

RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

Webb Keane

Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia,
Pennsylvania 19104

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ABSTRACT

The effort to know and interact with an otherworld tends to demand highly marked uses of linguistic resources. In contrast to less marked speech situations, in religious contexts the sources of words, as well as the identity, agency, authority, and even the very presence of participants in an interaction, can be especially problematic. Different religious practices alter any of a variety of formal and pragmatic features of everyday language in response to their distinctive assumptions about the world, otherworlds, and the beings they contain. These practices are also mediated by speakers' assumptions about the nature and workings of language. Because such assumptions bear on the presumed nature of human and nonhuman subjects, religious debates often dwell on details of verbal and textual practice. The study of religious language touches on more general problems concerning relations among performance, text, and context. It also reveals chronic tensions between transcendence and the situated nature of practices, with implications for the nature of agency and belief.

RELIGION AND MARKED LANGUAGE PRACTICES

Religion, according to William James (1902; cf Wallace 1966, p. 52), is founded on the subjective experience of an invisible presence. A similar assumption seems to underlie EB Tylor's assertion that prayers begin as spontaneous utterances and degenerate into traditional formulas (Tylor 1873, p. 371). An approach, however, to the study of religion that begins with subjective experience encounters certain difficulties. One is epistemological, because the observer can only have access to other people's experiences and beliefs through objective manifestations. The difficulty, however, is due not only to the skepticism or positivism of the outsider. To presume that religious practice derives from prior experiences or beliefs is to play with theologically loaded dice. An emphasis on subjective experience involves

presuppositions and entailments that are not shared by all religious traditions (Asad 1993). Moreover, concrete activities such as speaking, chanting, singing, reading, writing—or their purposeful suppression—can be as much a condition of possibility for the experience of the divine as a response to it (Ferguson 1985). This can be especially evident, for instance, in the context of proselytization and conversion, in which language may help make the supernatural believable (Harding 1987) or induce certain religious dispositions in the worshiper (Rafael 1992, cf Foucault 1980). In general, analytic approaches that stress the public rather than the subjective character of culture (Rappaport 1979, Schieffelin 1985, Urban 1991) are also likely to concur with Clifford Geertz's observation that it is "out of the context of concrete acts of religious observance that religious conviction emerges on the human plane" (1973, pp. 112–13).

Religious observance tends to demand highly marked and self-conscious uses of linguistic resources. In this article [bear in mind that the analytic coherence, discreteness, and universality of the category religion are problematic (Asad 1993)], religious language will be provisionally defined in terms of the perceived distinctiveness of certain interactions, textual practices, or speech situations. To the extent that participants consider religious language different from everyday speech, this distinctiveness seems to respond to some of the common semiotic and pragmatic questions they face: By what means can we, and in what manner ought we, talk with invisible interlocutors? How can we get them to respond? How should we talk about them? By what marks do we know that some words originate from divine sources? Are these words true, fitting, efficacious, or compelling in some special way? These questions touch on more general problems concerning the relations among performance, text, and context. They also involve the relations among experience, concrete practices, and what is culturally construed to lie beyond ordinary experience, whether that be in the past, the future, at a spatial distance, or across an ontological divide. The problems of communication between this world and another, or of handling authoritative words derived from distant sources, are critical to many religious practices: Not only do they impose special semiotic difficulties on human practitioners, but their language must sometimes contend with the fact that the very presence of the deity, spirits, or ancestors cannot be taken for granted.¹

¹This review is confined largely to issues that have been raised in empirical studies of the role of language in religious practice. I have written little about the extensive literature on belief statements, the logic of religious discourse, myth, hermeneutics and scriptural interpretation, conversion narratives, feminist critiques of religious rhetoric, or the more scattered discussions of oaths, blessings, and uses of writing as material artifact. The review also does not address research at the intersection between language and music. It does, however, cast the net broadly to include practices such as divination and so-called "magic," which some definitions of religion exclude (often on theologically parochial and historically shifting grounds). Throughout, citations are limited to works available in English.

Language is one medium by which the presence and activity of beings that are otherwise unavailable to the senses can be made presupposable, even compelling, in ways that are publically yet also subjectively available to people as members of social groups. However, no single set of formal or pragmatic features is diagnostic of religious as opposed to other marked uses of language, such as poetic or ceremonial speech. Rather, different religious practices seem to select from among the entire spectrum of linguistic possibilities (Murray 1989, Sherzer 1990, Tedlock 1983). They suspend or alter certain aspects of everyday ways of speaking (even when religious language is taken to be prior to the everyday) in response to problems posed by their particular otherworlds and their assumptions about the everyday. Religious language is deeply implicated with underlying assumptions about the human subject, divine beings, and the ways their capacities and agencies differ. At the same time, religions face chronic dilemmas posed by the tensions between transcendence and the situated and concrete nature of verbal practices. So much depends on these assumptions and tensions that much religious debate dwells on linguistic forms (Bauman 1990; Bowen 1989, 1993; Ferguson 1985; Samarin 1973). The review begins with one common denominator among many varieties of religious language, the problems raised by interaction with invisible beings. It then addresses linguistic form and pragmatics. The final two sections consider the emerging scholarly interest in entextualization and the dilemmas posed for practitioners by otherworldly authority and agency.

