LANGUAGE APPROACHES IN THE PUBLIC PRACTICE OF RELIGION

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Abstract

Religious institutions represent a very specific context in which decisions about language are made because language plays a role in religion that is different from its role in other areas of human activity. This difference lies in the ways particular religious groups understand the nature and purpose of language and these religious understandings influences how languages are chosen for religious purposes and how these purposes are understood. This paper will examine how religious groups use language in public acts of worship and the ways that religious views of language influence language practices. It will argue that there are two dominant understandings of language that are at play in religious contexts. The first is the idea of language as a sacred object. The second is language as a communicative tool. These two understandings are not mutually exclusive and both may be present in particular religious practices, although in some contexts one may predominate over the other. The paper will examine how these views play out in different world religions.

A. Language and Religious Observance

The relationship between religion and language planning and policy (LPP) is complex. Religion may be a factor influencing language planning in the non-religious domain, it may be a site for LPP work, and it may be a site where other LPP decisions are played out in a specific context. This paper will examine the nature of LPP work in one particular context of religious language use – religious observance. This context already raises complexities for thinking about LPP because religious observance

is both a public and a private matter and language choices made may be either individual or collective: that is in religious observance language has both private and public dimensions. For this reason, the present paper will focus only on the public dimension of religious observance as this is the site of language use where decision-making and established norms and practices are most obvious and easily studied. In particular, the focus of this paper will be on the use of languages for liturgical purposes – that is, the language used for the rites and rituals of public worship.

The use of language is fundamental to the public practice of religion and different religious groups use languages in different ways in their public worship. This means that religious groups are involved in some forms of decision-making about language use in religious contexts. However, the language of public religious observances has not been widely considered in the literature on language policy and planning (examples include Ferguson, 1982; Liddicoat, 1993, 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Pennycook & Makoni, 2005; Spolsky, 2003).

B. Approaches to liturgical language

There are a number of different ways in which religious groups determine the language to be used in their public religious observance. In some cases, the selection of a liturgical language is set by precedent: that is it represents the continuation of an ancient usage. This is the case, for example in the use of Classical Arabic in Islam, Hebrew in Judaism, Sanskrit in Hinduism, Pali in Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism and Latin in Catholicism (until 1970s). In such cases the use of a particular language is dictated by the practice of the religion not by the languages spoken by the faithful. It may be case that few worshipers know or can understand the language in which worship is conducted. It is also often the case that the languages used for religious observance may be used primarily or solely for religious purpose, either for some of for all communities of worshipers. Alternatively, the choice of liturgical language may be considered as something which can be legitimately planned by the faithful. This is the case in many forms of Christianity, such as Protestantism, Traditional Orthodoxy and Modern Catholicism but is also the case for some

forms of Buddhism and other religions. The possibilities are associated with two fundamentally different understandings of the nature and purpose of religious languages – sacrality and comprehensibility (Liddicoat, 2012b, 2013).

The *sacrality* perspective on language is one that starts from the idea that particular languages are sacred and therefore are most fitting for liturgical use. The idea of sacredness may be the result of a particular theology that associates the language with a divine use as in the case of Arabic as the language chosen by God as author of the Qu'ran in Islam or Hebrew as the language used by God in the creation of the world in Judaism. It may also result from a long tradition of religious use of a language by particular institutions, as in the case of Latin as a sacred language in older forms of Catholicism. When a sacred language is used for liturgical actions it is used primarily its purpose is usually the performance of a religious act in a way which is reverent and mystical. It can also reflect a particular understanding of the nature of public worship in which the liturgical act is seen as undertaken between the performer of the act (for example a priest) and its divine recipient, while the faithful are secondary participants who witness the liturgical act or have a limited role in its performance. For example, in Orthodox Christianity the part of the faithful is performed by a choir, in traditional Catholicism the role of the faithful was performed by a server, in spoken services, or by a choir and servers in sung service or in Islam where the linguistic parts of the liturgy are performed primarily by the imam, with the faithful responding. The relationship of the faithful to the liturgy is therefore primarily one of observer and understanding of the liturgy by the faithful is not seen as a necessary element of liturgical practice.

