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CHAPTER 19 Language and Religion

Webb Keane

1 Introduction: "Religious Language" as an Anthropological Topic

Despite long-standing interest in subjects such as ritual speech, oratory, magic, myth, exorcism, divination, possession, oaths, prophecy, and more recently, textuality, reading, and performativity, "religious language" *per se* has not been a commonly recognized anthropological topic (one exception is Samarin 1976). But taken as the intersection of the studies of religion and language, it can bring insight into key questions that have usually been treated from more restricted perspectives. Religious contexts can be especially revealing for the study of linguistic form and action since they can involve people's most extreme and self-conscious manipulations of language, in response to their most powerful intuitions about agency.

For the purposes of this chapter, I propose that an anthropological study of "religious language" concerns linguistic practices that are taken *by practitioners themselves* to be marked or unusual in such a way as to suggest that they involve entities or modes of agency which are considered by those practitioners to be consequentially distinct from more "ordinary" experience, or situated across some sort of ontological divide from something understood as a more everyday "here and now."[1] This definition aims to take indigenous perceptions as a guide, without foreclosing the possibility of comparison and generalization. I argue that religious language practices exploit a wide range of the formal and pragmatic features of everyday language in ways that help make available to experience and thought the very ontological divides to which they offer themselves as a response. These practices can assist the construction of forms of agency that are expanded, displaced, distributed or otherwise different from – but clearly related to – what are otherwise available.

This approach does *not* presuppose belief, since it starts from the existence of signifying practices rather than pre-existing concepts. Many religious traditions have little interest in either individual belief or public statements of doctrine (Asad

1993; Needham 1972), and may accept differences of interpretation as long as practices themselves remain consistent. Moreover, even religions that do stress belief may still object to the subordination of material practices to inner states. For instance, Blaise Pascal insisted, "The external must be joined to the internal to obtain anything from God, that is to say, we must kneel to pray with the lips, etc., in order that proud man, who would not submit himself to God, may be now subject to the creature. . . . [To] refuse to join [externals] to the internal is pride" (no. 250, 1958: 73).

Such "externals" as ritual have been the stuff of ethnography. One recent theory of religion asserts that "the sacred, the numinous, the occult and the divine" are all ultimately generated in ritual (Rappaport 1999: 23). This reflects a common anthropological view that to count as "religion" something must take forms that can be shared and reproduced as sociological realities (Geertz 1973). That is, religion is approached in its modes of "semiotic mediation," the ways in which social relations, cultural meanings, even subjective experience, are not just transmitted by signs but are constrained, made available for embodiment and circulation, and transformed by them (see Lee 1997; Urban 1996).

The approach taken here presupposes that people have some intuitions, or language ideologies (see Kroskrity 2000 and this volume), about distinctions of markedness among different linguistic forms and practices. As Roman Jakobson suggested for poetics (1960), since religious language practices may involve practitioners' heightened awareness of language (among other things), they offer analysts insight into that awareness and its linguistic and, by extension, conceptual and social consequences. Although such intuitions presumably involve cognitive input (Boyer 1993), the best evidence suggests that their concrete realizations are irreducibly mediated by specific cultural, social, and historical formations.

2 Religious Language as Action: From Game to Performative

An important theological question in several monotheistic traditions has been how words, which normally denote objects of experience, could have meaning when applied to a God who transcends experience. The question tends to assume that the primary function of language is to denote entities and say something about them. One response has been to focus on linguistic functions *other* than denotation. For instance, words that are apparently statements about God could actually be affirming the speaker's faith. This led many Western theologians to concepts that have been foundational for contemporary linguistic anthropology, Ludwig Wittgenstein's "language game" (1953) and J. L. Austin's "performative" (1962) (see Duranti, this volume). Wittgenstein claimed that different language games are governed by their own, distinct conventions. One would not hold a sonnet, shaggy-dog story, instruction manual, scientific proof, declaration of love, or memorized liturgy to identical standards of verifiability or sincerity. As Bronislaw Malinowski (1935) suggested, when Trobriand magic spells include semantically opaque speech, the resulting "coefficient of weirdness" shows that their "context of action" is distinct from that of other verbal acts.

The notion of language games drew attention to the interactive, socially conventional, and multi-functional character of speech practices. But it fell short of explaining their authority, specific forms, or how they change. Many students of religion turned to Austin's account of speech acts or performativity. Austin observed that certain expressions, such as "I hereby do thee wed," when spoken under certain conditions, serve not to make statements about things, but to effect changes in a state of affairs, such as transforming two persons into husband and wife. He eventually suggested that *all* statements have a performative (or "illocutionary") dimension.