Invisibility and Interaction

That the peculiarity of certain speech situations can support religious interpretation is famously evident in Augustine's conversion to Christianity (Augustine 1961, pp. viii, 6–10). Upon hearing the words "take and read, take and read" (*tolle lege, tolle lege*) spoken in a "sing-song" voice by an unseen child from the other side of a wall, Augustine understood them to be a command from God. Opening the Bible, he took the words he encountered to be another moment of communication. Two features of the speech situation permitted this. First, the invisibility of the speaker allowed Augustine to wonder about the true source of the words. Second, the fact that words written in one context can be taken up and read in another allowed him to see himself as their addressee. This episode illustrates the importance both of participant roles and of the tension between text and context in understanding the efficacy of religious language. Moreover, the repetitiveness and assonance that drew Augustine's attention to the child's utterance hint at the power of linguistic form as well.

Such speech situations are made possible by general properties of language that allow otherwise nonperceptible beings to play a role in human societies,

interactions that some scholars view as defining religion (Boyer 1994). To the extent that religion does involve interaction with invisible and intangible entities (or even, say, visible but silent icons), it poses certain practical difficulties. This is implicit in Hanks's remark that "it is distorting to describe a shaman... as acting alone simply because his spirit others are nowhere visible to the untrained observer" (1996a, p. 167). Invisibility, however, may pose dilemmas for even the trained observer, as suggested in the words of a practitioner, which form the title to an ethnography of prayer: "Where are you spirits?" (Metcalf 1989).

Religious speech situations can differ from the familiar parameters of everyday speech in several respects. In doing so, they can challenge ordinary habits as well as the theoretical models of speech that are predicated on them. If everyday conversation is a joint production that depends on the participants sharing certain default assumptions (Hanks 1996a, p. 168; cf Sperber & Wilson 1995), such as who is participating and what counts as the relevant context of "here" and "now," religious speech frequently occurs in situations in which those assumptions must be suspended (Howell 1994). In contrast to the face-to-face encounters of conversation analysis, the presence, engagement, and identity of spiritual participants in the speech event cannot always be presupposed or guaranteed. Prayer often seeks to bring about interaction between human beings and other kinds of beings that would (or should) not otherwise occur (Atkinson 1989; Gill 1981; Hanks 1990, 1996a; McCreery 1995; Shelton 1976). In some traditions, human beings must be reassured by aural means "that the ancestors and spirits have not forsaken us" (Peek 1994, p. 475). Even belief in the omnipresence of divinity does not assure that one can interact with it (KH Basso 1990, Peacock & Tyson 1989). Spirits may be the real audience, even of performances not explicitly directed to them as addressees (Becker 1979, McDowell 1983), and even practitioners who agree on how to pray may disagree on who their prayers actually address (Frisbie 1980a).

In contrast to everyday conversation, where such matters can be tacitly assumed, addressing invisible interlocutors may require that the participants in the speech event or even its location be clearly referred to (Gill 1981, Hanks 1996a, McCreery 1995, Metcalf 1989, Schipper 1974, Thomas & Afable 1994). The need to be explicit may also extend to the nature and purpose of the speech act being undertaken. Much of the content of spells and prayers is *meta-pragmatic*, that is, it reflexively refers to the very actions it is undertaking (Silverstein 1976; cf Jakobson 1971). One reason is presumably that the supposed participants do not all share the same spatiotemporal context, or do not share it in quite the same way. Metcalf observed of one Berawan prayer that half the verses are devoted to "trying to ensure that the recently dead man whom he ad-

addresses knows exactly what is happening and why” (1989, p. 266). Such metapragmatic means may help effect communication with the spirit world or permit a textual world to direct concrete actions (Atkinson 1989, Bell 1987, Bowen 1993, Gill 1981, Hanks 1996a, Malinowski 1965, Sherzer 1990, Tambiah 1970). Some Gayo spells center on passages from the Qur’an that describe events in which certain powers were granted to characters in the text (Bowen 1993). By reciting these passages, the speaker may obtain those powers in turn. This appears to work by recontextualizing narratives as metapragmatic statements: Their linguistic form remains the same, but their function shifts. Rather than being construed as accounts of actions that were carried out in the past, the words are taken as reports on and directives for the action they themselves carry out in the moment of speaking.

The problem of presence is often compounded by another feature of otherworldly beings. If these beings are sufficiently transcendent, then the ordinary means by which people speak of or to entities in the world of everyday experience may be ruled out in principle. Some traditions, fearing hubris or blasphemy, index the transcendence of divinity by enjoining name avoidance or circumlocution (Janowitz 1989, 1993). Reflexive reference to the very prohibition itself—e.g. the “unspoken name” (Keane 1997a, p. 131)—may serve to refer to a deity. As fully developed—for example, in negative theology and many mystical traditions—the concept of transcendence leads to the dilemma that even to say that the divine lies beyond discourse is already to reduce it to discursive form, which should therefore be eschewed (Clooney 1987, Lopez 1990, Sells 1994, Wright 1993; cf Katz 1992). The divine may be avoided not just as an object of discourse. According to some Jewish traditions, the power of the divine name lies in the fact that, because the deity Himself utters it, it is “the most important token” of divine speech (Janowitz 1989, p. 85; 1993). The prohibition on speaking the divine name thus prevents human beings from presuming to take on a speaking part reserved for God. Prohibition may also serve not only to protect the speakers from otherworldly dangers, it may also serve to bound off an entire sacred code from the effects of secular contexts (Kroskrity 1992). To protect the status of Hebrew in Israel, where it is also the language of secular affairs, Ultraorthodox Jews will not speak it outside liturgical settings (Glinert & Shilhav 1991, Kantor 1992). From a pragmatic perspective, this preserves the presupposition that any actual instance of speaking Hebrew will in fact be sacred.

Most religious traditions, however, do require practitioners to engage with the invisible world in some respect, and they provide the linguistic means to do so. What in their own speech activities enables people to have interactions with divine or spirit beings? Wherein lies the efficacy of religious language? Answering these questions requires examination of formal characteristics of

speech performance and the explicit beliefs or implicit assumptions that accompany them.

