

The Communication of Immortality: A Description of Verbal Devices in the Genre of the Sermon

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ABSTRACT As one of the cultural means of facing death, the sermon performed shortly before burial has been identified as a dynamic space within the rigid structure of mass. But just how is the sermon constructed and how do verbal devices used in this genre guide production and interpretation of experiences about death? The study on the genre of a sermon aims at identification and description of verbal devices that interact reflexively with contextual presuppositions based on the cosmologies underlying the Christian understanding of death. Using principles from genre analysis, interactional linguistics and ritual analysis, the study analyzes five video recordings of the performance of the sermon in Bukusu funeral events. The Bukusu people occupy the Western Kenya region on the border between Kenya and Uganda. The topic of facing death is critical among the Bukusu people because here, in most cases, natural death is non-existent. Thus, communicating immortality becomes a crucial means of bonding the bereaved and instilling hope, thereby combating fear. Being at the interface between discourse analysis and anthropological linguistics on the one hand and religion on the other, this study is a contribution to the discussions about the role of communicative genres in the communication of immortality.

INTRODUCTION

Studies in Communicative Genre

Since the inception of the communicative genre theory (Günthner and Knoblauch 1995), studies in this field have taken two paths. Firstly, researchers within this theory have focused on face-to-face communication, for instance, gossip (Bergmann 1993), and reproaches (Guenthner 2000) among others. Secondly, researchers have been interested in communication transmitted through media and technology. As a contribution to this arm of genre studies there has been research on audiovisual communication featuring for example work place relationships (Heath and Knoblauch 1999), hybrid genres and especially telephone conversation over the radio, messages in the telephone responses and computer visual presentations (Knoblauch and Schnettler 2010; Knoblauch 2014). With respect to hybrid genres research has mainly explored the multimodal nature of communication: the harmony among verbal, non-verbal and technical artefact in realising communication. In this case, communication lies not in specific elements such as codes or speech acts but in the entire performance: the realization of the entire communicative process. Within the two arms of research there has been an attempt to integrate video data and to develop

interpretive techniques in the analysis of video data (Knoblauch and Schnettler 2010). This paper extends the genre theory to the funeral performances in Africa, by examining particularly the face-to-face interactions in the sermon and demonstrating how verbal devices used in the sermon contextualize presuppositions underlying Christian understanding of death. The focus is on the sermon performed in mass that takes place shortly before burial among the Bukusu people. This paper is part of a larger research project that focuses also on the traditional genres.

The Bukusu People and the Bukusu Funeral

The Bukusu people belong to Luhya subgroup of the wider group of the Bantu people, and they live in Western Kenya on the border between Kenya and Uganda. Being speakers of Lubukusu, the Bukusu people number about 1, 499, 000 people according to a recent statistics (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2011). The Bukusu funeral comprises a complex of speech events and speech acts that reflect the underlying understanding of death. Admittedly, the Bukusu funeral brings together people from diverse religious persuasions, each with its cosmological organization. In line with this argument, there exists a wide cosmological interstice between Christianity and traditional Bukusu re-

ligion that can be considered local religion. Hence, this calls for the use of devices that perform two functions at the same time: 1 convince the mourners, a majority being Bukusu people, to accept the Christian view of immortality and thereby 2 persuade the mourners to accept the immediate death in terms of the mystery of life, death and resurrection of Christ. Indeed, as one of the persuasive strategies, the enactment of evidence of the existence of Christ in the life of the deceased and the church itself, is, therefore, crucial.