The idea of the performative seemed to offer a way of understanding how talk "about" God could be doing something else. But if such talk is really performative, why should its linguistic forms have *looked* so much like an assertion as to have given rise to that mistaken impression (see Keane 1995)? After all, affirmations of faith take many forms such as words addressed *to* rather than *about* God, bodily gestures (Mahmood 2001), or semantically opaque utterances like mantra (Staal 1990). The role of explicit belief statements in certain traditions requires analysis of "language ideology," to which I will turn below.

In a different line of development, some anthropologists (Ahern 1979; Rappaport 1990; Tambiah 1979) took a cue from the fact that Austin's key examples are rituals. They suggested that the specific nature of ritual efficacy is performative, its results being due to the social convention that a certain form constitutes a certain action. The logical necessity linking act and consequence is like that between saying "I promise" under the right conditions, and the making of a promise. The saying *is* the making of a promise.

The performative approach to ritual seemed useful in explaining several things about ritual. One is that by removing its efficacy from the domain of physical causality, ritual escaped the accusation of being bad science, of trying to accomplish material results (such as making rain) on the basis of faulty premises (the magical power of words). Another is that the emphasis on conventionality fits the empirical observation that actors often consider it important that they themselves did not invent the ritual. As in many traditions, ritualists in Sumba, Indonesia, insist that "there are no longer any who really know" the rites, for the living are merely "new lips and new eyes" who did not create the ancestral words but just follow the traces of "Lord's tracks in the twigs, Lady's cutting-marks on the stump" (Keane 1997b). The poetic structure of their ritual speech and the highly salient pragmatic norms governing its performance reinforce the sense that these words are independent of their speakers, and that this contributes to their power. Finally, the conventionality of performatives seemed to justify the common ritual emphasis on repetition of forms. Adherence to a certain form (such as the parallelisms in the Sumbanese couplets just quoted, or, in English, a "hereby" in a proclamation) can help determine that a given utterance is a token of a certain performative type.

But the performative approach is also subject to an important criticism. In many cases, the practitioners themselves do *not* see their rituals as achieving their effects simply by convention. They may, for instance, be concerned with influencing the spirit world through emotional effects or magical causality (Gardner 1983). Some further explanation is required of how practitioners commonly define ritual as having special powers, or as able to bring about social interaction with extra-ordinary agents.

2.1 Ritual as authoritative action

If language games and performativity concern the *logic* of symbolic action, anthropology has increasingly been interested in its relation to *power*. The observation that participants in ritual can experience its regimentation of vocal and bodily movements as an external force was, of course, central to Emile Durkheim's (1915) account of its function in creating social solidarity. Similarly, as Gladys Reichard (1944) proposed of Navaho prayer, poetic patterning has "compulsive force," and linguistic anthropology has long tried to specify the emotional and social effects of ritual's formal properties more broadly (Duranti 1994: chapt. 4; Irvine 1989).

Maurice Bloch (1989 [1974], 1975) looked at several dimensions of structure to explain the distinctive character of ritual authority. He defined ritual in terms of its formality and repetitiousness, understood these to be markedly apart from the norms of everyday interaction, and looked to them for its special power. Since ritual, as he defines it, severely restricts the participants' choices of intonation, vocabulary, syntactic forms, and acceptable illustrations (such as scriptural or mythological allusions), it wields what he claims is necessarily a highly impoverished kind of propositional language. Therefore he concludes that ritual cannot primarily function to make statements. Rather, it is coercive: once participants have entered the ritual frame, they are committed to a pre-ordained sequence of events. The only alternative is the extreme act of rejecting the very premises of the ritual. Moreover, this coercion is all the more effective in so far as it tends to operate beneath the level of individual awareness, and includes the pressures of ordinary politeness norms – that to interrupt or speak in the wrong register, for instance, is vulgar or insulting.

In contrast to many "language-game" theorists, therefore, Bloch did not simply situate ritual as one game alongside, and neutral with respect to, others. Ritual words gain their power to suppress "reality" by being detached from context and from any association with the particular speaker. This makes it possible for the ritualists to speak on behalf of experience-distant entities, such as impersonal ancestor spirits.