Form

Some of the richest work on religious language can be divided into that which focuses on meaning and that which focuses on form, though the two are usually closely linked. Studies that focus on meaning, especially as conveyed by metaphor (Calame-Griaule 1986; Fernandez 1982, 1986; Wagner 1986; Weiner 1991; Witherspoon 1977), tend to stress the richness and polyvalent qualities of religious language (although often only according to semantic content). Conversely, studies of form often ascribe to ritual language a certain semantic poverty. Here I concentrate on questions of form, which have been more central to those interested in verbal practices *per se*.

It is unusual for religious language not to bear some formal marks of its special character. Even the so-called plain speech of Quakers is recognizable by certain stylistic features (Bauman 1990, Irvine 1982, Maltz 1985; cf Coleman 1996). In her pioneering work, Reichard (1944) sought the “compulsive” force of Navajo prayer in its formal patterns. Developing the theme, Gill (1981) claimed that it is a general characteristic of the language of prayer that its repetition and formal elaboration are far out of proportion to the message, construed as denotation. One evident function of this elaboration, he proposes, is to signal a special frame of interpretation. Virtually any means, including changes in phonology, morphology, syntax, prosody, lexicon, and entire linguistic code can frame a stretch of discourse as religious. Shifts in phonology can mimic shifts in language code. I have observed Indonesian Christians take on Arabic-inflected pronunciations to index the religious (albeit not Muslim) character of a speech event. Linguistic form is multifunctional, however, and such devices are likely to entail more than just a shift of frames. For example, when practitioners of local religions in the Indonesian backcountry take words from the prayers of their Muslim neighbors, they are also trying to tap into the power held by politically dominant groups and to claim some of the status associated with spatially distant sources of knowledge (Atkinson 1989, Metcalf 1989, Tsing 1993).

A useful summary of characteristics commonly found in ritual speech is provided by Du Bois (1986). Du Bois’s list can be divided into features of performance and of text, and an associated belief that ritual speech replicates how the ancestors spoke. The performance features consist of marked voice quality, greater fluency relative to colloquial speech, stylized and restricted intonational contours, gestalt knowledge (speakers often learn texts as a whole and cannot recite them in parts), personal volition disclaimer (crediting a tradi-

tional source for one's words), avoidance of first and second person pronouns, and mediation through several speakers. Du Bois argues that these features tend to shift apparent control over speech from the individual proximate speaker, who is bodily present at the moment of speaking, to some spatially, temporally, or ontologically more distant agent (see also Urban 1989). This shift of control and thus responsibility is reinforced by the textual features, including the use of a ritual register (different lexical items for the same words in colloquial and ritual speech), archaistic elements (including words and grammatical forms that speakers believe to be archaic), elements borrowed from other languages, euphemism and metaphor, opaqueness of meaning, and semantic-grammatical parallelism (the latter having inspired an especially large literature, e.g. EB Basso 1985, Boyer 1990, Fox 1975, 1988, Gossen 1974, Jakobson 1960, Keane 1997a, Kratz 1994, Kuipers 1990, Sherzer 1990, Urban 1991).

Boyer (1990) proposed to explain the special forms taken by ritual speech on the grounds that listeners always assume that those forms are somehow caused by their divine sources and are thus evidence of the workings of forces that are otherwise imperceptible. Du Bois's survey of ritual speech, however, suggests that the authority ritual speech holds for its hearers need not require us to attribute implicit theories of causality to them. The formal properties listed above have such effects as playing down the indexical grounding of utterances in the context of the specific speech event, increasing the perceived boundedness and autonomous character of certain stretches of discourse, and diminishing the apparent role of the speaker's volitional agency in producing them. The resulting decentering of discourse (Bauman & Briggs 1990; Silverstein & Urban 1996a, p. 15), can encourage the perception that the words come from some source beyond the present context. For example, each recitation of Zuni prayer should be an exact repetition of words "according to the first beginning" (Bunzel 1932a, p. 493). But the participants' sense that such prayers do indeed repeat primordial words need not rely merely on their acceptance of some explicit doctrine. Rather, the decentering effects produced by the formal properties of prayers help support this belief as an intuition that is reinforced by each performance.

A second influential approach focuses on sociopolitical effects of linguistic form. One version of this approach builds on Durkheim's observation (1915; cf Briggs 1988, Kratz 1994) that ritual form can create a unified congregation by regimenting vocal and bodily movements and, by its emotional effects, may transform individuals' subjective states (Davis 1985, George 1996, Goodman 1972, Lawless 1988, Maltz 1985, Nelson 1985, Pitts 1993, Roseman 1991, Tinton 1988). Another approach looks at how linguistic form can restrict access to the circulation of discourse (Briggs 1993, McDowell 1983, Urban 1996; cf KH

Basso 1990). To the extent that their use demands esoteric knowledge, religious speech genres or lexicons can become scarce resources (Bledsoe & Robey 1986, Carpenter 1992, Frisbie 1980a, Irvine 1989, Lindstrom 1990). Their distinctive aesthetic and semantic character is then sometimes projected onto those who command them. Those who customarily speak refined or sacred words may themselves be credited with essential qualities of refinement or sacredness (Bourdieu 1991, Buckley 1984).