The *comprehensibility* perspective views the role of liturgical language as communicative; it has a role in communicating with the faithful and the force of the liturgy comes from its being understood. From this perspective liturgical action is seen either as a collective religious act, as a form of instruction or as a way of propagating beliefs and the liturgical language needs to permit participation and allow for access to the liturgical action. This particular view of language became highly theologised during the

Protestant reformation in Europe when using the language of the faithful in public worship became a fundamental tenet of belief. For example Article XXIV (Of speaking in the Congregation in such a tongue as the people understandeth) of the 1563 Anglican Articles of Religion states:

> It is a thing plainly repugnant to the Word of God, and the custom of the Primitive Church, to have publick Prayer in the Church, or to minister the Sacraments in a tongue not understanded of the people.

The two perspectives relate to two very different orientations to experiences of the divine. In the sacral view, an experience of the divine is seen as mysterious, numinous and transcendent and the worshipper engages with the divine through mediated, symbolic ritual. In addition, the experience of the divine orients primarily to the affective domain and is understood as being primarily an emotional communion not anchored in a literal understanding of the words of the of the liturgy. The sacral view may therefore place a very limited emphasis on the language itself as a constituent part of the liturgy, as in the case in traditional Catholic and Orthodox liturgies. The comprehensibility view, one the other hand, sees an experience of the divine as immanent and personal and the worshipper engages more directly with the divine through collective communication. This view emphasizes the cognitive dimension: worship is an intellectual communion oriented to understanding the divine person or divine acts. Understanding the language is therefore central to the proper execution of any liturgical act as liturgical acts have an important propositional dimension. In such a view, public language is addressed not only to a divine person: the worshippers themselves are also understood as audience. These views can be taken as representing poles on a continuum with various practices located at different points along the continuum. Moreover, both views may co-exist in understandings of liturgical languages and the views of a community may shift between emphasizing sacrality and emphasizing comprehensibility over time.

C. Effects the two perspectives on language use

These two perspectives have direct consequences for the ways that religious institutions respond to language issues.
The sacrality perspective is strongly associated with linguistic conservatism and established or ancient language forms are seen as being more appropriate for religious use than contemporary forms. This conservatism can become fundamental to understandings of language use, as in the case of the decrees of the Council of Trent promulgated by the Catholic Church as a response to the Protestant Reformation. In Session 7, Canon 9 states:

> *Si quis dixerit, ecclesiae Romanae ritum, quo secreto et submissa voce verba consecrationis proferuntur, damnandum esse, missamque nonnisi in lingua vulgari celebrari debere ... anathema sit.* [If anyone says that the rite of the Roman Church, according to which a part of the canon and the words of consecration are pronounced in a low tone, is to be condemned; or that the mass ought to be celebrated in the vernacular tongue only… let him be anathema.]

That is the idea that a vernacular language could be a legitimate language for religious use is seen as sinful and ultimately leading to damnation.

The comprehensibility perspective is associated with the adoption of the languages of the local community of the faithful for religious purposes. This was central to the LPP of the Protestant Reformation: Luther emphasized the development of a German language liturgy for reasons of both theology and church government. One key element of Protestant LPP has therefore been the development of religious resources in many languages and the establishment of Bible translation activities. The work of Protestant missionaries has developed many languages as liturgical languages, especially in Africa and the Pacific.

There are in fact complex interactions between the two perspectives over time. The impact of linguistic conservatism can be seen even in religious traditions which initially adopted a comprehensibility view of liturgical language. This is the case in Anglican Protestantism with the retention of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* in to twentieth century liturgical practice. This is

the case for example in Orthodox Christianity where classical varieties have been maintained as liturgical languages, Greek and Armenian Churches. Linguistic conservatism may also lead to a situation in which a language is maintained for liturgical use long after the community has ceased to use it for other functions, as in the case of Old Church Slavonic in Orthodox churches in the Slavic world, Coptic in Egyptian Christian communities, Ge'ez in Ethiopian Christianity and Pali in Theravada Buddhism. Moreover, the emphasis on sacrality may lead to the deliberate selection of archaic varieties for liturgical use. For example the 1662 version Book of Common Prayer used a more archaic version of English than those developing the 1552 Anglican Service Book (Nervalainen, 1991).