Bloch drew criticism for too directly associating form with a particular social function. Judith Irvine (1979) showed that the word "formality" often conflates a wide range of meanings which do not necessarily correlate, and may even work at odds with one another. She argued that our analytic vocabulary must distinguish among at least four kinds of formality: increased code structuring, heightened cooccurrence rules, invocation of positional identities, and the emergence of a central situational focus. In particular, the structuring of linguistic code is relatively independent of the other three aspects of formality, which are more sociolinguistic and pragmatic in character. Moreover, in any empirical instance, local ideologies play a crucial role in mediating any actual social consequences of ritualization. Form alone is not fully determinative.

The high formality of poetic structure and interactive norms in Sumbanese ritual genres, for instance, can undermine rather than simply reinforce the smooth workings of hegemonic authority, fostering the participants' sense that ritual actions involve grave risks (Keane 1997b). The sense of risk operates at several levels. Foregrounding the rule-governed character of ritual implies that errors in performance can bring dangerous consequences. Tight constraints on interaction imply that the spirits themselves are difficult to reach, and potentially dangerous. The sense of risk makes palpable two things. First is the effort needed to communicate across an ontological gap; second, that such communications face inescapable potential for pragmatic and semantic slippage. Since ritual forms are seen to have an existence independent of their users, they can never be fully under their control. Even the most knowledgeable elders must insist that they possess only fragments of the ritual – or risk being stricken down by spirits for their presumption. In cases like this, there seems to be a positive correlation between a highly formalistic understanding of ritual and the relative lack of stable human authority.

3 Ritual as a Speech Genre

The development of the ethnography of speaking (Gumperz and Hymes 1964; Bauman and Sherzer 1974) helped direct attention to speech genres (Bakhtin 1986; Briggs 1988). Genre is "one order of speech style, a constellation of systemically related, co-occurrent formal features and structures that serves as a conventionalized orienting framework for the production and reception of discourse" (Bauman 2001: 79). Ritual can thus be situated in a multi-dimensional field rather than at one end of a line ranging from formal to not-formal. A given genre, such as liturgical chanting, will share some but not all features with others, such as oratory (Bloch 1975) or poetry (Leavitt 1997). Part of ritual's distinctive power, then, might derive from the complex of such linking and distinguishing features articulating it with its verbal surroundings. In this context even highly rule-governed ritual forms turn out to provide more creative resources than might be apparent when viewed in isolation (Gill 1981).

This observation draws support from the growing interest in less obviously formalized activities, such as Muslim sermons on cassette, a moment of evangelical "witnessing" in a conversation, or charismatic Catholic social gatherings, which show that ritual actively contrasts with and borrows from other genres. This weakens any claims about the necessary effects of form on authority, since ritual actions depend on their relation to what happens outside the ritual frame. A televised jeremiad by Jerry Falwell (Harding 2000; cf. Crapanzano 2000; Meigs 1995), spoken in the context of American traditions of religiously inflected political oratory, may have much greater relevance than in societies where political rhetoric has been more secular. Verbal productions that in Taiwan might index a state of potentially benevolent spirit possession would in Canada be likely to lead to a diagnosis of mental illness – even in Taiwan they may end up socially classified as madness (Irvine 1982; Wolf 1990; Wilce, this volume). Moreover, since genres must be identifiable by features that exist independent of any particular context (Bauman 2001), ritual genres are inherently vulnerable to being quoted, parodied, performed insincerely, reframed as art forms, and so forth. The fact that in themselves semiotic forms such as word morphology, poetic structure, or the pragmatic sequence cannot guarantee particular intentions or effects has also been a perennial source of difficulty and reformist efforts within many religious traditions.

3.1 Form and function in ritual speech genres

Ritual speech commonly displays a degree of repetition and elaboration far out of proportion to any obvious propositional requirements. For example, one typical Sumbanese prayer sequence involving two speakers and taking about 113 lines of verse might be reduced to this: "we are following the rules, so please accept this offering and hear our words" (Keane 1997b: 122–4). Couplets such as

followed path there	*lara liya*
for horses to follow	*pali waingu jaraya*
going the Laboyan way	*ta pali Laboya*
crossing trail there	*ada palaya*
for people to cross	*papala waingu tauya*
crossing the Wanukakan way	*ta papala Wanukaka*

(Keane 1997b: 103) amount to "we are performing a ritual properly." These are instances of the framing function (Bateson 1972) that can, in principle, be achieved by any linguistic property, such as esoteric vocabulary or unusual intonation, that marks off a stretch of discourse from its surround.