The Sermon

The *Order of Christian Funerals* (henceforth OCF) urges the enactment of a short homily after readings at the funeral liturgy, but neither defines homily nor sermon. The connecting aspect between the two, though, according to the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary*, is that both are speeches that specify even edify the best moral principles that are religious in nature. The homily, observes Murray (1994: 352) 'is a very general form of discourse specified by its religious nature and its purpose being the edification rather than doctrinal exposition'. The edification function of the homily suggests that the homily takes little cognisance of the needs of the community, but the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* adds that the main celebrant must be sensitive to the needs of the community. The family 'in its needs, sorrows, fears and hopes' (Murray 1994: 354), according to the *Order of Christian Funerals* is the principal audience in the funeral sermon, and the family consists of those 'most touched with the grief at the death of one they love' (Murray 1994: 354). The family is part of the community, which shares in their 'needs, sorrows, fears and hopes', and the responsibility of the community lies in their 'involvement in the ministry of consolation' executed through 'active participation in the celebration of the funeral rites' (OCF 11). As sympathisers, the community is motivated by the words of Jesus Christ: 'blessed are they who mourn; they shall be consoled' (Matt. 5: 3; OCF 9). The passersby may be present too, but as Murray (1994) observes 'for the purposes of the sermon they should be regarded as transparent'. Thus, the sermon identifies two kinds of audiences: the community of Catholics (inclusive of the bereaved family) and the non-Catholics.

One of the functions of the sermon is to 'console and comfort' (Murray 1994; Kent 2007: 4) those who 'have suffered the loss of one whom they love' (OCF 8). Consolation includes the 'task of incorporating the physical remains [of the deceased] among those of the earlier dead, and aiding the soul in its journey to and inclusion in the community of the dead in the other world' (Paxton 1990: 7), and it is therefore linked to 'expiation and reconciliation' (Houlbrooke 1989: 15) based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (OCF 8). As a consequence, the second function according to Murray (1994) is to 'raise the hopes [of the bereaved]' by bringing them to the understanding that 'the mystery of God's love and mystery of Jesus' victorious death and resurrection were present in the life and death of the deceased and that these mysteries are active in their own lives as well' (OCF 27). The third function is that, the funeral sermon serves an interpersonal function of establishing a bond among Christians and the deceased. Thus, the basis of Christian immortality is the mystery of life, death and resurrection of Christ, and the sermon constructs immortality by demonstrating that Christ is part of the general Christian tradition, of the deceased's life and death and that Christ is available to the mourners in the moment of death.

The Sermon: Genre or Ritual

Research in linguistics and sociology of knowledge on the one hand and anthropology on the other reveal that cultural means of transmission of knowledge can be studied under genre and ritual respectively. Studies in genre and ritual agree on three key issues, firstly, that cultural performances are essentially pre-patterned and historical and that they play a part in solving problems related to communication (Van Gennep 1909/1986; Turner 1967; Günthner and Knoblauch 1995). Cultural communication problems often coincide with the transition of individuals or a group of people from one stage of life to another (Van Gennep 1909/1986; Turner 1967; Bell 1997). Secondly, studies agree that communication problems mitigated by cultural performances are recurrent, and have links to the crisis occasioned by the fact that transition holds the subject 'betwixt and between' making communication difficult (Van Gennep 1909/1986; Günthner and Knoblauch 1995). Thirdly, there is

consensus that those cultural performances are not static or prefabricated; instead the performances are dynamic and dialogical (Günthner and Knoblauch 1995). However, studies reveal one difference that is essential for the purpose of this paper: that while genre, as a general term refers to cultural performances, ritual partly refers to performances that have a religious significance (Turner 1967; Maxwell 1983). In other words, genre draws, from ritual, the cultural religious aspects, and in this case, cosmologies underlying the Christian understanding of death. From this perspective, then, this paper views the ritual of the sermon as an instance of genre.

As a model, the genre theory proposes an analysis of features on the levels of the formal, situative and functional structure (Günthner and Knoblauch 1995: 8; Luckmann 2009: 274-277) so that while formal (language) features refer to verbal and prosodic (kinetic) features, features of the 'ongoing dialogue' belong to the situative level. Functional aspects on the other hand include cultural aspects. The genre theory further proposes that the relationship among the features in the three categories is reflexive, and Auer (1999) concludes that formal and situative features contextualise functions. While the Christian view of immortality forms the functional level, the verbal devices are part of the formal level. In this paper, verbal devices are identified and description on how they reveal the Christian idea of immortality is made. Though the sermon is delivered among the Bukusu people, the language of use is Kiswahili. In this paper, though, the researcher does not attempt the question why Kiswahili is used over Lubukusu.

