

Language and religion as a sociolinguistic field of study: some introductory notes

1. Introduction

The topic of ‘language and religion’ is relatively new to sociolinguistics and the systematic development of ‘language and religion’ as a field of sociolinguistic study only really started to come about in the past decade. Therefore, we considered it appropriate to start this volume with an accessible and generalizing introductory article to this field of study. We conceived our article in such a way that it starts with an overview of its development and then turns to a brief description of existing frameworks used to demarcate it. The article ends with a presentation of a tentative framework that gives context to the invited contributions to the present volume.

2. The development of language and religion as a sociolinguistic field of study

A brief glance at the history of sociolinguistics suffices to reveal that the importance of religion as a factor of relevance to the study of language variation, shift, maintenance, policy and planning already features in the works of at least some of those who are generally considered to be the founding fathers of this branch of linguistics. In *The Norwegian Language in America* (1953), Einar Haugen, e.g., expounds the link between religious affiliation, identity and language shift among Norwegians in America. Joshua A. Fishman *et al.*'s *Language Loyalty in the United States* (1966) contains more than a handful of contributions (written by Joshua A. Fishman himself, Heinz Kloss, John E. Hofman and others) that even from a contemporary point of view can be considered as guiding interdisciplinary approaches to the way in which religious factors interfere with processes of language shift and maintenance in contexts of immigration. Apart from Haugen and Fishman, William Stewart and Charles Ferguson also thematised the interplay between language and religion. In his sociolinguistic typology for describing national multilingualism, Stewart (1968: 541) lists the religious language function (i.e. “the use of language primarily in connection with the ritual of a particular religion”) as one of 10 language functions. And at a time when David Crystal's article on language and religion (cf. Crystal 1966) and William Samarin's edited volume on *Language in Religious Practice* (1976) had already been published, Charles Ferguson (1982) gave a strong impetus for the study of the correlation between the distribution of the world's writing systems and the spread of religions. Ferguson (1982) builds on previous work in which he

already addressed the centrality of the religious dimension to the study of diglossic patterns of language use (Ferguson 1959) and language planning (Ferguson 1968). Next to all these approaches, studies dealing with the linguistic aspects of colonialism paid attention to religious factors by scrutinizing the influence of missionary activities all over the globe on the standardization and documentation of (endangered) languages and by overtly and critically examining the often “insidious effects” of religiously inspired language spread “on language ecology, on languages, their speakers, and the well-being of those speakers” (Kaplan/ Baldauf 1997: 230).

While in the light of this very brief overview it would be inappropriate to claim that the interplay between language and religion has been badly served by sociolinguistics and the sociology of language over the past decades, one cannot conclude either that continuous systematic attention has been paid to the topic. Although it might sound a bit exaggerated, Fishman’s assertion that “we now stand in the sociology of language and religion just about where we were relative to the sociology of language per se some 40 or more years ago” (Fishman 2006: 13) makes sense. From the point of view of sociolinguistics and the sociology of language, the systematic study of the interface between language and religion only really got into its stride at the turn of the millennium. Not surprisingly, Joshua Fishman once more was among the ones who gave it a boost.

In 2006, Fishman assisted Tope Omoniyi as a co-editor of a volume entitled *Explorations in the Sociology of Language and Religion*. In their introduction, Fishman and Omoniyi made an appeal to Bernard Spolsky to frame the contributions to their volume. Spolsky currently plays a leading role in the further elaboration of language and religion as a topic in sociolinguistics. As can be inferred from his book on *Language Policy* (2004, especially pages 48-52) and chapter 3 from his book on *Language Management* (2009), Spolsky mainly concentrates on the close interactions between religion and language policy. In December 2009 Sipra Mukherjee posted a call for papers for a thematic issue of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* devoted to ‘Language and Religion’ on the LinguistList. In 2010 Tope Omoniyi edited a volume on *The Sociology of Language and Religion: Change, Conflict and Accommodation*. In October of the same year, a workshop was organised at the occasion of the annual meeting of *verbal*, the Austrian association of applied linguistics, aimed at “expressing the role that language plays in shaping, constructing and disseminating religion and religiousness”.¹ And Richard Watts informed us that a future volume of *Multilingua. Journal of cross-cultural and interlanguage communication* will soon be devoted to the subject. The present volume of *Sociolinguistica* is, thus, to be situated in a field of research that is currently experiencing vibrant development.

