

1 Analysing Religious Discourse: Introduction

Stephen Pihlaja

1.1 Background, History, and Key Terms

When you think about *religious discourse*, you probably think of some kind of institutional text or talk – sermons and catechisms, sacred books, prayers, and hymns. Institutions dominate what we think religions are, how we think about them, and how religious belief is established and develops. The people writing religious texts are often revered and seen to be holding special knowledge – prophets and theologians and the enlightened. They might wear clothes to set them apart. They might write or stand and speak to religious believers from a physical distance. Their words can be seen as inspired or infallible, or even the very words of the divine.

The texts themselves also have power. They can invoke a reality beyond what we can see and they connect the hearer to something beyond themselves, to something ineffable. The words of these texts have power even when they are referred to in passing. The very mention of them has meaning, like a sport fan holding a sign that simply says ‘John 3:16’. They have power to make believers act, like when the call to prayer draws people to the neighbourhood mosque. The language of religion, when it is used, changes things.

Sacred texts, sermons, hadiths, and catechisms are, indeed, important for how individuals and communities come to understand and follow religions. They lay the foundation for religious belief and practice and can be the definitive authorities. However, they are only part of the story of religious discourse. Official documents and sacred books are read and used by real people in real, dynamic contexts. Believers listen to the words of theologians and teachers and then go on to live their own lives, talking about and interpreting these texts in their own communities. 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.

Even though we use the word *religion* in day-to-day life, thinking about what should or should not count as a religion can be quite difficult. Durkheim’s (2008 [1915]) classic conception of religion is a ‘unified system of beliefs and

practices' (p. 47), which is a helpful starting point to think about what we mean: religion has something to do with what we believe and what we do in response to that belief. Hjarvard (2008) describes religion as 'human actions, beliefs and symbols related to supernatural agencies' (quoted in English by Lövhelm, 2011, p. 154). The beliefs in religion often include something about the 'supernatural', while others refer to the 'ineffable' qualities of religion and religious experience (McNamara and Giordano, 2018). Religious belief often includes not only the belief in the supernatural but beliefs about how that supernatural being or beings interacts with the world around us.

Belief, however, is also a problematic thing to define. What a person believes, or says they believe, is simpler to define in some confessional faiths, like Judaism and Islam, where there is an explicit statement that believers say with intention to affirm their faith. However, as Harrison (2006) shows in a useful review of the topic, religion is never 'one thing' and essentialist approaches to the category are unlikely to capture the diversity of the ways people believe and act within religions, or create useful boundaries between what should or shouldn't be included. Instead, Harrison (2006) categorises three approaches to religion: intellectual, focusing on belief; affective, focusing on emotions; and functional, focusing on practice.

Each of these approaches foregrounds particular religions over others and have implicit strengths and weaknesses. Analysis of Christianity and Islam in terms of beliefs and practices might be useful, but Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Shintoism treat belief in a vastly different way. Certain religions might not necessarily foreground belief in the supernatural. In many situations, focusing on practice could be much more useful in explaining how religion functions in social contexts.

Named religions are also not the only places where people hold beliefs about the supernatural or divine. People may claim to be, for example, 'spiritual, not religious' and explicitly reject elements of a structured sense of spirituality in day-to-day life. The spiritual is internal and focused on one's own experiences of the world, while the religious is focused on organised practice. That isn't to say that one excludes the other: in Ammerman's (2013) study, the 'spiritual, but not religious' were not necessarily unaffiliated – they often still attended religious services and could describe themselves with categorical religious labels. The rejection of being 'religious' may be less about the beliefs that an individual holds and more about the perception of their beliefs by others and their own felt experience of their belief.

Like religion, *discourse* can be understood in many ways. The Foucauldian understanding of *discourse* as describing larger social systems of ordering knowledge and power (Foucault, 1971) has had an important influence on how the word is conceived in the contemporary academic world. For Foucault, discourse is more than just the language or interaction in a particular context,

but everything that comes to bear on the production of language at a particular point in time – the ideology of the speaker, the social history, the culture, the power structures. However, Foucault didn't look closely at specifics of interaction the way that a linguist might. For researchers who want to do empirical research on religious language as it occurs in the real world, understanding language as it is being used in a real situation by people practising religion, is fundamental to understanding how that religion works.