METHODOLOGY

The data used in this study consists of five video recordings of the performance of the sermon and two 2-hour recordings of interviews with two catholic priests. With five video performances the researcher can identify and compare verbal devices identified and the religious presuppositions they signal, in one performance and across the five performances. The data was collected from Bungoma District of Western Kenya, where the Bukusu people live, in the year 2011. The study analyzes qualitatively transcribed data supplemented with ethnographic information. While admitting that verbal and non-verbal devices reflexively interrelate to create

meaning, in this paper the researcher focuses mainly on verbal devices. A functional approach is used to identify discursive structures that are analysed to show the reflexive interrelationship between verbal devices and contextual presuppositions based on the Christian idea of immortality. Taken as communicative resources for the organization of the performance, verbal devices are examined with the view of showing how by revealing the Christian idea of immortality they also build the sermon. This is in line with what Goodwin and Duranti (1992: 31) say that 'instead of viewing context as a set of variables that statistically surround strips of talk, context and talk are now argued to stand in a mutually reflexive relationship with each other, with talk and its interpretive work shaping context as much as context shapes talk' (Gumperz 1982). The relevance of the participants as joint creators of context lies in the fact that participants use contextualization cues to make the context available. Thus, verbal devices as used in this study are contextualization cues that make the sermon and Christian cosmology available.

RESULTS

Christian Immortality and Verbal Devices

This section discusses instances in which verbal devices trigger contextual presuppositions based on the Christian idea of immortality. Examples are drawn from the five performances that form the corpus.

Citations

There are many instances of citations in the data as the following three examples show.

Having contextualised life and death as gifts from God, the priest in the following excerpt explains the vision of 'heaven' based on the book of revelation.

(1) SV4-CIT1

- 01 *mmesikia katika somo la kwanza; (6.1)*
kitabu cha Ufunuo; (5.0)
you have heard from the first reading; (6.1)
the book of Revelation; (5.0)
- 02 *kwamba yohana alionamaono; (2.0) ak-*
aona watu wengi
that John saw a vision; (2.0) he saw many
people
- 03 *wamevaa- (1.1) wamevaa mavazi meupe;*
(1.1)

- they were dressed- (1.1) they were dressed in white clothing; (1.1)
- 04 *akauliza watu hawa ni akina nani ati hawa wameosha na*
he asked 'who are these people'. That this people have been washed by
- 05 *damu ya mwana kodoo: - (2.7) na sasa wanafurahi mbele ya KITI cha*
the blood of the lamb: - (2.7) and now they rejoice before the throne
- 06 *enzi; (-) mbele ya kiti cha mwana kondoo: - (0.9)*
before the seat of the lamb: - (0.9)
- 07 *jua halitachoma tena; (1.4) na Mungu; (2.7) uchungu yote yote*
the sun will not burn again; (1.4) and God; (2.7) all pain
- 08 *haitawaguza na mungu atawapanguza machozi katika maisha yao;*
will not touch them and God will wipe tears from their lives

The noun *somo* 'reading' (line 1) alludes to the Christian tradition located in the Bible, while the ordinal number *kwanza* 'first' indicates the place of the reading in mass. Hence while *somo* 'reading' embeds the reading in the general history of salvation, *kwanza* 'first' embeds the reading in mass. The utterance *kitabu cha ufunuo* 'book of revelation' (line 1) reveals the general source but the specific source (chapter, verse) are unstated. The citation dwells upon the vision in which John sees *watu wengi wamevaa...mavazi meupe* 'many people wearing white garments' (line 3). The adjective *meupe* white indicates perfection associated with resurrection; hence people wearing *mavazi meupe* 'white cloths' are the glorified. The verb *wameosha* 'they have been washed' reveals the transformation from sin to holiness that is only possible through Christ. The privileges of the 'washed-people' include: *Wanafurahi mbele ya kiti cha enzi* 'they rejoice before the throne', *jua halitachoma* 'the sun will not burn', *uchungu wote hautawaguza* 'they will not experience pain' and *mungu atawapanguza machozi* 'god will wipe their tears' are the privileges of the status of 'being washed by the blood of the lamb' (line 5-8). The noun phrase *damu ya mwana kondoo* 'blood of the lamb', according to the Christian cosmology, recalls the sacrifices of the old in which human beings offered animal sacrifices as a way of appeasing the supernatural, but it also shows Christ as a lamb, a lamb whose

sacrificial body becomes a 'door' to the kingdom of God. Hence those who die in Christ are 'perfectly purified' (COCC 1023), and all things of the human world pass away (COCC 1044).