A frame is "indexical," that is, it points out something in the immediate context – indicating, for instance, "this, now" is a ritual (Hanks 1990; Peirce 1955; Silverstein 1976). It is thus "metapragmatic" (Silverstein 1993), saying something about the linguistic act being undertaken. But indexes alone merely point to the presence of something and cannot themselves offer any information about it. Some acts, such as "I hereby do thee wed," use explicit metapragmatic verbs ("to wed") to state what they are doing. Commonly, however, more guidance from semiotic form is needed, such as iconism or resemblance (Jakobson 1990). For instance, because the strongly dualistic couplet forms just quoted manifest a Sumbanese aesthetic of completeness and balance, they are iconic of the desired ritual outcome – sacred wholeness – without actually denoting it. And, over the course of the ritual, speakers' utterances tend increasingly to take strict parallelistic form. This is one example of how changes in linguistic form may realize the progression of the ritual action by resembling it, an instance of a "metapragmatic icon" (Silverstein 1981).

The observation is significant because it goes beyond imputing the effects of ritual simply to convention, to show they can derive from formal properties as they unfold in real time. For example, rituals may display increasing depersonalization over the course of the event (Bloch 1989 [1974]; Kuipers 1990). Indexes of the present time, place, or participants such as personal pronouns may be progressively eliminated, with poetic formulae, prosodic regularity, and other regimentations of discourse becoming more stringent, such that the participants come increasingly to speak not as individuated, complex, politically interested, and temporally finite parties, but as more abstract, disinterested, and timeless elders or spirits. The outcome is due not wholly to convention or conscious intention but to subliminal effects of linguistic and pragmatic forms.

Indexes and metapragmatic icons can make use of a wide range of linguistic properties in mutually reinforcing ways. For instance, the appearance of phonological or morphological forms markedly different from those found in colloquial speech may be taken by participants to be an irruption of divine speech. Entire stretches of

discourse may take on greater poetic structuring, or shift their tense markings, reinforcing the intuitive sense that, as in the case of Zuni prayer, the words are being repeated exactly "according to the first beginning" (Bunzel 1932: 493).

Regardless of the varying conscious intentions of ritual performers, the properties of ritual speech tend to mark it as different from more "ordinary" ways of using language. But the examples of metapragmatic iconism imply that there are more specific functions involved in these marked forms than the mere framing as "ritual." This may help explain the recurrence of certain features in ritual speech across the ethnographic record. John Du Bois (1986) identified some of these as follows:

- use of a ritual register
- archaistic elements
- elements borrowed from other languages
- euphemism and metaphor
- semantic opacity
- semantic-grammatical parallelism
- marked voice quality
- stylized and restricted intonation contours
- unusual fluency of speech
- gestalt knowledge
- personal volition disclaimers
- avoidance of first and second person pronouns
- speech style attributed to ancestors
- use of mediating speakers

Some of these are mutually determined. Fluent speaking style and gestalt knowledge, for instance, can both result from learning entire texts as seamless, and sometimes semantically opaque, wholes. Overall, however, these features must be understood as bearing what Wittgenstein called family resemblances, in so far as they do not constitute necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in a set, but form linked clusters such that no single member of the family need possess every feature. But viewing this cluster in terms of pragmatic functions and semiotic characteristics may offer a way of widening our scope from ritual speech to religious language practices more generally.

4 Religious Language as Altering Conversational Assumptions

As the concept of the metapragmatic icon suggests, rituals may derive some of their efficacy by linking formal properties to expected outcomes. One comparative question that arises, then, is whether there is something that motivates this common feature of ritual speech across the ethnographic spectrum. I have suggested that religious language commonly helps make present what would otherwise, in the course of ordinary experience, be absent or imperceptible, or makes that absence presupposable by virtue of the special means used to overcome it. In pragmatic terms,

ritual suspends certain presuppositions of ordinary interaction, such as the assumption that one's interlocutors can see and hear one, that they share one's language, and that the relevant shared context and conversational goals are unproblematic (Grice 1975). The special character of interaction across an ontological gap is made explicit in the question posed by some prayers of the Berawan of Indonesia (Metcalf 1989), "where are you spirits?"