Alternatively, religious institutions that had promoted an ancient language for sacral reasons may change their theological position in relation to language and adopt a comprehensibility perspective. This has been the case, for example, for the Catholic Church, since the Second Vatican Council when a uniform Latin liturgy, which had long been defended against calls for translation and vernacularisation, was replaced with a vernacular liturgical norm that has led to the proliferation of translations into many languages. While the Catholic Church's decision to adopt a vernacular liturgy was a wide theological change of orientation, such changes may also been seen at local levels. This has often been the experience of religious organizations in diasporic contexts relating to migration in which subsequent generations shift from the language of their ethnic origin to the language of their host society. This has led for example to some diasporic Orthodox Churches introducing the language of the host country into liturgical practice, even though a classical language variety is maintained as the liturgical norm in their country of origin (Wigglesworth, 2008). In some cases, religious organizations may begin as ethnically based institutions but become less ethnically based over time, either because of changes within the original group or of diffusion of the religion across ethnic groups. Hatoss (2012) for example traces a decline in the use of German by the Lutheran Church in Australia not only because of shift from German to English among the congregations but also because Lutheranism has evolved to become a multiethnic denomination

in Australia as new patterns of immigration brought into Australian churches Lutherans from other countries speaking other languages.

Religious organizations with a comprehensibility perspective in relation to liturgical language do not, however, always adopt the language of the faithful as the normal liturgical language. This has been especially the case in contexts of colonialism, where the colonizer's language has been used as the liturgical language. In such situations, religious conversion and thus religious practice becomes closely the colonial project of imposing the metropolitan language and culture on colonized societies. In this case, missionary work may involve a considerable element of language education to prepare new converts for participation in public worship. For example, in the South Australian colony, Governor Grey forbade the use of the Kaurna language in the services of the Lutheran mission in Adelaide and forcibly relocated the children to the Native School Establishment (Amery, 2001) and English-only establishment. Henceforth the religious development of indigenous people was to be through English not through their own language. Similarly, the Buddhist Dhammacarik program, established in 1965 to propagate Buddhism among the animist hill tribes sought to disseminate religion as a strategy to integrate minorities into the Thai nation and to establish loyalty to Thailand in precarious border regions (Platz, 2003). The language of proselytizing chosen by the Dhammacarik program was Thai the official language, and this was articulated closely with the desire to use Buddhism as a vehicle for assimilating hill tribes to the Thai nation. In some cases, the adopting of a local vernacular as a liturgical language may become a vehicle for spreading that language to other groups to create supralocal liturgical languages. This is often the case where a religious mission is located in a plurilingual area and the use of a single language is institutionally easier than adopting and developing multiple languages for religious purposes. Dunn (2007), for example, reports that in New Georgia (Solomon Islands) the Methodist mission first developed as Roviana as a liturgical language for a mission located in a Roviana speaking area. When the Mission expanded to Touo speaking Ughele Island, Roviana was used as the liturgical language of both

communities and in the Mission school. Crowley (2000) also reports the extension of languages as mission lingua francas in Vanuatu. In these cases, the practices of religious bodies with a comprehensibility perspective of language use may come to resemble the practices of bodies that have a sacral view. The teaching of English to converts to Protestantism in order to enable them to fulfil their religious obligations may parallel the teaching of Arabic for similar reasons in Islamic schools in non-Arabic-speaking areas.

The interactions between language practices and language perspectives are therefore complex. While sacral views of language and their associated linguistic conservatism may preserve fixed patterns of language use, comprehensibility perspectives are often much more complex. In particular, in comprehensibility views other factors, such as perceptions of particular registers as most appropriate for religious use, the impact of tradition, wider language policies and even local institutional imperatives may influence language use in ways which seem to compromise the comprehensibility perspective.