First, the priest exhorts the mourners to pray for the deceased and then in the example (2) below, the priest, citing from the Bible, demonstrates the place of the 'hearts' of just men.

(2) SV3-CIT1

- 01 *na tunaambiwa katika somo la kwanza : - (1.5) kwamba*
and we are told in the first reading: - (1.5) that
- 02 *roho zao wenye haki: - (1.1) zimo: - (1.3) mikononi mwa bwana;*
hearts of the just: - (1.1) are in: - (1.3) in the hands of the Lord

The biblical source of the information is unstated, but the noun *somo* 'the reading' (line 1) embeds the reading and mass in the Christian salvation tradition. With the ordinal number *kwanza* the citation (reading) is embedded in mass in which the paschal mystery lives. The noun *haki* 'justice' in *Roho za wenye haki zimo mikonono mwa bwana* 'the spirit of the just are in the hands of God' (line 2), reveals the mystery of life, death and resurrection of Christ as a model of God's justice. Christ's justice is based on the spirit, indicated by the noun *roho*; a justified spirit is capable of entering the kingdom of God metonymically indicated by 'hands'. That the passion of Christ opens God's dwelling place for the human beings, is true, and Christ's entry into the 'possession of God' (Durrwell 2004: 63) curves out a way along which the saviour and the saved must proceed. While the sacrificial and glorified body of Christ becomes the door to justice and sanctification, it also becomes the pillar of Christian morality.

Prior to example (3) the priest explains the import of 'purification. In the example below, the priest explains that Christ wishes to save, and not to lose, human life.

(3) SV4-CIT2

- 01 *Alisema hataki mtu yeyote apotee: ; (1.1) anataka wote*
He said he does not want any person to get lost: ; (1.1) he wants all
- 02 (he points at believers using the right hand)
- 03 *waokolewe;*
to be saved;

In the citation framed as reported speech, the source of the citation in the Christian tradi-

tion and the present moment of mass are unstated. Implying the place and time of the pronouncement gives Christ's message prominence over space and time, but it also portrays Christ as unlimited by space and time. Christ's message of which his life is integral has a basis in redemption. The verb *Waokolewe* 'they be redeemed' (line 3) indicates the efficacy of paschal mystery in mediating human beings with God, while the verb *apotee* 'he/she gets lost' (line 1) refers to failure to access God. Thus, Christ's (cited) message revealed in *hataki mtu yeyote apotee...anataka wote waokolewe* 'he doesn't want any person to get lost...he wants all to get saved' is that human beings are destined to salvation or damnation and that Christ's intention is to save human beings. The Christian dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, are informed by the Christian view of the role and the efficacy of sacrifice and priesthood as shown within the history of Christianity. The sacrifices of the old do not access God, and are therefore not consummated (Heb 10: 11), while Christ's sacrifice achieves possession of God (Heb 10: 12).

Allusions to the Deceased's Life

Data contains the use of allusions to the life of the deceased. Prior to example (4) the priest first refers to a biblical quotation in which he establishes Christ as the hope for both the dead and the living. In the following excerpt, he talks about the banquet or the body and blood of Christ in which the deceased participated.

(4) SV6-AL1

01 *na ndio MAANA karamu ambayo tuna-Ongelea juu yake*

and that is why the banquet which we speak about

02 *ni mwili na damu ya KRISTU, (.) ambayo ndugu yetu aliishiriki;*

is the body and blood of Christ, (.) which our brother participated in;

The noun *ndugu* 'brother' both alludes to - and embeds - the deceased in the community of Christians, while the determiner *yetu* 'our' indicates the identity of the deceased as a member of the community of Christians. Allusion is part of the adjective clause that defines *mwili na damu ya KRISTU* 'the body and blood of Christ'. The utterance *karamu...mwili na damu ya KRISTU* 'the banquet...the body and blood of