Face-to-face interactions commonly build up an indexical ground, a emergent consensus among the participants about the nature of the shared here-and-now that forms the center of their conversation. Much interactive work is devoted to coordinating speakers (see Keating and Egbert, this volume; Bailey, this volume) and determinating the relevant context and the identities of the participants (Duranti and Brenneis 1986; Mannheim and Tedlock 1995). The outsider to the conversation may not know whether "we," at the moment, includes, for instance, only those people within earshot, all Canadian citizens, or the dead ancestors, whether "now" contrasts with yesterday, the era before feminism, or the afterlife (see Urban 1996), but what Erving Goffman called "ratified participants" (1981) normally come to some consensus very quickly. In contrast to such default assumptions, many of the formal properties of ritual speech play down the indexical grounding of the utterances in the immediate context. As Goffman (1967, 1981) observed, problems in coordination during ordinary conversation may be clues to trouble with, or new threats to, participants' identities and their sense of shared assumptions. In some religious contexts, however, it may be precisely the function of language to raise questions like "what's going on here?" and "who's speaking now?"

4.1 The dialectics of text and context

Forms that decontextualize discourse help create a perception that certain chunks of speech are self-contained, belong together, and could be reproduced in different contexts without substantive consequences for the discourse itself. This results in what has been called a "decentering of discourse" through "entextualization," the process of foregrounding its text-like properties, and the sense that it is relatively context-independent (Silverstein and Urban 1996). The words will seem to come from some source beyond the present situation in which they are being spoken and heard. Often the speakers seem to others or even themselves to have relatively little volition in producing their speech. They may be supposed, for instance, to be speaking exactly as the ancestors did, as the spirits who possess them dictate, or as has been written. The textual character of scripture can support the trans-contextual efforts of some Christians to find Biblical prototypes for every aspect of life (Harding 2000; Stromberg 1993). Effects of linguistic form are likely to seem especially persuasive and realistic because they are not derived from explicit doctrines, which one might doubt or deny, but seem to come directly from experience.

The decentering of discourse is one moment in a larger set of dialectical processes that also include the centering or contextualizing of discourse, which stress the relatively objective and subjective experiences of language. On the one hand, language is associated with the experience of inner speech and speaker's intentionality. On the other hand, it consists of pre-existing forms that one has learned from others, and, in addressing and being addressed, remains "on the borderline between oneself and the other" (Bakhtin 1981: 293; see also Benveniste 1971; Mead 1934; Vygostky 1978).

Taken as objectified forms, language has been an important target of religious critiques. One, stressing the propositional function, is that human language is an innately limited imposition on the ineffable or infinite, a position developed, for example, by Buddhism (Gómez 2000), some Christian mystics (Katz 1992), and Jewish Kabbalah (which treats scriptural language as divine emanation – but its communicative function as merely human (Scholem 1969)). The other, more sociolinguistic, is that language is inescapably implicated in politics or social vanities, as claimed by early Quakers (Bauman 1983). The latter critique in particular has tended to be associated with an emphasis on (apparently) plain or spontaneous speech, and language ideologies that stress the subjective intimacy of inner speech, and the norm of sincerity (Keane 1997c, 2002; Robbins 2001).

4.2 Reported speech

Suspicions of language in some religious traditions focus on the very same linguistic and pragmatic properties that other traditions may seek to exploit. To the extent that religious practices respond to or contribute to the perception of an ontological gap contrary to the assumptions of ordinary interaction, they may be prone to draw on the decentering and recentering possibilities of entextualization processes. For religions "of the book," the very existence of a written scripture is often taken as evidence for claims to an authority that transcends any particular context, and provides semiotic grounds for their intuitive verification. But the same decontextualizing objectivity may become the target of reformers and critics who seek unmediated access to divinity (Bauman 1983; Keane 1997c).

Compelling examples of the dialectic of recontextualization are found in the use of scriptures among contemporary Christians. Certain parts of scripture, such as Christ's Sermon on the Mount or the Lord's Prayer, are taken by many believers to reproduce words that were originally spoken in a particular context. Circulating in textual form, the words are now available for broad dissemination. Indeed, some believers take a capacity for wide circulation found, for example, in videotaped sermons, as evidence of the divinity of words even when they are not themselves sacred scripture (Coleman 2000; cf. Besnier 1995).

As they circulate, entextualized words are subject to recontextualization, as, for example, they are performed, read out loud, quoted, alluded to, or made the objects of silent meditation. The formal means by which words are introduced into new contexts have significant implications for the imputed relations not only between text and context, but also between different participants in the event (Boyarin 1993). Direct quotation, in which the words are supposed to retain the forms of the original utterance, tends to sharpen the distinction between the quoter and the person quoted. According to Vološinov, "The stronger the feeling of hierarchical eminence in another's utterance, the more sharply defined will its boundaries be, and the less accessible will it be to penetration by reporting and commenting tendencies from outside" (1973: 123). In contrast, indirect quotation, in which the original words are

rephrased, permits the person doing the quoting to interpret the original words and their intended effects from the perspective of the subsequent context (Lucy 1993). As a result, direct quotation is often felt to be more deferential to the original speaker, since it does not impose an interpretation or mingle voices (Hanks 1996; Urban 1989).