D. Influence of perspectives on the reception of language decisions

It is possible that language perspectives may change within a particular organization. Where the change is from sacral language to comprehensible language, the change itself tends to be sudden, although the change may be preceded by a long period of debate about language use. The change in the Catholic Church from Latin to vernacular languages for example was enacted by the Second Vatican Council's Sacred Constitution on the Liturgy promulgated in 1963 (Second Vatican Council, 1998) and this constituted an abrupt change between a Latin only language policy for the Roman liturgy to one of linguistic pluralism. However, the debates about the use of the vernacular date back to the controversy over the Chinese liturgy of the 17th century (Bontinck, 1962; Liddicoat, 1993). The change from a comprehensible perspective to sacral one is usually a slow evolution resulting from developing linguistic conservatism over time that comes first to preserve a language variety from a particular time and then asserts this as a linguistic norm. This was

the case for example, with the Anglican 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, which itself was based on norms of older prayer books and Bible translations (Nervalainen, 1991), and remained the liturgical norm in English-speaking churches for almost three centuries until the modern English revisions of the 20th century. This linguistic conservatism existed alongside a prevailing comprehensibility view that led to the translation of the prayer book into other modern languages and represents a tension between sacral and comprehensibility views within Anglicanism.

The movement from a sacral view of language to a comprehensible view, because it is usually so rapid may be problematic for religious organization and may lead to resistant to change, at least among some groups within the organization. Resistance may be based on perceived attributes of the language, usually aesthetically attributes, but is most often linked to non-linguistic arguments about the change (Dinges, 1987). The substitution for a vernacular language for a sacral language may for example be seen as theological corruption. One result of this resistance has been the establishment within religious organizations of bodies that maintain former language use in the face of a changed language policy. This is the case, for example, of the Prayer Book Societies in Anglicanism, which maintain the use of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, and of the Priestly Fraternity of St Peter in the Catholic Church. The resistance to language change in such contexts may even lead to schism in order to preserve the sacral language. This has been the case in the Catholic Church, where some Traditional Mass Catholics (including the Society of St Pius X and Sedevacantist groups such as the Society of St Pius V) have separated from the Church and have even declared the Church to be apostate.

E. Hybridity of practice

One consequence of the complexity of the interactions between sacral and comprehensibility perspectives is that liturgical practice may in fact be hybridized with some aspects of public religious observance conducted in different languages. This hybridity of practice frequently represents different under-standings of various components of public worship. Religious groups which emphasis the comprehensible may use other

languages in their services, as in the case of Latin versions of sung liturgical texts in otherwise vernacular Anglican or Lutheran ceremonies. In this case, the texts are regular parts of the liturgical service and their function can be considered as known by worshipers – that is worshipers are assumed to know the vernacular language versions of these texts. Moreover, these elements may be considered as liturgical adornment rather than as core components of worship, a view that in Western Christianity is supported by a strong musical tradition of setting for these texts in which liturgical function is often subordinated to artistic form. The interventions of a sacral language into an otherwise comprehensibility-oriented liturgical tradition are usually limited and reserved for more peripheral aspects of the public action of the liturgy. In contrast, within sacral perspectives the use of vernacular languages may relate to core aspects of the liturgy, where the purpose of the act is related to its comprehensibility for participants. This applies most commonly to the language used in sermons, in public devotions of a more personal nature and in the making of vows, especially marriage vows.

F. Sermons

In the case of sermons, the comprehensibility view of language often prevails even in traditions that are otherwise sacral in their approach. In liturgical traditions with a comprehensibility view, the choice of language for preaching is usually the same as the main liturgical language, as both are chosen for the same reason. Where the liturgical variety is an older variety of the language spoken in the community, the sermon typically uses a contemporary language variety, except where quoting religious texts. This has been the case for example in the Anglican tradition in which the *Book of Common Prayer* has been used.

In liturgies with a sacral orientation to language, a comprehensibility orientation may govern the choice of language for the sermon and preaching is done in the local language of the faithful. In Judaism, the sermon at weekly services is usually delivered in the language of the community and this practice has been an element of synagogue worship since its development

with preachers using Aramaic in Palestine and Greek in diasporic communities, and is evidenced in early Talmudic Judaism (Joseph, 1890). The same is true of the sermon in the Latin-rite Catholic Church homily. The Carolingian reform synod of 813 required that homilies be delivered "*in rusticam romanam linguam aut theotiscam quo facilius cuncti possint intelligere que dicuntur*" [In rustic Romance or German so that those present can more easily understand what is said] (Jungmann, 1986 [1951] I: 458) explicitly emphasizing the need for comprehensibility. In Islam, similarly, the Friday sermon is usually delivered in the language of the congregation, even though the service is conducted in classical Arabic (Mattock, 2001) and the Pali language liturgy of Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism includes a sermon in Sinhala (Coperahewa, 2009). In the case of sermons the communication is between preacher and people not between people and God so comprehensibility is central to the purpose of the sermon.