If those who emphasize metaphor are often inclined to see religious language as richer than ordinary speech, another approach sees it as more impoverished. Bloch (1975, 1989) claimed that the formal structure of ritual speech leads to diminished propositional meaning and in other ways restricts the range of what can be said (cf Rappaport 1979). By these effects, highly formal speech comes to serve the perpetuation of authority. Bloch has drawn criticism, both for his account of language and for the conclusions he draws from it, even from some who concur with aspects of his thesis (Boyer 1990, McDowell 1983). Formality, redundancy, and repetition are not incompatible with semantic meaning (Briggs 1988, Janowitz 1989). As Gill (1981) pointed out, formality only looks noncreative when we take texts in isolation rather than as components of larger actions. In a fundamental challenge to Bloch, Irvine (1979) showed that he had grouped together a heterogeneous set of properties under the rubric of formality, conflating linguistic properties, kinds of events, and aspects of social order, when demonstrably formality of one does not necessarily follow from the other. Thus, rigid poetic canons may correlate with political hierarchy but leave performers powerless (Metcalf 1989), whereas flexible speech norms in relatively egalitarian societies may reinforce individual differences of social status (Atkinson 1989). We need to be careful, then, about what aspect of society is being correlated with the formality of its ritual speech (Brenneis & Myers 1984).

Few would be willing to claim that the linguistic and pragmatic properties of ritual speech are without effect. A third approach has been to link these properties to the actions that ritual speech is supposed to undertake. In an influential paper, Silverstein (1981) argued that ritual speech is persuasive in part because of the mutually reinforcing ways in which its form, at multiple linguistic levels, serves as a metapragmatic figure for the accomplishment of the successive stages of the action being undertaken. For example, the sequence of verbs in Navajo prayers moves from plea for expected future actions to description of actions taking place to description of result of accomplished actions (Gill 1981; cf Vitebsky 1993). Thus, over the course of the actual time of the speech event the portrayal of time by the grammatical tense system shifts, until finally the outcome is implicitly taken to be something already accomplished.

Such analyses focus on the effects of form on the consciousness of hearers, speakers, or readers. The forms taken by ritual speech also reflect the participants' assumptions about agency or about what is required to communicate effectively across (or even talk about) (Wright 1993) the semiotic and ontological gap between human beings and invisible interlocutors (Gill 1987). If human beings cannot be sure their addressees share the same language, wordless song (EB Basso 1985) may be the best way to communicate with them; conversely, spirits may manifest their presence by producing unintelligible sounds (Hinton 1980) or changes in voice quality (Howell 1994, Irvine 1982, Schiefelin 1985) in possessed human beings. When people use a sacred language, such as Arabic, they may debate matters of pronunciation in the effort to reproduce the sound of revelation (Nelson 1985). Sonic form itself can be seen as divine (Alper 1988, Buckley 1984, Dusenbery 1992, JD Hill 1993, Janowitz 1993, Lopez 1990, Sullivan 1988, Witherspoon 1977). If the utterance of mantra is tantamount to divine presence (Staal 1990), the speaker's intention and semantic intelligibility become irrelevant. Conversely, those who receive part of their scripture in translation (e.g. from Hebrew to the Greek of some early Christians) may find the "spirit" to lie in semantics, in contrast with the "fleshly" linguistic form (Janowitz 1993, p. 400; cf Stock 1996).

At issue in the formal character of religious language, therefore, are not just aesthetic, emotional, or social functions, but also assumptions about who is actually speaking and listening in any given speech event. Closely bound up with these are local assumptions about how language works. These questions can be addressed in turn as problems of intentionality, participant roles, and authorship.

Intentionality and Responsibility

The means by which human beings communicate with invisible beings tend to reflect underlying assumptions about the nature of these beings, of the human subject, and of the social relations between them (Buckley 1984, Bunzel 1932a, Gossen 1974, Rosaldo 1982). In some traditions prayers are shaped by human deference toward the beings addressed (Robson 1994); others, like the Zuni, "do not humble themselves before the supernatural; they bargain with it" (Bunzel 1932b, p. 618). Some forms of speech seek to persuade, flatter, or please the listener (Calame-Griaule 1986) or influence the spirits by displaying the speaker's privileged knowledge of their names or origins (Atkinson 1989, Bowen 1993, Lambek 1981, Sherzer 1990). It is precisely the assumptions about the participants implicit in linguistic form that are often at issue when religious reformers seek to transform or forbid certain speech practices. One complaint by reformers is that if God is all-powerful, then cajoling words

are arrogant, and magical words—to the extent that they seek to act directly upon their addressee—a denial of divine agency. Another complaint is that persuasive words that seem to be addressed to offerings, sacralia, or altars thereby inappropriately impute subjectivity to an inanimate listener and are effectively a form of fetishism (Keane 1996).

Similar concerns about the role of speakers as agentive, volitional, and intending subjects animate debates in the academic study of language. Religious language raises difficulties, for example, for the view that the meaning of utterances depends on the listener's construal of the speaker's intentions (Grice 1957, Sperber & Wilson 1995). Do shamans or worshippers necessarily address beings from whom they expect recognition of their intentions? Do glosolalia (Goodman 1972, Samarin 1972), the use of a language unknown to the addressee (Bauman 1990), or other esoteric or unintelligible speech (Hinton 1980) communicate an intention, and if so, whose? Must I impute intentions to spirits when seeking signs from them in return? In collective worship, must every participant share the same intentions or assumptions about what is happening?