Linguistic form alone, however, does not fully determine the nature of the relationship between quoter and quoted source, for under some ideological interpretations, direct quotation can come to identify the two. Naomi Janowitz (1989) argues that the words of some Jewish mystical texts were supposed to be identical to those sung by angels, so the human reciting them joins the angelic chorus. Similar efforts to eliminate the distinction between quoting context and quoted original are found in some Buddhist meditation practices that aim at the internalization of texts such that the meditator identifies with their divine source (Gómez 2000). For many Christian fundamentalists the process of becoming saved is inseparable from the ongoing penetration of their everyday speech by scripture (Harding 2000; Stromberg 1993). Citations can become so thoroughly part of the speaker's consciousness as to lose at least some of their character as quoted text and become difficult to separate from the speaker's "own words."

4.3 Participation roles

Ways of reporting speech commonly express aspects of the relations among participants in a speech event or text. Quotation indexes the participant role of "animator." In Goffman's (1981) terminology, conversational roles can be analyzed into ***principal***, who bears responsibility for what is said, ***author*** who formulates the words, ***animator*** who utters them, ***proximal addressee*** of the utterance, ***target*** to whom the words are ultimately directed, and *overhearer*. Sumbanese rituals institutionalize such distinctions, as speakers pray and orate on behalf of silent sponsors, animating couplets whose ultimate authorship is attributed to ancestors, but whose selection and sequence must be determined by a different ritual specialist. The speakers address these words to yet other ritualists (the proximal addressees) thus casting both spirits and humans as overhearers, the former also being ratified as targets, and, overall, creating a manifestly supra-individual "speaker" (Keane 1997b).

The distinction between author and animator encompasses a wide range of possible relationships. Responsibility for words can range from a sharp hierarchical distinction between author and animator, to some degree of co-authorship or ambiguity (Duranti and Brenneis 1986). Early Islam apparently did not differentiate between the authority of words spoken by God and those spoken by the Prophet Muhammed (W. Graham 1977). In the Qur'an, God's words appear as reported speech, and so are also the Prophet's words, as he is their animator. But Muhammed also animates prophetic speech of which he is the author – although its principal remains the divine source of his inspiration. Eventually, however, it became theologically important to distinguish prophetic speech from direct revelation, sharpening the boundary between reported speech and its frame, and thus between animator and author. This placed the original prophecy and its divine author at a greater remove from historical

events, in order to accentuate the otherworldliness of the divinity and prevent the deification of the prophet.

Often what is at stake in the precise distinction between author and animator is the degree of agency, authority, and responsibility a performer is willing or permitted to assume. As Sumbanese ritualists would insist, powerful words come from absent authors. The forms of reported speech help make such distance (or its reverse) presupposable. In Lowland South America, narrators may gradually shift the extent of their identification with the protagonists in the myth they are narrating, positioning themselves either as commentators on absent spirits or as the spirit itself, bringing the otherworld into the present (Urban 1989; see also L. Graham 1995). Such "breakthroughs into performance" (Hymes 1981) are crucial for the capacity of religious practices to transform their contexts.

Even subtle alterations in speaking role can be crucial. For example, evangelical Protestants often describe their conversion as a call to witness, testify, or preach to others (Titon 1988; Peacock and Tyson 1989). Notice that this may not involve any particular change in *belief* itself – the individual may have subscribed to the same doctrines before and after being "saved." Rather, in such cases, full conversion consists in taking on a specific kind of authority – being transformed, as Susan Harding (2000) puts it, from a listener into a speaker, with a greater responsibility for and even authorship of words.

Bakhtin identified heteroglossia, or the capacity for coexisting linguistic styles to index multiple social identities, as pervasive in everyday speech. Many religious practices systematically take advantage of this capacity to alter the salient identities and relationships among authors and animators over the course of a performance. As the participant roles taken on by performers change, they index the absence, presence, or emergence of divine or spirit participants. The progressive transformation of these indexes is itself iconic of the transformation being effected by the religious event, for example the gradual appearance and then departure of the Quaker's Inner Light, the Pentecostal's glossolalia or speaking in tongues, the ritualist's ancestral spirit, or a shaman's spirit familiar. In contrast to more intellectualist and conventionalist aspects of ritual, the power of such semiotic forms seems to lie in the sense of realism they create by their direct availability to the senses and intuitions of participants and witnesses.