In order to push ahead the systematic development of ‘language and religion’ as a field of study, Fishman (2006) strongly pleads for the elaboration of a theoretical framework that can serve as a sort of anchorage for the many case studies we are confronted with. Yet, it might also be worthwhile to concentrate on the possible demarcations and subdivisions of the field first. Such an approach has the advantage that a consensus can

¹ Cf. http://www.univie.ac.at/aauteweb/downloads/aaute_2010/ReligionSpracheAusschreibungstext.pdf; last access on 03.06.2011.

grow on the contours of the field of language and religion. On the basis of such a consensus one might consider to elaborate theoretical frameworks for which Fishman's "Decalogue of basic theoretical perspectives for a sociology of language and religion" (Fishman 2006) certainly has the potential to serve as an inspiring landmark.

The choice is made here to take a 'taxonomic approach' to language and religion as a starting point. In the next paragraphs we offer a generalizing overview of existing frameworks relating to the (socio)linguistic study of language and religion that is then complemented by our own framework in section 4.

3. Existing frameworks

One possible way of coming to terms with the breadth of the study of language and religion is to base oneself of the framework presented in the *Concise encyclopedia of language and religion* (2001) edited by John F. Swayer and J.M.Y. ('Seumas') Simpson. Apart from section VII which contains biographies (highlighting the contribution of missionaries, theologians, religious leaders, philosophers, orientalist and linguists to the history and/or the study of language and religion) the encyclopedia consists of 6 main sections. Based on the encyclopedia's table of contents and heavily relying on Sawyer's general introduction to the volume (Sawyer 2001a), the sections and their contents can be summarized as follows:

Section I: Language in the context of particular religions: This section contains general information on a wide variety of religions (e.g., African traditional religions, Australian Aboriginal religions, Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, Judaism, Quakerism, Sikhism, etc.) and particularly focuses on the role of language in each of these religions.

Section II: Sacred texts and translations: The focus here is on sacred texts (the Bible, the Quran, the Talmud, ...) as well as on important religious translations (the English Bible, the Septuagint, translations of the Buddhist canons, ...) and archaeological finds (the Rosetta Stone, the Dead Sea Scrolls, ...).

Section III: Religious languages and scripts: This section deals with the role of particular languages or language varieties (e.g., Church Latin, Church Slavonic, Jewish Aramaic, Panjabi, ...) in the history and development of religion. It also includes entries on the development of the Alphabet, on paleography and on a number of 'sacred scripts' (e.g., Devanagari and Runes).

Section IV: Special language uses: This section mainly contains contributions on the special use of language in contexts of worshiping (e.g., the use of mantra, glossolalia and silence), in theological discourse (e.g., the use of metaphors, myths, ...), in the context of religious experiences (channeling and meditation) and in everyday life (e.g., blessing and cursing).

Section V: Beliefs about language: This section covers philosophical discussions of religious language in Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism. It also deals with belief in the magical power of names and words and beliefs about language such as those expressed in the biblical story of the Tower of Babel.

Section VI: Religion and the study of language: This section includes articles that deal with the contribution of individual scholars (e.g., active in the Arab, Chinese, Persian linguistic tradition) or groups of scholars (e.g., the Summer Institute of Linguistics) to the study of language in the religious context.

Following Spolsky (2006) one could briefly add Sawyer's limited version of this classification (Sawyer 2001b). However, since this version too does not really focus on language and religion as a *sociolinguistic* field of study, we leave the discussion of this classification aside and turn to a brief description of the framework Spolsky himself developed to structure the contributions in Fishman/ Omoniyi (2006). The framework developed by Spolsky (2006) consists of the following dimensions:

1. *Effects of religion on language:* Possible research topics include the influence of religion on language choice, language maintenance as well as (lexical) borrowing.
2. *The mutuality of language and religion:* Research within this dimension deals, for example, with the interplay between religions and languages in the changing sociolinguistic repertoire of multilingual towns. At stake here is the interaction between multilingualism and religious pluralism.
3. *Effects of language on religion:* A possible focus of study is the contribution of language (such as used in prayer, e.g.) to building a religious community.
4. *Language, religion and literacy:* Research within this dimension looks, for example, at the influence of language and religion on literacy.

Spolsky does not seem to be totally convinced of his classification. He repeatedly refers to it as being "parsimonious" and "not terribly revealing" (Spolsky 2006: 7). He does, however, add an interesting perspective to it in that he sketches out two related lines of research on the relationship between religion and language policy: one focusing on the specific influence of religion on various aspects of language policy, the other on religious literacy policy. The second line of research relates, among other things, to the status of sacred religious texts as 'translatable' or not and the effects this has on language policy. The first line of research includes a discussion of the diffusion of missionary religions on indigenous languages or the language policy of certain religions and religious institutions (cf. chapter 3 in Spolsky 2009 for illuminating examples on the language policy of religious institutions).

