

## **Collocations as Manifestations of Sociolect and Idiolect in Religious Discourse. A Translation-Oriented Perspective**

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**Abstract:** Being highly crystallized and ritualized, religious discourse may appear to always display very specific, well-defined characteristics. In this paper, we briefly touch upon idiolects and sociolects to bring to the fore the idea that there are contexts in which this type of discourse loses its rigidity in favour of more creative means of expression. Collocations are discussed against this idea, while taking a translation-oriented perspective on them.

**Keywords:** collocations, idiolect, religious discourse, sociolect, translation of collocations

### **1. Introduction. General characteristics of Christian religious discourse**

Aiming to bring God into daily life, religious discourse – and not only the Christian one – reflects the religious belief it speaks about and it talks to believers (and not only) in mysteries, about the unseen.

Christendom began the process of crystallizing its dogmas around the year 33 A. D.; this is still an on-going process in the case of some denominations, while Orthodox Christians declared this process completed in the year 787 A. D., when the Seventh Ecumenical Council took place in Nicaea.

Benefitting from a deep and thorough analysis, from such a long practice period, and so many illustrious minds that have used it, Christian religious discourse may give the impression that it has reached its highest possibilities of expression and

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has used all the available linguistic means to fulfill its aim. This impression is strengthened by the general avoidance of saying something new regarding the content of Christian discourse, because of the general tendency to condemn any “innovation” brought to the dogma.

Like any discourse, the religious one is a form of communication (Hatim, Mason 1997: VII) and is characterized by intentionality, coherence, intertextuality, and effect (Nida 2004: 16).

The analysis of the linguistic characteristics of discourse for translation purposes, in general (Dejica 2008), or of religious discourse, in particular, may be approached starting from texts as wholes or from bigger chunks of texts, but the smaller, more focused level of individual words and phrases may also tell a lot about what is peculiar about it, as this is the level that lends to the religious discourse some of its most important characteristics, i.e. its specific terminology. However, it is true that one cannot analyze any type of discourse unless one frames it in a broader context, as pointed out by Gruia (2014:15):

Analyzing discourse presupposes going beyond the sentence level, by incorporating social, cultural, and situational factors, which help to outline the complete significance of a discursive sequence. Discourse is the product of linguistic information, but also of situational information, depending on the type of interaction and on the social context. (our transl.)

Religious discourse did not appear as a consequence of Christendom; contrary to the general impression, anachronistically founded on what we see in religious communication today, Christians did not invent religious discourse. In fact, at the beginning of Christendom, in the Early Church, preachers avoided the use of the discourse techniques employed by the ancient orators. Their main purpose was to convey a content that could speak for itself, and the use of adorning rhetorical means coupled with this end was regarded as damaging to the endeavor. However, this is not to say that the early Christians completely abandoned rhetorical devices, as some of the ancient oratorical techniques, like *captatio benevolentiae* strategies at the beginning of a sermon, and *invocatio Dei*, are still part of, for example, the Holy Liturgy today, when the reader of a given text asks the priest for benediction before reading it (Gruia 2014: 34).

Religious discourse belongs to the epidictic genre, “aiming to clarify for the audience certain aspects related to dogmatics or to morals, or to eulogize the life of a Saint, etc” (Gruia 2014: 27, our transl.). Although, usually, one considers that the people attending a religious service are already convinced about everything regarding their religion, we rather consider any religious assembly as being non-homogenous, its members having diverse degrees of faith. Even those advanced in faith need to accumulate more information on some aspects and to refresh their knowledge, for the religious domain is extremely vast.

Conveying the truth and trying to persuade the audience about it, religious discourse uses diverse types of arguments, which can be classified, depending on

what their ground is, as: arguments based on authority, on deeds, and on examples (Gruia 2014: 61-75). The articulation of various types of arguments gives birth to argumentative strategies, which, in turn, can be classified by using the level criterion into global discursive strategies and punctual discursive strategies. The global discursive strategies are explanations, definitions, narrative and explanatory interventions, and analogy as an argumentative method. The punctual discursive strategies are represented by rhetorical questions, denial, rhetorical silence, and tropes (Gruia 2014: 77-89).