If we would like to take a more language-focused approach, *discourse* could be simply a way of describing 'language used to do something and mean something, language produced and interpreted in a real-world context' (Cameron, 2001, p. 13). Discourse is more than language as an abstract system of signs captures – it captures how language is used at specific times in specific spaces and encompasses interaction. This is not a new idea, of course: Saussure's (1916) distinction between *langue* and *parole* – language as a system vs language in use – shows that scholars have long realised the difference between thinking about language as an abstract collection of signs and language as it is used in day-to-day interaction. Of course, grammar structures and individual words are important for the meaning of any individual utterance, but how that meaning emerges in an utterance requires looking beyond just the words and the order in which they are said.

Once we start to look at language in context and consider the different components of a specific interaction, things can become quite complicated. The elements that make up any individual interaction are numerous, and many different elements might have some impact on why any given interaction develops in the way it does. Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) use complex systems theory to help describe and map the development of language in use, drawing on the physical principles of the biological systems in which human animals interact. In Complex Systems Theory, a key concept is *emergence*; that is, patterns and order come naturally into existence from the repeated interaction of individuals over time.

Discourse is then not the result of central planning but rather, it comes about when all the components of the system interact with one another, along with the time and space in which they occur. These components might include important figures like imams or priests or gurus, or important sacred texts or unwritten doctrines, but these components are not necessarily determinative. The patterns that emerge in the ways that people interact with one another around religious issues are also scalable. Phenomena that emerge in individual interactions, can also emerge as consistent discourse practices on larger scales, the way that certain ways of praying or metaphors for religious experience become common among many believers in a particular religious tradition.

Discourse from this perspective can then be treated in a variety of different ways. We could think about how religious discourse is embedded or 'nested' in

larger systems. One could also think about how discourse exists in time. What occurs before and after any individual interaction can be incredibly important, with things said or written thousands of years ago being repeated in the contemporary discourse and, in turn, the things religious believers say and write now, affecting how religious belief will develop going forward. Timescales can be considered on many different levels, from the moment-by-moment interaction of people to the discourse event as one in a series of discourse events, and over years.

Discourse, particularly in religious contexts like rituals, can be quite stable over time, with the same words being uttered again and again. Those same rituals can also change, depending on the context and who is speaking. Throughout this book are examples of rituals being played out in different context, both establishing a relationship with the past and creating new contexts for faith. These relationships between past utterances and new contexts, with new conditions for production are ultimately the focus of much religious discourse analysis, with rich histories and complex contexts for interaction resulting in interaction that can reveal the relationships between language and religious belief and practice.

Conversation analysts like Sacks, Jefferson, and Schegloff (Sacks, 1992; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff, 1972) show that the patterns which occur in discourse often operate without the speakers themselves being explicitly aware of them. Instead, they are accepted as common sense, just the things that humans naturally do. Language use and interaction are also important sites of meaning making and identity construction, as work by Labov (1972; Labov and Waletzky, 1967) established early in the history of conversation analysis. Patterns, beliefs, or regularities in social interaction have a recursive relationship with the social world. Individual utterances reflect what has been said in the past and affect what will be said in the future.

Discourse analysts can also focus on patterns in interaction like conversation analysts might, revealing how everyday life creates and maintains norms. Linguistic ethnographers, on the other hand, may place more focus on the context of interaction and use longitudinal observation and ask people about their experience to help make explicit insider and outsider perspectives on religious discourse. These methods make clear the different findings and insights can be gained from approaching different data sources from different perspectives.

Analysing Religious Discourse showcases a range of tools different analysts might employ in looking at language and religion, from a focus on the processes of cognition to the study of the translation of sacred texts, to the emergence of metaphor in talk about religious experiences and the ineffable. These methods are diverse, but they all are built on valid, reliable frameworks for thinking about language in use, grounded in theories and methods that have

been applied to ranges of different texts. The way any single utterance, or interaction, or text should be analysed is up to you, the analyst, and this book intends to help you think through the range of different possibilities that are out there for you to find the answers to the questions you might ask about religious discourse.