In some cases, however, a sacred language may be used in sermons even though it is not widely spoken: Although comprehensibility would seem to be the main consideration for sermons, there is evidence in some preaching practices for a sacral orientation to language. For example, in both mediaeval Catholicism, Latin was used in sermons long after Latin had ceased to be known by congregations and macaronic sermons, which mixed Latin and a local vernacular, formed part of preaching practice (Constable, 1994). Similarly in mediaeval Judaism, vernacular sermons were often interspersed with biblical quotations in Hebrew, which preserved the sacred nature of scripture (Saperstein, 1983). In the early modern period, in many Jewish communities a tradition of vernacular preaching gave way to one of preaching in Hebrew. The motivation for this appears to have been one of identity: Hebrew sermons were considered an important marker of differentiation for Jews living in predominantly Christian societies in which vernacular preaching was the norm (Meyer, 1988).

Preaching is thus a language activity in which the selection of language orients relatively strongly to a comprehensibility orientation to language because this accords best with the function of preaching within a religious context. Nonetheless,

other ways of understanding language may influence the actual practices chosen by individuals and communities.

G. Public devotions

In some cases, religious groups that use a sacred language for most liturgical functions may use another language for extra-liturgical public devotions. For example, traditional Catholicism has usually used vernacular languages for public prayers, reciting the rosary, following the Stations of the Cross, etc. These activities are not the formal, central acts of worship of the institutional Church but rather pious activities carried out by and for lay people. In this case, the act of worship is made by individuals rather than by the institutional church and so participation is central to the act of worship. As acts of the faithful, it is necessary for them to be performed in the language of the faithful in order for them to achieve their devotional purpose.

H. Vows

In some religions, vows are made in the context of a public ritual. This is especially the case for marriage, but can apply to other types of vows. Acts of public worship that involve the making of vows may be done in the vernacular even in religious traditions that have a sacral view of language. For example, in traditional Catholicism the marriage vows may be exchanged in the vernacular, even though the rest of the liturgy is performed in Latin, although the possibility always exists that vows may be exchanged in Latin. The renewal of baptismal vows by the faithful during the Holy Saturday ritual may also be done in the vernacular. In Judaism the reading of the marriage contract may be done in the vernacular, or it may be in Aramaic. In this case, the reading in Aramaic is the fossilization of an earlier vernacular tradition. In these cases, the vows are a binding public act of the individuals involved and the individuals themselves require no particular qualifications for participating in the vows. The focus of the liturgical action is on a sacred undertaking and this requires comprehension of the vow itself as a constituent element of the undertaking. Thus, the possibility of performing the vow in the vernacular language plays an important role in the accomplishment of the vow. Some vows however may always be

restricted to the sacral language, as in the case of the priestly ordination vows of the traditional Catholic Church, which were always performed in Latin. These vows are fundamental to the sacral role of the priest – a role which is performed primarily through the sacral language. The priest can therefore be understood as an individual who is considered to be a competent user of the language and the vow itself is embedded in the sacred nature of priesthood.

I. Concluding comments

The choice of a liturgical language is not simply the resolution of a linguistic problem; it is fundamentally connected to ideas of religious conduct and integrated into the symbolic systems of the religion. Decisions about liturgical language reflect understandings of the nature and purpose of liturgy as a collective action. Such understandings may be codified in some way within a religious group or they may be worked through locally by particular groups of worshipers. Language planning for religious observance is a negotiation between views of language as a means of communication and as an expression of religious sentiment. These views of language relate to views of worship: the immanence of worship as a local linguistic act and the transcendence of worship as a form of collective religious expression. Choices of liturgical language therefore encode aspects of the self-concept of the religious group, not just their assessment of their linguistic needs.

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