of religious language; and although we do not begin with the a priori notion of the uniqueness of religious linguistic usage, we should be happy if we were to discover it. This uniqueness or domain specificity of language in religion would be found in any number of points where sociolinguistic variables intersect. In the following we discuss some of the functions, ends, or goals that language serves in religion, the various kinds of linguistic resources that are exploited, and some of the social processes that characterize the use of language.

2. Religious Ends

Whatever the term religion might comprehend, language serves in a number of ways to set it apart from the profane or nonreligious. This specialization might be expected with practices that occur only within this domain (as with prayers), but a religious event elicits appropriate speech even when the separate parts are neutral (like announcements in a church service). Within a single religion there may be different levels of perception or experience. At the one extreme are found the numinous or mystical, like the use of the sacred syllable *ōm* in Hinduism (Christian 1976), *pīyyut* hymns with esoteric vocabulary in Judaism (Rabin 1976), and ‘holy words’ in an African independent church (Turner 1967). — Religious communities, defined simply as groups adhering to a given set of beliefs and practices, also are set apart linguistically. The fact that language is used as an ethnic boundary marker, symbolic of social oneness, is not itself in any way surprising, but we need to give attention to the way in which language is used to reinforce the social identity: Arabic is the sacred language of all Muslims; the Chamula language is part of the Fourth (and best) Creation; the Amish insist that if their children are taught in English the Amish way of life will disappear. Language is either looked at in very pragmatic terms or it is made integral to the ideology of the community. In either case this leads to the legitimating linguistic theories (like those of contemporary theology just mentioned) that need to be studied for their own sake.

The range of linguistic resources used in social marking is broad but still relatively limited. The least interesting perhaps are in-
stances of language differences inherited from migration, conquest, and the like. Thus, the immigrant Molokan and Doukhabor sectarians of the United States and Canada continue to use Russian in all of their religious events in spite of the fact that in the Molokan case an urban environment leads to intense and intimate interaction with the dominant language. More interesting are cases where linguistic differences are asserted in unilingual settings. The Ashkenazi-Sephardi differences with respect to the pronunciation of Hebrew is not really an example, because these differences are the result of the geographical separation of these communities in the past. This is just a case of dialect speakers finding themselves living together. A better field for study would be the linguistic usage of Israeli youth who have been indoctrinated in Modern Israeli and have experimented with new synagogue liturgies. What we seek to know is how people establish a new social identity. The assertion of a new social identity can, of course, be accomplished by adopting an entirely different language as the religious one. Pidgin Sango is the Protestant language of the Central African Republic even where there is no need for it, as in unilingual villages. But social change can lead to new feelings of identity that revive interest in the native language. (This happened with those ethnic groups in the Cameroun Presbyterian church that had used Bulu as lingua franca and as religious language.) On the other hand, the ‘new’ language may be an old one that is disguised or one that is drastically altered: Argots or ‘secret languages’ — where intelligibility, perhaps minimal, is possible — are often of the first type. Of the second type are pseudolanguages. Cargo cults in Papua-New Guinea area have arisen with ‘new languages’ that are hardly more than a mish-mash of words from non-native languages (Worsley 1957). New ‘languages’ in a different sense, more accurately argots, arise in a new movement as the effect of the ideology. The emergence of Spiritualist churches in the last century, for example, led to an argot where words as common as see and feel have special meanings (Zaretzky 1972).