1.2 Key Topics, Questions, and Debates

Along with the difficulty of describing religion comes the question of whether *religious language* is a category of discourse that should be treated in a different way than other forms of discourse (see Hobbs, 2021 for a full discussion). Of course, most language analysts would be happy to differentiate kinds of institutional discourse, and language that occurs in sermons could be treated as distinct from other kinds of informal interaction without much disagreement. There's no question that prayer, particularly across different traditions, represents particular ways of communicating. The trouble, however, comes with how researchers and analysts should treat the belief that prayers are, indeed, interaction with something or someone that exists beyond the natural, empirical language that is observable. Religious discourse forces several uncomfortable decisions on the researcher, both in deciding from an etic perspective what religious is, exactly, and what people are doing when they talk about their faith.

In considering the boundaries of religious discourse, different approaches can be seen both in work looking at language around experiences of the so-called 'ineffable' (Chilton and Kopytowska, 2018) or in work that looks more at the sociolinguistic elements of religious language (Omoniyi and Fishman, 2006) or practices around texts (Rosowsky, 2008, 2017). All these works have key differences, of course, in the kinds of discourse that they consider, but the research they include does not always occur in religious contexts even if it is explicitly religious in some way. What is religious for one person might not be religious for another.

Along with the problem of deciding where the boundaries of religious discourse are, there is the problem of deciding that the religious aspect of the interaction is the most important element to focus on. Religious belief or practice is not explicitly the topic of discussion in some discourse where religion plays an important role, as in, for example, a discussion of the US President George W Bush's speeches about the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Researchers might foreground religion in relation to Bush's statements, as van Noppen (2012) does in his work, but this decision is not necessarily straightforward. To foreground an individual's religious identity, particularly when they themselves might not explicitly be doing so, is an important ethical decision that discourse analysts must consider.

Conversely, in analysis of explicitly religious discourse, where the speakers are focused on issues of religious belief and practice, doing analysis of the talk with a focus on religion might be misleading. For example, in analysis in conversations about institutional religion and shifts in belief in a Christian podcast, my own research (Pihlaja, 2021) has shown that issues like gender and race may be more salient than religious belief and practice, even when the focus is about religious belief. Other cultural, sociopolitical issues may be more salient even when a religious person is claiming to be speaking primarily about a religious topic.

Another key issue for researchers working in religious discourse is how to treat truth claims with religion and respect the beliefs and practices of religious adherents while describing their interaction in an empirical way. These issues can be particularly problematic when analysing the truth claims speakers make that might be viewed from a variety of different perspectives. In a charismatic prayer service, a Christian might describe themselves as having the Spirit of God ‘in’ their body, a description that an analyst might describe as being metaphorical. The believer themselves, however, may claim that the phrase is not metaphorical, that the Spirit of God is actually inhabiting the body in a way that should not be understood metaphorically.

And although Complex Systems Theory describes the emergence of particular patterns of speaking and belief, for those who believe in the a higher power or God or gods actively engaging with the physical world, the analysis of interaction without taking into account the will or plan of supernatural powers will be necessarily limited and not provide an accurate description of why things are the way they are. A linguistic analysis of the Qur’an, for example, might be understood to be challenging the assertion that it was dictated to the Prophet Mohammed word-for-word, and could be seen by some Muslims as offensive.

The examples are problematic because they show a difference in beliefs about causation. For the analyst, the explanation for the patterns in speech and writing can be traced using empirical linguistic analysis that takes into account a range of elements and agents that can be observed or whose presence can be extrapolated from the evidence. With a range of different truth claims about supernatural realities and the ways that the divine interacts with reality taking care to both recognise and respect those beliefs, while at the same time avoid making claims that can’t be supported by empirical evidence, is a key ethical obligation. Discourse analysis is not theology and its usefulness and limitations should be acknowledged, while taking care to show respect for the beliefs of the religious believers who are often the focus of analysis, whether the analyst shares their beliefs or not.