All in all, Spolsky's exploratory approach to language and religion reads as an open invitation to further reflect on similar or alternative 'lines of research' or 'thematic frameworks'.

4. An alternative framework

Before presenting our alternative framework, we would like to point out that we by no means consider it to be inherently better than any other framework we encountered while preparing this volume. We simply developed it to frame the contributions to our volume. From the contributions it seemed possible to distinguish four thematic categories. They are listed below and should be looked upon as ‘open’ categories with permeable borders rather than as ‘closed’ categories.

4.1 The anthropology of language and religion

In his *Sociolinguistics. A Sociological Critique* (1992) the Welsh sociologist Glyn Williams devotes a chapter to Parsonian structural functionalism. Williams describes how Parsonian structural functionalism relates “the human capacity to create and transmit culture” to “a more generalized capacity to cope with the environment”. Religion is put forward as playing a central role here. It is seen as “the primary evolutionary universal”. However, in order to “operate effectively”, religion “must be implemented in action systems and must therefore involve communication via the secondary primary evolutionary universal – language” (Williams 1992: 53). Like kinship (important in view of reproduction) and technology (important in view of coming to terms with the physical environment), religion and language are to be considered as anthropological constants in the evolution of mankind.

Regardless of whether one wants to endorse Parsonian structural functionalism or not², the (presupposition of the) close bond between language and religion at the cradle of civilisation makes a reflection on the evolutionary interface between religion and language since ancient times appealing. Many religions and mythologies provide accounts of the origin of language as something ‘divine’. Well-known in this respect are the biblical account of Adamic name-giving and the Egyptian god Thoth as the master of language and speech. In the course of history such accounts were long accepted, yet “when secular explanations for natural phenomena began to be sought to supplement or replace religious ones, it was inevitable that a secular explanation was sought for the origin of language too” (cf. Carstairs-McCarthy 2003: 2). Today’s secular explanations are fed by (a mixture of) biological, genetic, primatological, anthropological as well as archaeological evidence. The discoveries of shrines, sculptures, icons, figurines, etc. have confronted us with manifestations of so-called ‘prehistoric’ worldviews. Whether they are bearers of script or not, these sculptures, icons, figurines, etc. can be considered as tokens of visual-symbolic communication with the supernatural that can help us to elucidate pre-historic acts of giving meaning as well as the societal functions of ritual language use. Such issues are central to **Harald Haarmann**’s contribution to the present volume.

Haarmann starts from the well-grounded assumption that communication with the supernatural is an anthropological constant in the history of mankind. He makes use of his

² For the sake of clarity: Williams (1992) does not endorse Parsonian functional structuralism but takes it as a starting point for his sociological critique of sociolinguistics.

encyclopaedic knowledge of the origin of writing systems (cf. Haarmann 1990 for details) and his expertise in the field of archaeomythology (cf. Haarmann 2007) to outline contemporary forms of communication with the supernatural and to take this as a starting point for “educated guesses” on similar forms of communication in ancient times. In the course of his contribution Haarmann questions the validity of the – essentially Saussurian structuralist – distinction between *signifiant* and *signifié* as a means to understand pre-historic acts of giving meaning. He argues that, in the case of ancient forms of visual-symbolic communication, one should not mainly concentrate on the physical reality in order to explain the relationship between *signifiant* and *signifié*. One should rather concentrate on the interlink of physical reality with virtual reality (as expressed in myths, legends and fairy tales) and imagined reality. To capture the role of imagined meaning Haarmann resorts to the study of communicative means as they are used by shamans when they go into a trance. He thus connects the dissolution of ancient acts of giving meaning not only with the analysis of visual-symbolic ways of communicating with the supernatural but also with (presumptions about) the oral communication with the supernatural. Flirting a bit with the highly permeable borders of sociolinguistics, Haarmann’s contribution reads as a fascinating anthropological trip to the origins of language and religion. It invites us to question ‘eurocentric’ and ‘monotheistic’ ways of viewing things. And through highlighting the ‘sociolectal dimension’ of ritual language use, it also links up to the second thematic grouping we suggest for this volume.