Christ' alludes to the communion with Christ at the table of sacrifice, a communion that takes place during the last supper. According to the Christian cosmology, the last supper anticipates another banquet to be celebrated in heaven in the fullness of time. The Eucharistic banquet celebrated at the funeral, like the banquet to come includes the re-unification of the living and the dead. Hence, the verb *aliishiriki* 'which he participated in' alludes to the communion of the deceased in the body and blood of Christ offered at the table of sacrifice, a participation that links the deceased to the bereaved, and to Christ in whom the deceased and the bereaved are also to reunite at the apocalypse. Communion in the glorified body of Christ also takes place through sacraments, which perfect the relationship between Christ and a believer. Consequently, death, which signals the conclusion of sacramental life, also marks the incorporation of the deceased into the mystery of death and resurrection (Durrwell 2004: 347).

Before the following example (5), the priest demonstrates that Christ's mission was to ensure that all human beings are re-united with God. In the following excerpt, the priest alludes to the deceased.

(5) SV4-AL1

01 *Beneficiary mmoja: - (1.4) wa maneno ya kristu ni Namarome*

One beneficiary: - (1.4) of the words of Christ is Namarome

02 *Christine;*

Christine

Considering the deceased as a *beneficiary* (line 1) establishes Christine's death within the paschal mystery; the deceased is on the path to salvation, a path established by Christ and a path along which the believer 'journeys' with Christ. The noun *beneficiary* and the number *mmoja* 'one' locates the deceased among the body of believers including the mourners whose lives are altered by the sacrifice executed by Christ, that is, all believers, as *beneficiaries* commune in the teachings of - and life and death of - Christ. Communion in the glorified body of Christ bonds the dead and the living, a reality that instils hope and challenges the mourners to follow the footsteps of the deceased in the hope of the reunion in heaven.

Before enacting the following example (6), the priest first explains the three stages of birth in human life: physical birth, spiritual birth and

birth in the kingdom of God. In the following excerpt, the priest alludes to the life of the deceased.

(6) SV2-AL1

01 *Sasa huyu mzee amepita hatua hiyo tatu;*
(1.1) *kuzaliwa; (1.7)*

now this old man has passed the three steps; (1.1) to be born; (1.7)

02 *nga ali omukwangwa sijui namba ngapi*
(reads eulogy)

as he is Omukwangwa I don't know which number

03 *Alafu khwepela khulisubila liewe- (1.3)*
ten years ago, (1.7) azaLIWE

Then through his faith- (1.3) ten years ago, (1.7) he is to be born

04 *mara ya pili- (1.2) khunyola baptisimu*
mukanisa yefwe entakatifu ya

a second time- (1.2) to get baptism from our holy catholic church

05 *Katoliki, Roman Catholic; (4.6) haya*
2001 kamenya mutini: - (.) miaka; (-)

Roman catholic; (4.6) then in 2001 he lived in faith: - (.) for ten years

06 *kumi ya: - (-) ten years alianza mwaka*
wa kumi na moja 2012 wele

of: - (-) ten years he had started the eleventh year in 2012, then God

07 *omwene kaboola yicha nono; (1.8) wa-*
malile lukendo lwowo;

himself said, 'come now; (1.8) you have finished your journey'

The noun phrase *huyu mzee* 'this old man' (line1) indicates the deceased, while the verb *amepita* 'he has passed' signals life in terms of a 'journey', a journey across *hatua...tatu* 'three steps'. The priest uses Lubukusu language when he talks about the first (line 2), second (line 4) and third (line 7) 'births'. The noun *hatua* 'steps' indicates stages that correspond with physical and spiritual changes. The initial physical birth *nga omukwangwa* 'as omukwangwa' (line 2), though serving as a precondition for the spiritual birth, is itself insufficient since, the physical birth implies the taking over of the sin of the fore fathers. The role of the spiritual birth, *khunyola baptisimu mukanisa yefwe entakatifu Roman Catholic* 'to be baptised through our holy church Roman catholic' (line 4), lies in the salvic mission of Christ; Christ lives, dies and resurrects in order to join up human beings with God. Thus, in order to be 'born' in heaven (line 7), a believer must link his own death with that

of Christ in baptism, a link that guarantees a believer resurrection with Christ. Establishing the deceased within the three interrelated but crucial steps persuades the mourners to understand and accept the immediate death in terms of the mystery of life, death and resurrection of Christ and its efficacy in mediating between human beings and especially the deceased and God.