In the present discussion the word ‘language’ is an ambiguous one, for it refers both to form and function in the dynamics of interaction. It should be made clear that in religion, as in other human experience, the replacement of one language by another need not be complete either for form or for function. The practitioners of a religion require only that the ‘language’ fulfill its immediate function. A Spiritualist minister must certainly give the impression of talking English even though her ambiguous messages only provide suggestions to a seeker for getting its meaning. There is less need for satisfying intellectual requirements in a Rhodesian spirit-cult rite (Blakney, 1969), with Pentecostal glossolalia (Samarin 1972 a), or in a Ceylonese healing ritual (Tambiah 1968). The need, of course, is determined by the given religious phenomenon, and it is a product of several factors. For example, ‘identifying one’s social identity’ can include conversion experiences and initiation rites, but it can occur without them. Becoming a member of the neo-Pentecostal (charismatic) movement, for example, necessitates the learning of its argot as in Spiritualist churches. A person is not incorporated into such social units as a prayer fellowship, church congregation, or weekend retreat simply because he assents to the group’s belief, but also because he can talk about it. From one point of view, therefore, Pentecostal talk is more important than glossolalia in this movement. Yet glossolalia is the linguistic evidence, traditional Pentecostal doctrine claims, of the new religious experience. De facto socialization into the movement is through the argot; the symbol of the new social reality is glossolalia. The convert to Pentecostalism therefore acquires two ‘new’ languages. — An argot is undoubtedly learned when one becomes a member of the Jamaa movement in Zaire (Fabian 1971), for there are many Swahili words whose meanings are peculiar to the movement. But full membership, which is formal and explicit, is achieved by going through four stages of initiation, each characterized by a specific kind of speech event and reflecting kinds or qualities of personal relationships established during this process. — Time is only one of the factors that determines the nature of the language of initiation. Where neophytes are brought into cult membership during a relatively brief training period, the acquisition of a real foreign language is virtually impossible, but disguised forms of languages and pidgins are more accessible. Easier yet are pseudo-languages. Glossolalia is such an effective initiation symbol. It marks the precise moment when a seeker at a revival meeting gets ‘the experience’. — It would be a mistake to think that language serves religious ends
without being influenced by or venturing into the profane world. We thus find language being used to support structure and privileged position. In Spiritualist churches the four ranks in leadership are characterized by the right to use certain argot terms, each rank using terms from those available to the lower one(s), but not vice versa. The minister is alone at the top, and she can discipline the colleague who violates the rule. Igbo go to shrine priests to have prayers said to certain capricious gods, but these priests are descendants from former conquerors who still have political power in the villages (Shelton 1976). Members of a Kewa cult in New Guinea use their argot to extort food from unwary fellow villagers. This is possible because the argot consists of words and expressions that replace standard Kewa words that, on the initiative of the cult, have become taboo: for example, ipa agi, literally 'water mother' for nogo (girl). The villager who mistakenly violates the taboo is required to atone with a payment of pigs or pearl shells.

3. Linguistic Means

It is a sociolinguistic premise that speech is adapted to culturally relevant functions. In a description of the linguistic means at the disposal of religion we are concerned with the parts of language that are exploited and the products of the exploitation. Substitutes for native language have already been mentioned: a switch from English to Hebrew or an argot or a pseudolanguage. But even without these more or less drastic departures from normal speech, special varieties of native language can be built with available resources or with an admixture from other languages. The result is a register or style. There is, for example, a testimony-giving style among traditional Pentecostals (such as the Assemblies of God) that consists of rapid delivery at a flat and higher-than-usual level of pitch. Cutting across different genres of discourse such as sermons, prayers, and testimonies is the practice of breaking speech up into rhythmic units sometimes punctuated by verbal ejaculations or grunts. (On sermons see Rosenberg 1970 and Samarin 1972 b). Many other examples of styles that are peculiar to certain kinds of religious acts are found.

The general picture for religion, then, is similar to that for other domains of experience. Religion may not be unique in its inventory of linguistic resources, but it may be with respect to their predominance. That which in other domains is infrequent may in religion be frequent. This would seem to be the case with the use of anomalous utterances of the mumbo-jumbo and abracadabra type. (Here too the form-function relationship cannot be ignored. What is linguistically 'normal' in the cognitive-denotative sense may in its magical use be meaningless. Examples are to be found in the repetitive verbalization of names, words, or sentences. The adherent of a 'high' religion may thus be the religious brother of an adherent of a 'low' religion in a specific use of language, if not in the form used.) Perhaps, however, there is a higher-level typology of which the use of anomalous speech is just one instance. It appears that in religion greater liberty is taken to satisfy the esthetic appreciation for the substance of language. The average man does not have an opportunity to speak in metered units, but he can do this when he prays or repeats a spell. This happens in extemporaneous Pentecostal prayers (since Pentecostals are hardly given to liturgical ones), but satisfying sounds are also provided in the corpus of religious texts. Repetitious patterns are found in Igbo, Christian, and Chamula prayers (Shelton 1976, Ferguson 1976, Gossen 1976) that are part of the tradition of these religions. Yet even these texts must be seen as the products of deep-seated motivations. Even where text were originally produced with little or no intent to be esthetically pleasing, they are interpreted (in the elocutionary sense) so that they are prosodically pleasing. When people defend the King James Version of the Bible, for example, they frequently cite its "majestic rhythm." Since there is no inherent rhythm to this seventeenth-century translation, these traditionalists are really defending the style of reading with which they have become familiar. Obviously, any version, even the one in Basic English, could have its own majestic style. What is true of Christian Scriptures is also true for Judaism and Hinduism. — Linguistic adaptation to religious needs is not limited to the selection of linguistic resources for the creation of special varieties of language. It also leads to special kinds of discourse. The 'language' of religion — the means whereby religion expresses itself — therefore consists of genres like song, recitations, prayer, and magical or divinational formulae. Here the domain specificity of religious language may be seen, perhaps more clearly than anywhere else. One does not ad-
dress or petition the gods in the same way that one addresses chiefs and kings (unless the chiefs and kings are theocratic figures). As linguists, we are concerned with the structures of these genres insofar as they are the product of 'grammatical' discourse rules and as sociolinguists we are concerned with their function in speech events.