4.2 Meanings and uses of religious language

In a narrow sense, ‘religious language’ can be referred to as a language that is “consistently used with religion” or within a religious domain of language use (cf. Samarin 1987: 85).³ In this sense, ‘religious language’ is a sort of language “especially reserved for religious activities and used for very little else, except perhaps as school subjects or literary and scholarly languages” (Fasold 1987: 77-78). But even then, religious language is mainly meant to allow the learner, the writer or the scholar to participate in religious custom (cf. Baker 2000: 178-179 on religion and language learning). An example of the study of ‘religious language’ in a narrow sense is David Crystal’s analysis of liturgical language from a sociolinguistic perspective (cf. Crystal 1990). Other examples can be found in Samarin (1976).

Apart from focusing on the (sociolinguistic) traits of ‘religious language’ in contexts of religious practice, one could, however, also widen the scope somewhat and investigate how ‘religious language’ is used outside of the religious discourse community and filters through colloquial, political and other types of speech in which it is used to support non-religious causes. In connection with this, Paul Chilton, co-editor with Ruth Wodak of the *Journal of Language and Politics*, devotes a section of part III of his book on *Analysing*

³ A similar ‘definition’ of ‘religious language’ can be found in Swann et al. (2004: 262-263). ‘Religion’ itself is not defined by Swann et al. (2004). Also Samarin (1987) refrains from a definition and so does Fishman (2006: 14) who writes that he is “not prepared to define “religion” per se, accepting that the behaviors, beliefs and values that are deemed to be religious are more diverse than any of us are currently aware of”.

Political Discourse (2004) to the role of religion. Chilton indicates that the dimensions of the analysis of religious discourse could, for example, include the political exploitation of religious language and the nature of religious meaning expressed linguistically.

As can be derived from his website, Paul Chilton is working on a CDA approach to religious language.⁴ In this volume, however, an impetus to a CDA of religious language is given by **Jean-Pierre Van Noppen** who is an authority in the field of theolinguistics and an expert on metaphorical language use. In his contribution, van Noppen elucidates the misuse of religious language for ideological purposes and explains how critical theolinguistics can contribute to reveal such misuses on behalf of both believers and non-believers. Van Noppen shows us the way on how to read, receive, understand and believe religious language as it finds its way in many forms of discourse in contemporary society. He does so by pointing out the need to scrutinize the nature of relationship between the intensional referent and its linguistic articulation and through highlighting the relevance of metaphor theory.

Piet Van Sterkenburg's contribution also deals with religiously connotated language. A renowned Dutch lexicographer, Van Sterkenburg first explains how the Dutch language – like many other languages – is permeated by religious vocabulary in the form of emotionally rather neutral fixed collocations and expressions as well as loaded (self-) curses and swear words. Van Sterkenburg's contribution then briefly centres on the origin and use of swear words from a historical point of view and complements this with a discussion of the results of a number of consecutive surveys on the use and the perceived meaning of swear words among Dutch speakers. One of the things that Van Sterkenburg's surveys reveal is that the process of secularisation in The Netherlands (and Flanders for that matter) leads to a decrease in the use of religiously inspired swear words and also contributes to the erosion of religious connotations attributed to biblically inspired swear words. They also raise questions on the endurance of the influence of scriptures on the elaboration and modernization of (standardized) vocabulary.

4.3 The role of religion in language standardization and language spread

It is commonly known that translations of holy scriptures triggered and influenced processes of standardization in many languages. That certainly was the case for Bible translations in the European realm (cf. the contributions in Deumert/ Vandebussche 2003 on Germanic languages). While the bigger languages used in Europe have long passed the initial stages of standardization, some regional and minority languages used all over Europe still face challenges related to the processes of norm selection, codification, implementation and elaboration that are commonly related to standardization. That is, e.g., the case for the Bretons and the Ladins. And it is also the case for Romani.

The existing varieties of Romani are extensively studied in all of its facets by researchers such as Peter Bakker (Aarhus) and research groups in Manchester (the team of Yaron Matras) and Graz (the team of Dieter Halwachs). As members of Halwachs' research group **Astrid Sabaini** and **Barbara Schrammel-Leber** in their contribution to

⁴ Cf. <http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/profiles/Paul-Chilton/>; last access on 03.06.2011.

this volume do not focus in a general way on standardization of Romani but on the challenges related to the increase in its written use. Sabaini and Schrammel-Leber draw attention to the functional expansion of Romani (as a minority language) into domains of language use that used to be privileged domains of the surrounding majority languages in Romani language contact settings. One of those domains is religion. With respect to this domain Sabaini and Schrammel-Leber illustrate the strategies used to translate passages from the Bible in a number of Romani varieties. They also reveal the emblematic function of these translational activities in that they contribute to a functional spread of Romani and the status upgrade of Romani communities.