Religious practices have played a central role in scholarly efforts to understand language as a form of action (Malinowski 1965; cf Lienhardt 1961, p. 238), notably under the influence of Austin's concept of speech acts (Austin 1975; see Ahern 1979; Du Bois 1992; Finnegan 1969; Gill 1981, 1987; Rappaport 1979; Tambiah 1979; Wheelock 1982). Models of action typically require some account of actors' intentions; for example, in the case of language, those of speakers', as is evident in Searle's (1969) version of speech act theory. In response, ethnographic counterexamples—largely drawn from ritual contexts—have been adduced against the models of speech that give central place to the intentionality of individual speakers (Duranti 1993, Rosaldo 1982). In his debate with Searle, Derrida (1982) stressed the degree to which language is independent of the intentions of its speakers. What Derrida calls the *iterability* of language means that because any given utterance must draw on a preexisting linguistic system and thus can never be fully determined by or confined to the specific circumstances in which it is uttered, it is always vulnerable to being taken out of context, being cited rather than used, taken in jest rather than in seriousness, and so forth. Derrida can be criticized for overlooking the social character of speech, because over the course of a given interaction participants tend to work together to limit the possible interpretations of their utterances (Borker 1986, Brenneis 1986, Duranti & Brenneis 1986, Tedlock & Mannheim 1995). In many religious speech situations, however, the possibilities for such interactive work are highly restricted: Because the spirits are not full coparticipants in the shaping of meaning in the same way other sorts of conversation partners are, the ambiguities due to language's iterability can be especially prominent.

Du Bois (1992) argued that divination works by suppressing speaker intentionality, distinguishing between the propositional content of questions formulated by human beings and the pragmatic force carried by the oracle's answers. By restricting imputed intentionality to only one component of the communicative event, divination allows people to avoid responsibility for what is said. Still, Du Bois's analysis appears to take intentionality to be the default assumption in speech and fails to explain why suppression of intentions should be more successful than the ascription of intentions to, say, oracular devices or hidden spirits (for an alternative approach, see the following section).

Speaker intentionality is a central issue in the debates among Indonesian Muslims discussed in detail by Bowen (1989, 1993). Some modernists demand that believers pray with sincere intentions by uttering the words with a "powerful depictive imagination" of their goal (1993, p. 84). As this example shows, intentionality can be crucial even when the words used are highly formulaic and thus not subject to manipulation by speakers. As an element of particular *language ideologies* (culturally specific assumptions about the relations between language form and function) (Woolard 1992), the concept of intentionality can produce effects in its own right. Swedish Evangelicals, for example, emphasize the intentionality of the individual speaker. According to Stromberg (1993), however, because speech can express unacknowledged aims, there will be occasions of stress when they find themselves saying things they have not consciously meant. To explain such utterances, which their language ideology renders mysterious, they ascribe them to divine agency. Similarly, Catholic Charismatics tell rounds of stories that often develop a thematic unity over the course of a gathering. Because the collective product is outside the volition of any particular storyteller, the participants take this unity to manifest the presence of a single divine source (Szuchewycz 1994; cf Borker 1986). This conclusion seems to be predicated on their assumption that any agency that lies beyond the level of the individual is not likely to be human. The role of intentionality across the range of known speech practices remains subject to debate. But these examples show that any theory of intentions must consider both extraordinary interactions and the mediating role of language ideologies.

Participant Roles

In Du Bois's view, divinatory procedures work in part by distributing responsibility for different components of speech among the several participants in the communicative event. Notice, however, that what Du Bois takes to be the suppression of individual intentionality can also be described as an expansion of the presupposed speaking subject beyond the level of the individual (Keane 1997a) and a fostering of collaborative authorship and interpretation (Brenneis

1986, Lambek 1981). This expansion can be effected through the elaboration of participant roles. Erving Goffman (1981, cf Irvine 1996) distinguished several roles involved in speech events, including the *principal* who bears responsibility for what is said, the *author* who formulates the actual words, the *animator* who utters them, the proximal *addressee* of the utterance, the *target* to whom the words are ultimately directed, and the *overhearer*. To treat a spirit as the addressee of words is to impute to it a different sort of presence, and perhaps agency, than that of an overhearer. Roles that can be held in combination by one person may also be distributed among several incumbents (e.g. priests who, in the name of ritual sponsors, utter words attributed to spirit authors). Distribution of roles may serve to displace responsibility away from particular individuals or diffuse it among many. Elaborations of participant roles may help invoke sources of authority that are not limited to the perceptible here and now, so that, for instance, the speech event makes plausible the presence of invisible and inaudible spirits (Hanks 1996a). Religious belief thus finds support in the concrete forms of speech practices as much by what they presuppose as by what they depict.

If some speech events distribute participant roles among many persons, others combine several roles in one physical individual (Hill & Irvine 1992, Silverstein & Urban 1996a). This is evident in possession (Boddy 1994), in which the deity or spirit and the human being both use the same body, and in Pentecostal speaking in tongues or glossolalia (Goodman 1972, Maltz 1985, Mueller 1981, Samarin 1972). In possession, however, linguistic forms may not be sufficient to determine what being has entered the scene (Goodman 1972, Whyte 1990), or for that matter, whether the speaker is simply insane: The ultimate decision may be determined as much by the politics of interpretation as by the character of the speech (Irvine 1982).

An important kind of religious transformation consists of taking on a new role as speaker. The conversion narrative of preachers is often about the call to preach (Titon 1988), and full conversion may entail being transformed from the listener to the speaker in acts of “witnessing” (Harding 1987, Lawless 1988, Peacock & Tyson 1989, Titon 1988) or developing “attunement” with a teacher’s discourse patterns (Trix 1993). As such studies show, the speaker’s religious identity is approached not only or most usefully as an object of discourse (as in the “life-history”), but also as an inhabitable speaking role (Kratz 1994, McDowell 1983), with all the discursive and moral possibilities that may entail.