DISCUSSION

As the examples (1,2,3) above reveal, with citation Christ is established within the Christian tradition as a 'means' for the reunification of human beings and God, a re-unification that includes the restoration of human beings (example 3) to the purpose for which they were created: to propagate in the spirit (example 1 and 2). Redemption through Christ resembles the sacrifices of the old, but it is more efficient since it opens the 'door' to the kingdom of God (Durwell 2004; Bachmann 2011). Entry into the kingdom of God implies penetrating immortality. Since the sermon enacts the mystery of life, death and resurrection of Christ, in it Christ lives; thus, with citation the Christ in Christian history (who died and resurrected) guides in construction and interpretation of the immortality based on Christ alive in mass: death and life (resurrection) meet. Hence, through citation the mystery of life, death and resurrection of Christ is established as a basis for the enactment of the sermon and for the establishment of a link between Christians (alive and dead) and Christ's death in preparation for renewal (resurrection in Christ).

As the examples (4,5,6) above reveal, with allusions to the life of the deceased the link between the deceased's life and Christ's death and resurrection is established showing evidence that the deceased, firstly, followed the example of Christ's life and secondly, that like Christ he/she has died. Thus, the believer's life and death are viewed in the light of Christ's life and death. Christ's death is redemptive, and the Christian tradition reveals that it is faced with thanksgiving and joy. The demonstrated reality that the deceased follows Christ's life and death justifies the deceased's participation in Christ's resurrection in which death is conquered. Thus, the deceased like Christ is to conquer death; the deceased is to penetrate immortality with Christ. As followers of Christ, according to the Chris-

tian cosmology, both the deceased and the bereaved experience renewal: the deceased resurrects with Christ and the bereaved renew their relationship with Christ through the witness of the deceased's life example. The Eucharistic banquet (mass) therefore unites the deceased and the bereaved in Christ in anticipation for the greater re-union in the fullness of time.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated two dynamically intertwined realities. Firstly, while citation extends the scope of the sermon to the past of death and shows that even within that past firstly Christ lived and died in the paschal sacrifice and secondly that Christ lived in people's lives (people who like the deceased lived and died), it also shows that Christ resurrected and by resurrecting he holds a promise of resurrection to the dead of all ages. Citation gives evidence from the Christian tradition that all who die in Christ resurrect with him, and that believers whether dead or alive are united in the immortality of Christ. Citation provides therefore an order that informs the performance of the sermon. Secondly, allusion to the life of the deceased, on the other hand, includes the life of the deceased, and in particular, it reveals how firstly, the deceased links his/her life to Christ's death and secondly, how he/she lives in accordance with the teachings of Christ. Evidence of the co-existence between the deceased and the existence of the deceased in and with Christ, provided by allusions to the deceased's life forms the basis for how death is to be viewed. Christ, according to the Christian cosmology, does not die, but he resurrects and enters his glory. Since the deceased dies in Christ he/she 'journeys' with Christ to glory-to immortality. In this way, allusion to the life of the deceased guides the performance and interpretation of the sermon and death within the Christian cosmology.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the two views, it can be argued that both citation and allusion to the deceased's life offer evidence of the existence of Christ in history (the history of Christianity and history of the deceased) as well as the reality of death (for the believers in the Christian history and the Bukusu funeral). This research has thrown up

many questions in need of further investigation. A close examination of citations and allusions to the deceased's life to show how they interrelate with the embedded metaphors, analogies, reported speech and code switching is strongly recommended. Also recommended are the examination of other verbal and non-verbal devices and an analysis of how they interweave to reveal cosmologies underlying the Christian understanding of death. This research forms a foundation to the investigation of language use in funeral sermons.

NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank Professor Martina Drescher for her invaluable comments on the initial draft of this paper.
- Transcription Conventions
- , rising intonation
 - level intonation
 - ; falling intonation
 - (.) below 0.2 sec
 - (-) 0.2 sec- 0.5 seconds
- CAPITAL Loudness

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