As well as focusing on the role of religion in the spread of a language variety into new domains of language use, one can also focus on the role of religion in the geographical spread of a language. Then one almost automatically ends up with the role of religion in language spread in the era of colonisation. As already mentioned under point 2, the interplay between 'language and religion' plays a role in studies dealing with the linguistic consequences of colonialism at least since the 1960s. Apart from investigating the part played by missionaries in documenting indigenous languages and developing indigenous language grammars and word lists, increasing attention goes to the way in which religious actors (especially through spreading the Word and through education) in tandem or in competition with other actors contributed to the spread of dominant colonial languages and thus had a hand in 'linguistic imperialism'. Research deals, e.g., with the way in which all of the actors involved in spreading religion and/or spreading colonial language had the same (or rather conflicting) agendas and the way in which the agendas in the colonies correlated with agendas in the metropolises (i.e. the home countries of the colonial powers).

Such research questions guide two contributions to this volume written by social historians with a vivid interest for language phenomena. By focusing on the links between the spread of the French language and the spread of Catholicism in educational settings in Jerusalem as part of Ottoman Palestine (1860-1917) and mandatory Palestine (1917-1948) **Karène Sanchez Summerer** on the basis of archival research brings aspects of French colonial language policy to the attention that until now have only marginally been treated in sociolinguistic literature. And **Kenneth J. Orosz** gives a fascinating and detailed account of the way in which the *Kulturkampf* (Otto von Bismarck's attempts to reduce the political and social influence of the Catholic church) was transplanted to the German colony of Cameroon and gave rise there to religious conflicts that have repercussions on language policy.

The contributions of Sanchez and Orosz once more corroborate Peter Burke's observation that social history and (historical) sociolinguistics are mutually enriching disciplines (cf. Burke 2004). Theories and methods of social history deserve to be much more applied to (historical) sociolinguistics (cf. also Goebel 2007) since they bring an added value that not only leads to a better understanding of (past) processes of language policy in general and language-in-education policy in particular but can also help us to better understand complex identity formation processes throughout history.

4.4 The relationship between language and religion as markers of identity

The concept of identity can be characterized with Haarmann (1995: 8) as “a generic term covering a variety of different experiences”. This does not, however, imply that it is impossible to approach identity or the process of identification in a systematic way. Following Haarmann (1996: 222), who takes an anthropocentric point of view as a starting point, the mechanism of identification mainly implies that a person tries to categorize the world in a binary way according to what that person is and/or would like to be and according to what that person is not and/or would not like to be. The process of identification at the individual as well as at the collective level is characterized by a complex interplay of strategies aiming at demarcation, on the one hand, and a quest for solidarity, on the other hand (cf. Tajfel 1978 and Giles/ Johnson 1987). One of the (many) factors that play a role in the dynamic process of demarcation and the quest for solidarity is language. Another factor is religion. Here it is intriguing to assess how far religious and linguistic identities (still) correlate.

Relying on quantitative analysis of an impressive amount of empirical data, **Sanita Lazdiņa, Ilga Šuplinska, Gabriele Iannaccaro** and **Vittorio Dell’Aquila** try to come to terms with the current interplay between language and religion in the Latgalian part of Latvia in their contribution to this volume. They show how the clear-cut link between particular languages and particular religions as constitutive of ethnic identities in pre-19th century Latgale has become much more nebulous.

The link between the Irish language and religious identity is at the heart of **Diarmait MacGiolla Chríost**’s contribution. With the help of recent census data MacGiolla Chríost seeks to identify connections between the Irish language and religion in Northern Ireland. He deals with the political and philosophical implications of these connections and uses these to open up new theoretical and empirical challenges (e.g. regarding the more detailed investigation of the use of the Irish language by Protestants in Northern Ireland).

In the final contribution to the volume **Mehmet-Ali Akinci** and **Kutlay Yağmur** provide fine-grained illuminating insights in the intergenerational differences in the ethnic and religious identification among Turkish immigrants in France. Their contribution provides a model for the way in which empirical investigations can help to illuminate the intricate relationship between ethnicity and religion.

5. Outlook

As it stands, this collection of contributions certainly does not reflect the whole spectrum of the sociolinguistic study of language and religion. It will, however, hopefully contribute to the further development of this field of study that presents itself as refreshingly versatile.

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