The researchers in this book have their own religious beliefs and practices and represent a variety of different cultural and religious backgrounds,

including researchers of no religious faith. However, the analysis in this book is presented from an agnostic position. This does limit the possible outcomes of the analysis – for example, no one will claim that their research is evidence of the reality of the divine or supernatural. This approach does also not exclude the possibility that some religious believers may find discourse analysis to be useful in understanding their own faith and faith communities. Religious believers may, for example, benefit from analysing the use of metaphor in their own religious texts to better understand and deepen their own faith.

Rather than attempt to resolve the key questions and debates that emerge in the discussion of religious discourse, the chapters in this book offer different perspectives for readers to consider for themselves, to use or disregard as is appropriate in each project. Ultimately, given the range of perspectives on language and religion, generosity towards others and a recognition that different perspectives will lead to different approaches is the goal of this book.

1.3 Book Contents

This book is meant to be read however you want to read it. You can, of course, read it cover to cover, but more likely you will find yourself dipping in and out of chapters that you find interesting. Each chapter follows the same structure to make it easier to find key information about different chapter themes and compare chapters quickly and easily. The chapters all begin with a presentation of *background, history, and key terms*. This section gives a basic sense of the context of the theme, with the necessary vocabulary used by scholars working on the theme. Next, the *key topics, questions, and debates* section describes the current state of the field, with a sense for how scholars are doing research, what questions they are pursuing, the conflicts that might be arising, and the debates that conflicts might expose. Each chapter then includes a *case study*, providing an example of the how the author's own research is addressing the questions that have been brought up in the previous sections, and showing how they investigate the theme. The chapters include some of the most recent discourse analysis of religious discourse as well, with the researchers presenting innovative and creative analyses. Finally, the *future directions* sections discuss how the field is likely to look like going forward, providing researchers the chance to think about how their own work might benefit from issues discussed in each chapter.

The book begins with a chapter by Shawn Warner on *Interaction*, focused on highlighting the tools of conversation analysis, a long-standing staple in discourse analysis, to understand how religious doctrine is worked out in interaction.

Vally Lytra examines *Ethnography* as an approach to understanding language and literacy practices of particular religious communities, with

8 *Stephen Pihlaja*

researchers living and working among religious believers to gain important insider insights about how religious practice and belief is enacted in believers' lives.

Zayneb Al-Bundawi shows how *Narrative* approaches and storytelling within communities can be an important way of tracing how community and individual identity are tied to interaction around sacred texts and rituals, even in informal settings.

Sarah Turner's chapter on *Multimodality* looks beyond spoken and written language to how people communicate about their religious experiences using other resources, like gesture, showing how insights can be gleaned about how people think and talk about their experiences by specifically looking at how they gesture.

Beau Pihlaja introduces *Rhetoric*, discussing how the long history of the study of rhetoric from Plato to the present day has developed tools that can be used to understand contemporary readings and uses of sacred texts, specifically as a part of political speech.

Philip Wilson describes the key issue of *Translation* in religious discourse, including not only the translation of religious texts, but other important documents for the development of doctrine, touching on issues of grammar, lexis, and sociohistorical context.

Kate Power discusses the role of *Institutions* in the development of religious belief and practice, discussing how power operates in different ways, and how models of governance, like elections, mix both secular and religious politics, with broader social contexts influencing who comes to power within an individual institution.

Stephen Pihlaja looks at *Media*, and the ways that technology in the recent past has changed how people talk about religious belief and practice, and the consequences of those changes on how people think, believe, and act.

Andrey Rosowsky introduces the concept of *Community* and the role of ritual language and interpersonal interaction in creating and maintaining religious communities, in terms of passing on rituals and practices using sacred, liturgical language.

Xin Gao and Juliet Thondhlana discuss *Education*, looking specifically at how religious language interacts with educational settings where a teacher's religious identity is a key part of their motivation for their work: Christians teaching English as a second or additional language in contexts where teachers are explicitly motivated by their religious beliefs.

Alain Wolf describes *Inter-religious Dialogue*, focusing on the issue of speaking across religious traditions as a kind of translation and looking specifically at how institutional religious documents deal with the issue of other religious traditions and what this shows about the nature of religious belief.

Wei-lun Lu and Svitlana Shurma then discuss *Ritual*, using the concept of pragmemes to discuss idiomatic eulogies in Taiwanese funerals. The analysis looks specifically at how religious beliefs influence the construction of Buddhist and Christian phrases, with important difference in the conceptual metaphors the idioms employ.