In general, where relatively egalitarian relationships prevail, the living may be expected to speak to the spirits in their "own" voices (Metcalf 1989), that is, as simultaneously author, animator, and principal. But in taking on individual agency, these speakers also expose themselves to the risks that attend interaction with spirits. In a less egalitarian situation, divine inspiration may provide speakers with an acceptable voice for public speaking that would not be available were they taken to be the authors of their own words (Lawless 1988; Lewis 1971).

Such examples show imputed authorship to have creative effects, by making available to speakers an identity or a relationship to some special agent. This is an instance of the broader point, that one widespread effect of religious language is the creation or extension of agents and forms of agency beyond what is commonly available in unmarked interaction. It is also one reason why "religious" speech has often been appropriated in "political" ways.

5 Intentions and the Identity of the Actors

The denial or displacement of individual intentionality can occur at several levels, from explicit propositions to the implications of linguistic form and the pragmatics of participation. The analysis of participant roles is only one instance of the collaborative and distributed nature of linguistic intentionality (Duranti 1993) and responsibility (Hill and Irvine 1993). Many of the effects of religious language can be better understood as expanding the presumptive speaker *above* the level of the individual, or, conversely, distinguishing among different voices *below* that level, emanating from a single body (Irvine 1996).

The distinctions among participation roles are of particular significance in many religious activities, given that the character and even the very presence of some participants is not guaranteed or readily determined by immediate observation, and that often the focus of the activity is the transformation of the identity of human actors, making present and bringing into engagement non-human ones. Therefore religious practices often elaborate on these distinctions to develop or respond to the purported nature, powers, and responsibilities of both practitioners and the entities with which they are interacting. In many cases where the authorship, performance, and responsibility for speech is distributed among different actors, it might be most accurate to describe the result as the creation of a supra-individual speaking subject (Keane 1997b). The reverse is also possible, the combining of distinct roles in a single bodily individual. As American folk preachers come to be "filled with the spirit," their performances display emergent features such as highly rhythmical, repetitive utterances, marked vocabulary, and gasping and shouting (Pitts 1993). When these are taken to index the individual's loss of personal control in favor of a divine agent, they verge on "possession," although this definition depends on local categories and participants' willingness to ascribe them in a given case (Irvine 1982). More generally, spirit possession (Boddy 1994) and glossolalia (Goodman 1972; Samarin 1972) involve both a deity and a human being using the same body but speaking in different voices, marked by contrasting prosodic and paralinguistic features, and sometimes distinct linguistic codes.

5.1 Objectifications of language and the construction of agency

The formal properties of highly ritualized performances often play down the agency of the living human participants in favor of powers ascribed to other entities. The social results may vary from the reinforcement of hierarchies to the making available of "other" voices that marginal or subaltern speakers may appropriate to subversive effect. In general, the formal means by which different religions propose to interact with their respective otherworlds can be diagnostic of their basic assumptions about the nature of the beings to be found there, as well as of living humans themselves. To this extent, linguistic practice may *reflect* ontological assumptions. For example, some beings do not require deference. Ruth Bunzel (1932: 618) claimed that in praying, Zuni "do not humble themselves before the supernatural; they bargain with it." This is strikingly different from Calvinists who try to avoid implying by their words that

they could actually influence God (Keane 1997c). And these both differ from forms of address that beseech or flatter (Calame-Griaule 1986) or influence by displaying the speaker's esoteric knowledge about the spirit addressee (Sherzer 1990). Modernist or reformist movements may place a great emphasis on cultivating sincere speaker intentionality, as in the demand that prayer be spontaneous. But even when highly scripted texts are followed, as in the daily prayers of Muslims, reformers may insist that the speakers utter them with "powerful depictive imagination" (Bowen 1993: 84). One may not be able to detect simply on the basis of speech forms whether the ideological emphasis is on personal intention or divine inspiration. In this respect, religious language does *not* necessarily reflect prior beliefs. Doctrine can be in tension with and even be constrained by linguistic practice.