Authorship

The analysis of participant roles calls into question who counts as present in any given event, and to whom the words manifested in any event are to be attributed. Of particular importance in many situations is the question of author-

ship. One speech genre in a single ritual can encompass quite different kinds of authors; an Episcopal service can include prayers whose sources are both local (that for Congress) and divine (the Lord's Prayer, as taught by Christ). In Boyer's (1990) hypothesis, listeners take the special forms of ritual speech to index a divine source. The hypothesis, however, does not fully account for the role played by the human animator who utters words imputed to otherworldly authors or principals. Often participants are primarily interested in the social relationships along which speech is transmitted from otherworld to manifest actors. Shamans, for instance, are commonly said to develop individual relationships with spirits who then provide them with songs or chants (Atkinson 1989; Briggs 1993; LR Graham 1995; Hanks 1990, 1996a; Howell 1994; Lambek 1981; Roseman 1991; Sullivan 1988). For listeners who are aware of this, the performance itself will be sufficient to index the existence of the relationship, and the relationship in turn provides the warrant for the performance. In addition, the efficacy of ritual or sacred speech may stem from the fact that it originates from those to whom it speaks, something that gives the speaker special authority or persuasiveness, or places the listener under special obligations (Bledsoe & Robey 1986, Briggs 1993).

When the author of words is distinct from their animator, relationships between the two can display significant variation. Yucatec Mayan shamans receive speech in dreams or from other shamans, but each individual continues to "beautify" this speech throughout a lifetime, leading Hanks to ask "what kind of speaker is this?" (1996a, p. 161–62). Warao shamans receive chants in dreams that are induced by tobacco that has been received from an older shaman (Briggs 1993). In this case, the chant appears to index two sources, both the spirit's authorship (of linguistic form) and the teacher's authorization (of pragmatic capacity). Distinctions among participant roles can have political consequences: Lawless (1988) argued that divinely inspired testimony allows Pentecostal women in patriarchal communities to exert influence that would not be available to them were they to claim full responsibility for their words. Howell (1994) correlated distinctions of authorship with sociopolitical principles. Whereas the egalitarian Chewong treat spirits and shamans as coproducers of the text, ritual speakers of the more hierarchical Lio are not supposed to innovate (see also Atkinson 1989, Metcalf 1989). What these examples show is that the handling of imputed authorship may have more general implications for local assumptions about agency. At one extreme, if words are compulsively effective in themselves, then anyone would be able to use them, regardless of the speaker's personal character or intentions, and without consequences for personal status—unless, like early Quakers, one is the chosen but relatively empty receptacle for God's words (Bauman 1990). At the other extreme, if one's words are supposedly only one's "own voice" (Metcalf 1989), the speaker takes on considerable responsibility and risk.

A single performance can manifest a range of speaker control and a variety of presumed presences and actors, visible and invisible. Many rituals take advantage of this “heteroglossic” variability by undergoing, for example, a shift over performance time from what Bakhtin (1981) called relatively “dialogic” toward more “monologic” and authoritative speech forms (Kuipers 1990). In the process, the identity of the presupposed author can shift by degrees along a wide spectrum. For example, Baptist preachers work toward a climactic stage marked by a staggered stanza pattern created by breath groups bounded by audible gasps or nonsense syllables (Pitts 1993; cf Davis 1985, Rosenberg 1970, Titon 1988). Participants take this final stage to be evidence of the divine speaking through the preacher because “no mortal could possibly project such a design so far in advance, and so consistently, upon what appears to be spontaneous speech” (Pitts 1993, p. 165). When Xavante narrate their dreams, according to Laura Graham, pronoun use, altered voice quality, and other features come to identify the speaker with the spirits (LR Graham 1995). This exemplifies Urban’s (1989; cf Besnier 1995, JD Hill 1993, Kroskirty 1992, Lawless 1988) thesis that during a performance, animators can shift between fuller and lesser identification with the narrated speaker, positioning themselves as commentators on the spirits, who thereby remain relatively absent from the present event, or performing as a spirit, thereby bringing their world relatively close to the present, while also distancing the speaker from the self of everyday speech. A shift in presumed author entails a shift in the animator’s relationship to his or her words. Falling short of full possession, in which one socially recognized identity can supplant the other, is what Hymes (1981) called the “breakthrough” by which a speaker may shift from report (taking some distance on his or her words) to performance (fully identifying with the role of authoritative animator, even if not that of author).

Shifts in performance may thus restructure relations between the speech event and an otherworld. As a preacher shifts into divinely inspired speech, not only does an otherworldly author become present in the context of the particular speech event, but the speech event may come to be projected into another, scriptural, context (Davis 1985, Peacock & Tyson 1989). The relative dominance of text and context can vary, as shown in Briggs’s (1988) analysis of New Mexican Catholicism: Whereas everyday Biblical allusions bring scriptural passages to bear on a here-and-now context that itself remains the center of attention (cf Meigs 1995), the mass may collapse the distinction between Biblical text and ritual context.

Quotation

Because not every society provides explicit, doctrinal explanations of the sources of ritual words, it may lie primarily with linguistic form to make the spirit world manifest, inferable, or presupposable for the participants. In addi-

tion to the linguistic and paralinguistic cues already noted, one means of making evident that words have otherworldly sources is the use of quotation. Shamanistic speech seems to fall ambiguously between that of priests and of the possessed. The distinction lies in whether performance is taken to be a kind of quotation or whether the spirits are speaking through the performer. Words that are framed as reported speech can thereby be portrayed as originating outside the present context in which they are being reported (Buckley 1984). The Sufi teacher's authority comes in part from animating the words of others who have actually seen the other world (Trix 1993). When Baptists hear the voice of the Spirit in the inward self, the only evidence lies in the public act of talking about it, a common reason for quoting divine speech (Titon 1988). Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scriptures abound in reported speech of God (Wolterstorff 1995).