Aletta Dorst expands on *Metaphor*, which has long been a key issue for scholars of religious language and discourse, given its prevalence across traditions and religions in religious text and talk relating to the ineffable. The chapter unpacks theories of metaphor that understand it both as a cognitive function and as emerging in the dynamic interaction of individuals.

Francesco de Toni then discusses *Emotion*, introducing appraisal theory to show how emotions and emotional language can be analysed, with a case study looking at multilingual correspondence within a community of European Catholic missionaries in nineteenth-century Australia.

Helen Ringrow discusses *Identity*, focusing specifically on issues around individual and social identity in the presentation of self, and how religious believers use language to present themselves as members of communities and holding specific beliefs, often implicitly, with particular language.

Peter Richardson then outlines the broad topic of *Cognition*, focusing on several key concepts driving research in the study of language in the mind: conceptual metaphor, metonymy, blending, and force-dynamics.

Karolien Vermeulen introduces the key concept of *Sacred Texts* and their role in religious belief and practice, focusing specifically on how the reading of sacred texts can create a spatial and temporal experience of the divine for readers.

Mariana Rocchia discusses *Ecology* and the role of natural environments in religious discourse, looking specifically at how religious institutions talked about the environment and conceive of it in relation to religious doctrine and belief and practice.

Finally, David Crystal draws the book to its conclusion, considering the main themes in light of the history of research into language and religion, and offering suggestions for several main streams of research going forward.

Among these different chapters, you will undoubtedly see useful connections. For example, the cognition, metaphor, and multimodality chapters all relate to similar issues; the ethnography, community, and identity chapters highlight some of the concerns at different scales. You'll see connections between the interreligious dialogue chapter and the translation one, as well as between the discussion of narrative and interaction. Discussions about the importance of metaphor are included in many different chapters.

Religious discourse – its role in social and cultural futures, its presence in day-to-day life, its emergent behaviours and structures – has always been and

will continue to be a fundamental part of how humans understand their own lived experiences. How you choose to look at those experiences and how people think and talk about them will depend on your own questions, the data that you have and that you can collect, and what the ultimate goal of your work is. *Analysing Religious Discourse* is meant to introduce you to new ideas about discourse or old ideas that you might think about in a new way. Whether you decide to follow one approach over another, there is something to be learned from every one.

1.4 References

- Ammerman, N. T. (2013). Spiritual but not religious? Beyond binary choices in the study of religion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 52(2), 258–78.
- Cameron, D. (2001). *Working with Spoken Discourse*. London: SAGE.
- Chilton, P., and Kopytowska, M. (2018). *Religion, Language, and the Human Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Durkheim, E. (2008 [1915]). *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1971). The orders of discourse. *Social Science Information*, 10(2), 7–30.
- Harrison, V. S. (2006). The pragmatics of defining religion in a multi-cultural world. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 59(3), 133–152.
- Hjarvard, S. (2008). The mediatization of religion: A theory of the media as agents of religious change. *Northern Lights: Film and Media Studies Yearbook*, 6 (1), 9–26.
- Hobbs, V. (2021). *An Introduction to Religious Language: Exploring Theolinguistics in Contemporary Contexts*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Labov, W. (1972). *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Labov, W., and Waletzky, J. (1967). Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience. In J. Helm (ed.), *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts*. Seattle and Washington, DC: University of Washington Press.
- Larsen-Freeman, D., and Cameron, L. (2008). *Complex Systems and Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lövheim, M. (2011). Mediatisation of religion: A critical appraisal. *Culture and Religion*, 12(2), 153–166.
- McNamara, P., and Giordano, M. (2018). Cognitive neuroscience and religious language: A working hypothesis. In P. Chilton and M. Kopytowska (eds.), *Religion, Language, and the Human Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Omoniyi, T., and Fishman, J. A. (2006). *Explorations in the Sociology of Language and Religion*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Pihlaja, S. (2021). *Talk about Faith: How Conversation Shapes Belief*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosowsky, A. (2008). *Heavenly Readings: Liturgical Literacy in a Multilingual Context*, Vol. 9. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.