The emphasis on sincere intentions usually manifests language ideology that privileges individual interiority (Keane 2002). The encounter between this ideology and actual linguistic activities can have interesting consequences. For example, Swedish Evangelicals expect conscious individual intentions to be the source of human linguistic expressions. Therefore, when people under stress utter words they claim not to have intended, they assume that divine agency is at work (Stromberg 1993). Similarly, Catholic Charismatics tell rounds of stories that, like many group conversations, tend to develop a thematic unity over time. In light of their assumption that speech derives from individual volition, they find the unintended emergence of this collective unity to be inexplicable without divine intervention (Szuchewycz 1994; cf. Csordas 1997). Language ideology is crucial to the interpretation of discursive forms.

The action being performed by a rite is, in principle, not created anew by the performers. Its efficacy depends on being accepted as an instance of something that can be repeated, and that cannot be derived solely from the speaker's intentions. One reason that some ritualists insist they are merely following the procedures laid down by ancestors is precisely to stress that link, forged by linguistic means, between an absence of intentionality on their part, and efficacy due to more distance powers. More generally, religious uses of language often work to suppress, constrain, deny, or otherwise displace what in other contexts might be intentions imputed to the immediate speakers (divination possibly presenting an extreme case; see Du Bois 1993).

6 Conclusion: Form, Function, and Mediation

Perhaps the single most important and widespread effect of the various formal and pragmatic devices by which religious language is distinguished from more unmarked language practices is the transformation of intentionality and agency. This claim, however, is not intended to reduce the phenomena to a single "explanation," if only because of the emphasis on language as a component of social practice. Being by their very nature heterogeneous, social practices include elements that are subject to determinants and constraints operating at distinct structural levels or domains (Bourdieu 1977). Where religious doctrines exist, for example, they can only become real to the extent that there exist concrete semiotic practices by which they can be enacted, embodied, experienced, and transmitted. But those practices will be subject to such factors as logistics, aesthetics, economics, or prior history, that are

independent of the logical, political, or emotional demands of and constraints on doctrine itself. Their push and pull must be understood within what could be called an economy of language practices and ideologies. Even textual forms as relatively autonomous, portable, and durable as written scriptures depend for their persistence and power on social dynamics surrounding contextualization and entextualization. Religious language is subject to the constraints imposed both by linguistic principles and by the practical requirements of action or performance, and its interpretation is subject to negotiation. Formal features of language do not achieve their effects alone or automatically.

Religious practices therefore require an appreciation of mediation in at least two respects. First, beliefs are mediated by the linguistic forms and practices through which they are remembered, transmitted, and made available for acts and reflections. The semiotic forms of those practices may constrain the production of beliefs and give direction to their transformations, as, for example, when fundamentalists draw conclusions from texts or reformers rebel against liturgies. Even a bald statement of faith depends on local conventions for expressing "beliefs" in the form of propositions, and for their hearers' acceptance of them as a recognizable and sensible activity. Second, those linguistic forms are not fully deterministic but are subject to reinterpretations within particular social and historical circumstances. As the historical adaptability of scriptures and liturgies suggests, form may persist while function or interpretation changes (e.g. Keane 1995).

From the first point it follows that close attention to language is required for any ethnographer who wants to gain insight into what people "believe," or even identify "who" the actors are in any particular situation – neither the invisible spirits presupposed by some acts nor the collective entities entailed by others may be immediately apparent to the external observer. It follows from the second point that linguists must bear in mind the importance of the social field for the interpretation of linguistic form in its ethnographic realizations. This means that we not attempt to reduce pragmatic function to linguistic form, conflate practice with some prior social function, reduce either form or function to cognitive determinants, or otherwise foreclose the role of social dynamics. Any account of social action requires attention to its semiotic mediation. And, conversely, any account of the effects of linguistic form in actual settings requires analysis of their social mediation.

NOTE

This chapter develops some of the arguments made in an earlier form, with more detail, in Keane 1997a. I have benefited from conversations with Luis Gómez and the participants in the Michicagoan Linguistic Anthropology Faculty Workshop, and especially Judith Irvine and Robert Scharf for comments on the manuscript, and Alessandro Duranti for his sure editorial hand.

1 On the problem of defining "religion" see Asad 1993; Smith 1982. By "ontological divide" I mean that practitioners understand the difference to be a qualitative one, as between kinds of things, rather than, say, simple spatial distance. The distinction is not, of course, always clear – the lines separating elders, ancestors, and deities may be quite blurred indeed. For the linguistic mediation of agency see Ahearn (2001), Duranti (this volume).

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PART IV The Power in Language