The linguistic means of religion, whether extemporaneous or traditional, are expressed in either oral or written form. It makes a difference for religious behavior if the society is literate or preliterate and, in the latter case, if it is in contact with literacy. Of particular interest to sociolinguistics is the way in which the language of the sacred writings affects later forms of language. (For the influence Sanskrit and Hebrew have had see Christian 1976 and Rabin 1976). In the case of the Church of the Lord, an 'independent' Christian movement in West Africa foreign orthographies may be responsible for the spelling of 'holy words': for example, what is pronounced something like Kokamula is written Kieokkammullal with a predilection for extra letters and long words (Turner 1967).

4. Social Processes

The realization of speech ends is a social process, and the linguistic products that effect this realization are social phenomena. These facts have not been ignored in the foregoing discussion. Now we should turn our attention to some facets of the social nature of the interrelationship between ends and means.

4.1. Sociolinguistic Competence

This refers to one's ability to use language — the language product is constructed according to the rules, and it meets the requirements of the setting. The identification of genres of discourse presupposes a structure that is characteristic for each. In a given community it is therefore possible for a person to fail in his linguistic performance, if only by not achieving the ideal. Publications have touched on the rule-governed nature of the speaker's task. We must know for each religion — or some given part of it — what it means to be sociolinguistically competent in it. In our eagerness to describe rules, however, we must not ignore the fact that people force rules to yield. Both form and function are involved. Although prayers in many religions are set by tradition and are augmented or varied with great conservatism, the Protestant 'free' prayer, being extemporary, is susceptible to great variation and exploitation. It is indeed possible for a prayer to approach the nature of a sermon.

What kinds of rules are more subject to strain and what are the social phenomena that accompany particular changes or periods of change? These are questions fundamental to sociolinguistics in general, but we do not now have good answers. Yet it should be observed, for example, that the Reformation seems to have led to only a few innovations in language use. On the other hand, dream interpretation as part of religious behavior in the Jamaa movement (mentioned above) is probably an innovation when seen in the context of African Roman Catholicism where this movement is found.

The domain of religion reminds us that we must study the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence for all domains in a given society. An adult who 'becomes religious' after a lifetime of irreligiosity or one who leaves one religious community for another has to learn a new kind of behavior. Language is often a very important part of this process. In any case, there are drastic differences between what adherents of different religions are required to know and how — and at what age — they go about acquiring this knowledge. Judaism places very great value on a knowledge of religious writings; memorization is important in Eastern religions; but Christian clergy, at least in our day, usually read the liturgy. In most fundamentalist churches one is supposed to bring his Bible to church and follow the sermon by looking up all the text citations, of which there can be quite a few. In some churches, generally lower-class ones, the preacher makes it a practice to let volunteers in the congregation read as soon as they find the place. One can very well imagine both the contribution this practice makes to group cohesion and also the opportunities it provides for competition.

This last example, like so many others, illustrates the way the ability to behave in an appropriate manner can be used to symbolize what it means to be an adherent of a given religious community and to regulate behavior within it. In some Protestant groups one learns to pray aloud in public — something that every 'good Christian' is supposed to be able to do — so as to express solidarity of the group. With this function, praying aloud can be described as a ritual act, equivalent to attending church, but whose social meaning has greater forcefulness and clarity.
4.2. Metalinguistics

This, for our present purposes, refers to beliefs and attitudes about language. Religion may be the source or determinant of a society's metalinguistic notions, but in any case the expression of religion — sometimes its very conceptualization — is influenced by the way people think about language.