The different ways in which the quoted words are framed by the quoting speech can have entailments for their respective authority. What is quoted might be the original moment in which the words were received (LR Graham 1995), previous performances (Hanks 1996a, Howell 1994), or words formulated by other participants in the same speech event. Because the reported speech given in the rabbinic text analyzed by Janowitz (1989; cf Trix 1993) consists of past didactic dialogues, the reader, as addressee of that reported speech, becomes one more link in the chain of transmission. Simultaneously, the authority of those words is displayed by quotation frames that show them to have their origins in the past. The relations between quoter and quoted speaker may be subject to contestation and historical reconfiguration. According to William Graham (1977, 1987), early Islam did not differentiate the authority of divine words and the prophetic words ascribed to Muhammed. The divine words found in the Qur'an are quotation, God's words framed as reported in the words of the Prophet. Conversely, the Prophet's words bear divine authority as utterances of God's appointed. Subsequent efforts to distinguish "prophetic speech" from "revelation" in effect sharpen the boundary between author and animator, and thus between reported text and reporting context, thereby keeping the original prophecy at a greater, potentially more authoritative, remove from subsequent events.

What distinguishes direct from indirect quotation is the purported resemblance of form between the words as they occurred in the original speech event and their reoccurrence in the subsequent, quoting, speech event (Vološinov 1973). In contrast with direct quotation, indirect quotation grants to the person reporting the original words responsibility for interpreting them from the perspective of the subsequent speech event (Lucy 1993). Whereas direct quotation separates animator (the person doing the quoting) from author (the person being quoted), indirect quotation combines the two roles (because the person

doing the quoting indicates that the original words have been rephrased), while still locating the principal—the speaker responsible for the original utterance—in some previous context. Consequently, people often feel direct quotation to be more deferential to the original speaker because it maintains a clearer distinction between the voices of quoted and quoting speakers, does not presume to interpret another’s words, and does not superimpose the speaker’s indexical frame of reference onto that of the original speech event (Hanks 1996b, p. 211; cf Urban 1989). Vološinov points out that such differences in form reflect the relative authority of the reported words and their authors: “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, p. 123). As William Graham’s (1977) discussion of prophetic speech suggests, however, direct quotation can also come to identify animator with author. For example, Janowitz (1989) argued that the hymns given by a rabbinic ascent text are supposed to be identical to the words sung by angels in heaven. Because these hymns are replicas of angelic speech, the human being who recites them in effect joins the heavenly chorus, “collapsing the distance between heaven and earth” (p. 91). Differences in how reported speech is framed are evidence for a range of ways in which the animator is thought to benefit from or identify with the divine sources of the reported words (Irvine 1996, p. 150; Meigs 1995; Urban 1989). Thus, questions about religious authority and ritual efficacy can demand a closer examination of the relations between text and context.

Entextualization and Contextualization

As the question of authorship demonstrates, there is a wide range of forms by which speech can manifest the presence of divine or spirit beings in concrete events or cast particular circumstances as instances of eternal or ordinary truths. This variation can be seen in terms of agency, as shown above, and it can also be viewed in relation to the definition and transformation of context (Schieffelin 1985, Wheelock 1982). The emphasis on the textual aspects of ritual is, more specifically, part of a growing scholarly interest in the particular ways by which the transformation of context comes about, and a move away from an earlier anthropological tendency to privilege “face-to-face” interaction and oral performance (Blackburn 1988, Boyarin 1993). A key concept is *entextualization*, “the process of rendering discourse extractable,...[so that] it can be lifted out of its interactional setting” (Bauman & Briggs 1990, p. 73; cf Silverstein & Urban 1996b). This process can be affected by anything that emphasizes the internal cohesion and autonomy of a stretch of discourse, permit-

ting it to form a text (whether oral or written) that is perceived to remain constant across contexts (Bauman & Briggs 1990). The process can include linguistic and performance devices, such as the formal features listed by Du Bois (1986), that diminish the speaker's control over the utterance. Entextualization is thus an ubiquitous feature of language use [cf Jakobson's (1960) poetics and Derrida's notion of iterability]. For example, it is one means by which animator can be distinguished from author, because it permits stretches of discourse to be removed from one context and resituated in another as reported speech.

Note, however, that text is one moment in a dialectical process through which words undergo both contextualization and entextualization (Bell 1987). (Re)contextualization, the (re)insertion of text into a context, may, for example, take the form of reading aloud, reciting formulaic verse, or quoting another's words (Becker 1983, Boyarin 1993, Janowitz 1993, Meigs 1995, Silverstein 1996). When scripture is believed to report the actual words of divine revelation, the act of reading aloud effectively closes the circuit from utterance in context to written text and back to utterance again (Janowitz 1989, pp. 102–3). To the extent that a scriptural text merges with a context, it can be taken as making divinity present (Nelson 1985, Peacock & Tyson 1989). Recitations, however, often retain some marked linguistic or performance features (Blackburn 1988, Rabin 1976, Silverstein 1996), which testifies to their persistent connection to and difference from the prior—and distant—context. Thus, to the extent that performance permits a distinction between text and context to remain perceptible (e.g. by reading with an exaggerated monotone), it provides material substantiation for the participants' intuitions that the present interaction stands out against a more authoritative source that is in some way absent (Besnier 1995, George 1996, Valentine 1995). The relation, however, between text and context can also be understood as an instance of a pervasive dilemma for many religions, that the divine is in practice entangled with the concrete human acts it should transcend (Lopez 1990, Lutgendorf 1991, Nelson 1985). Groups that seek immediate access to divinity tend to be suspicious of any overtly textual mediation, including not only actual written artifacts such as prayerbooks or notes (Bauman 1990, Maltz 1985, Peacock & Tyson 1989, Pitts 1993, Stock 1996, Tilton 1988), but also memorized, formalized, or aesthetically appealing words, the use of which can be seen as inauthentic and idolatrous (Coleman 1996, Janowitz 1993, Keane 1997b, Nelson 1985, Prell 1989).