If language is viewed as having a supernatural origin or in some way being part of the divine essence, everyday speech or speech on certain occasions is affected. Both among the Dogon of West Africa and in Hinduism language figured in the creation of the world (Calame-Griaule 1965, Christian 1976). We all know about the *logos* of St. John's gospel, but we have no information about how this concept was related to social behavior. Well documented ethnographic observations would lead us to be careful about assuming certain kinds of behavior on the basis of certain kinds of beliefs. Evangelical Protestants assert as part of their creed that the Bible in the original language was wholly and verbally inspired by God: that every word is precisely the one God wanted. (They are not alone among those who have inspired texts.) Yet the linguistic and philosophical implications have never been adequately worked out. In evangelicalism's fundamentalist sector there is a strain of antirationalism: human language is but an imperfect instrument that God overrides in his power; for Pentecostals human language is even carnal whereas glossolalia is spiritual. A similar attitude appeared among early Quakers (Bauman 1970). In religion, perhaps one finds the most explicit expression of belief in the power of language as a force in its own right. Among the Chamula 'heated words' during a ritual are like incense; in Spiritualist churches certain words 'do' what they 'say', so one avoids words like sickness and death; in Hinduism certain verses are repeated for their efficacy; African Muslims wear verbal charms and Tibetans use prayer wheels for the same purpose. Ethnographic literature provides abundant documentation of this aspect of linguistic belief and practice.

The study of sacred texts has led to extensive grammatical and lexicographical work, and linguistic science is indebted to religion for this legacy, but the linguistic history of religion is, as one might expect, uneven in quality. The ancient grammar of Sanskrit attributed to Panini is acclaimed by modern linguists for the quality of its generalizations, its elegance, and its economy. Long before the Renaissance — when Greek and Hebrew began to be studied assiduously — Muslim scholars had already arrived at a highly enlightened understanding of Arabic. The ecumenicity of scholarship in the west had its influence at that time on Jewish studies of Hebrew. It is these ancient Jewish attitudes towards grammatical studies that explain in part the present state of Hebrew: the Sephardi had a great respect for the study of grammar, but the Ashkenazi frowned on it. Native linguistic notions, however, certainly had a prejudicial effect on the study of sacred texts. One that has pervaded (in many seminars) and dominated Catholic and Protestant thought is belief in the deterministic nature of Hebrew and Greek: because one is static and the other dynamic, they led to different views of life. Theologians thus discovered and accounted for different theologies in Judaic and Christian religions. (Barr 1961 debunks this notion; Penn 1972 traces its history in secular thought.)

Linguistic notions, on the other hand, can be used to explicate or defend belief and to provide a model for the belief system. The history of theological argumentation is replete with illustrations of linguistic use, such as the repetition of *kai* (and) in Matthew 28:19 ("in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit") which is said to prove that baptism must consist of three separate immersions in sequence. Much more sophisticated is Augustine's use of the relationship between the form of a sentence and its meaning in explaining eternity (Burke 1970, 142).

Since language attitudes can affect any aspect of a community's linguistic resource, the use of different languages also will be affected. Such use is not necessarily uniform throughout the community or in the whole domain of religion. Religion is a domain that either inhibits or elicits the use of a second language. The Telugu, like Indians generally, borrow extensively from Sanskrit, but some styles more than others. Molokans now living in the United States speak Russian or English with a great admixture of the other in settings that might be called casual or intimate. In religious settings only Russian is used and that in a *form free of English loans* except for an occasional culture-specific item. On the other hand, Haitian Protestants require a great deal of Standard French in their Creole on formal religious occasions, and they might
be happier with a sermon entirely in French even if it were incomprehensible (Orjala 1970).

Another way of looking at the process of language selection is in terms of the event rather than text. Thus, in the synagogue sabbath service conducted for the most part in English, certain parts are restricted to Hebrew, and different parts of Ceylonese healing rite take different languages or mixtures of languages, reflecting the hierarchical positions of gods and demons.

5. Literature (selected)


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14. Ethnicity

1. Definitions

1. Definitions

Ethnicity is a term whose definition is elusive. In ordinary usage there is considerable overlap between the English terms ethnicity, nationality (c. art. 16), and race (expecially as that term was used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) and the German word ‘Volk’. There are etymological grounds for this polysemy, since the original Greek plural noun 'ethnoi' refers to the tribes and nations of the ancient world who were not Hellenic (e.g. Thracians, Persians, Egyptians). The ‘ethnos’ was a group occupying a particular territory whose members shared a distinct language and culture. In the popular understanding, ethnicity still connotes a distinct within-group culture. In a more technical understanding, shared culture and a distinctive language style are not necessarily defining attributes of ethnicity.