The concept of entextualization means that context is not the court of final appeal for any analysis, or something residual that must only be taken into account. Rather, what is relevant to context—and even whether context is to be considered relevant—is the result of ongoing social processes, genre expectations, and language ideologies. Because entextualization tends to decenter the

event (Bauman & Briggs 1990, p. 70), reorienting it around a prior or otherwise absent origin, what counts as context becomes problematic. This would seem to support Bloch's (1989) contention that ritual suppresses this world in favor of the otherworldly. Ritual, however, need not serve only one function. To the extent that entextualization and contextualization exist in a dialectic relation to each other, neither can serve as a final ground for analysis. Because language use moves between the poles of entextualization and contextualization, speech events can also stress the boundary between text and context—as when ritual language remains incomprehensible to listeners—maintaining the separation between worlds. To the extent that texts can move across contexts, they allow people to create the image of something durable and shared, independent of particular realizations such as readings, interpretations, or performances or their historical transformations (Barth 1990; Urban 1991, 1996). One effect of the transportability of texts is the identification of spatial with temporal distance: Local practitioners may find the authority of both the scriptures and the practices they ordain to derive simultaneously from their global reach and their ancient origins (Bledsoe & Robey 1986, Bowen 1993, Briggs 1988, Pitts 1993).

Dilemmas of Belief and Agency

The ways in which different religious practices handle language can shed light on some general dilemmas of belief and agency. One implication follows from the challenge these practices pose to any strong version of linguistic determinism. Irvine (1982) argued that a diagnosis of spirit possession is never determined directly by how the possessed person speaks but requires some degree of social negotiation. Others point out that linguistic form alone cannot tell us what people take their words to be doing, where they believe those words originate, or even whether they consider the language to be intelligible (Briggs 1988; Irvine 1982, p. 243). Practitioners themselves may remain in some doubt about these matters (Goodman 1972). An important consequence of the underdetermined relationship between linguistic form and function is that existing ritual forms can take on new functions and meanings during periods of religious reform, in the name either of change or of continuity (Bowen 1989, 1993; Keane 1995; Tambiah 1979).

A second implication concerns belief. Academic discussions of belief have tended to presuppose the view characteristic of conversion-oriented religions, that one either believes or does not, and often that co-religionists can be assumed to possess a high degree of shared belief. But matters need not be so clear-cut: If linguistic form and function are not mechanically bound together, then particular practices need not require particular beliefs (Boyer 1990, Favret-Saada 1980). In fact, some language practices seem designed to permit

people to carry on without demanding an explanation of what is happening (Du Bois 1992). Moreover, in contrast to Bloch's thesis that ritual speech is successful only to the extent that it brooks no deviation, some religious speech practices may be effective precisely because they can support ambivalent or contradictory beliefs in the practitioner. This is one implication of Rafael's (1992) view that Tagalog speech practices in the confessional were simultaneously ways of converting to Catholicism and of fending off missionaries' demands for belief. Ivy (1995), using the psychoanalytic model of the fetish, proposes that Japanese spirit mediums provide members of a highly industrialized society with the solace of communication with the dead without needing to fully persuade them that such communication has been achieved.

Religious language also raises questions about agency. In studies of ritual, performance, and conversation, attention has increasingly shifted from formal patterns to the emergence and negotiation of meanings over the course of interaction (Bauman & Briggs 1990, Kratz 1994, Schieffelin 1985, Silverstein & Urban 1996b, Tedlock & Mannheim 1995). Wary of the determinism alleged of some varieties of structuralism, analytic approaches that stress interaction often give great weight to the agency of participants. The problem of agency becomes especially acute, however, in circumstances that are supposed to involve otherworldly agents, and in practices that impose severe constraints on the human practitioner. Religious language frequently puts the role of the apparent performers into question and situates the more efficacious, moral, or liberating agency in all sorts of other loci, such as sounds, canonical words, teachers, deities, divinatory mechanisms, congregations, or books.

That language practices presuppose certain constructions of agency helps explain why religious reform movements give so much attention to the proper uses of words. Reformers in several religions (Bauman 1990, Bowen 1993, Maltz 1985) often attack existing speech practices as either granting human beings too much agency (relative to divine beings), or too little (relative to false idols or objectified words). Traditionalists may in turn defend themselves by asserting their superior respect for forebears or accusing reformers, who seek unmediated access to the divine, of excessive pride. At stake is the relationship between the exteriority of language and its implications for the interiority of speakers (Keane 1997b). As has often been observed, language can seem both deeply subjective (as an apparent medium of inner thought), and eminently social (as a preexisting system and a medium of communication). Those who stress sincerity or direct access to divinity tend to be suspicious of language, to the extent that its concrete forms bear evidence of its conventional or social origins outside the individual speaker. Those who stress the distance or difficulty of access to the divine often lay great weight on the mediating power or intersubjectivity provided by those same properties of language. In

one view, speakers should shape their words; in another, sacred words should offer something to speakers that they would not otherwise have. Implicit in these differing stances is a broader point, that human agency is not always something people want entirely to celebrate or claim for themselves; they may prefer to find agency in other worlds. To the extent, however, that their access to other worlds is mediated by language, it involves persistent tensions between transcendence and the pragmatic present. Those tensions sustain a wide range of certainties, ambivalences, and ambiguities and thereby keep open a host of historical possibilities.

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