In order to promote an efficient discourse which might convince the audience and determine the listeners to have a living kind of faith, the religious speaker uses ethos, pathos, and logos that provide him emotional access to the listener's conscience, and thus enable him to influence the listener's reasoning and feelings and, to a broader extent, the society he lives in; its purpose is to achieve a specific perlocutionary effect, namely to modify the mind and the heart of the listeners. As Gruia (2014: 110) states:

Any discourse conceives its object dialogically; that is why we are trying to highlight the perlocutionary function of the religious discourse, for this is constituted depending on the answer given by the interlocutors to the sentences uttered by the orator. This dialogue is analyzed not only from an internal perspective (of the statements), but also from an external one (through the request of participation addressed to the receiver), the intentional side being stressed (especially through the polyphony of the discursive self). We are speaking thus about a selection of the means necessary to the orator (depending on the audience) in order to make a cognitive selection, but also to perform a methodological selection, in order to organize the arguments. (our transl.)

In time, some types of religious discourse have crystallized, mainly on the ground of their specific use. Thus, there are: homilies, uttered after the Holy Liturgy; paraenesis, uttered during occasional religious services other than the Liturgy; and theological discourse, produced on the occasion of various conferences or lay gatherings. They are divided in subcategories. Thus, for example, there are two forms of homilies: the exegetic, and the thematic; paraenesis can take the form of a panegyric, an akathist, a necrology, a sermon when installing a priest or a hierarch in the parish or eparchy, and a sermon when consecrating a church (Gruia 2014: 137-196).

We can state therefore that religious discourse is a very complex means of communication which addresses the receiver in a manner that is not always straightforward, whether the listener is considered knowledgeable and already convinced about the truth of the message, or a novice, not at all convinced about the transmitted content.

## **2. Idiolect and sociolect in religious discourse**

As we have already seen, religious discourse addresses the human person in its integrality. Humans living in societies at a given moment are tributary to the existing

level of development of that particular society, as well as to the diverse contexts that influence them on a daily basis. The language they use in religious discourse is of paramount importance, as it reflects the way they think under the influence of their belief and of the general characteristics of the community they are part of. To illustrate this with a brief example, we may mention that the correspondent of the English *the Holy Ghost* is of neutral gender in Greek, of masculine gender in English and Romanian, and of feminine gender in Hebrew (Munger 2015: 7). Does this affect religious communication? It surely may!

In religious discourse, there are at least two types of language varieties that intermingle: one's idiolect and the more general sociolect.

To put it very concisely, an idiolect represents the speech habits peculiar to an individual or the individual manner of using language. As Hatim and Mason (1997: 102-103) explain:

[...] idiolect incorporates those features which make up the individuality of a speaker or writer. Now, this varies in scope from what may be described as a person's idiosyncratic way of speaking (a favorite expression, a quaint pronunciation of particular words, the over-use of certain syntactic structures, and so on) to a more collectively shared set of features that single out entire groups of users, and set them apart from the rest in certain aspects (e.g. the tagging feature [...] or the frequent use of the "posh" pronoun 'one'). Another equally attractive feature of idiolects is that, contrary to common belief, they are not peripheral. They are in fact systematic, their use is often linked to the purpose of utterances and they are frequently found to carry wider socio-cultural significance. It is the task of the translator to identify and preserve the purposefulness behind the use of these seemingly individualistic mannerisms. (Hatim, Mason 1997: 102-103)

When it comes to religious discourse, idiolects deserve due attention. At first sight, the religious idiolect of individuals seems to be similar to some extent, as, since they all try to convey an almost identical content, one may expect that the kind of language they use is also quite similar. However, at a closer look, it turns out that it differs from person to person, because of their different levels of knowledge, personal experience, domains of interest, etc. Also, different individuals have different ways of speaking about faith, ranging from the kind of vocabulary they use to the overall style of their discourse.

Sociolect, defined as the "social dialect", respectively as the "social variety of a language, used by an individual in the process of communication in a given social-linguistic context" (dexonline.ro), also manifests itself in religious discourse. In Christian countries, sociolects are quite akin, for these countries have evolved and became states – and some are still evolving – in close connection to Christendom. In order to have an efficient religious discourse, one must take into account the language variety of the particular social class for which this discourse is produced. Today, it is impossible to disregard the general knowledge related to the universe, to sciences, as it is in this context that a certain sociolect develops and evolves and this applies to the context of tackling religious aspects as well. Ignoring the sociolect may trigger a

break or even failure in conveying the content of the religious message to the audience:

Today's believers expect from the speaker a communication updated on the present problems. Although the theological core always remains valid, the sermon must constantly be renewed. At the beginning of Christendom, language was different; now, one needs to discuss differently with the modern believer, as s/he is educated and has scientific knowledge. The Gospels remain the same, but their interpretation must correspond to the ability of today's believer to understand them. That is why a sermon must not be improvised, but it has to work in such a way that a finality is provided to it. (Gruia 2014: 43, our transl.)

We believe that ethos, pathos, and logos – all employed in order to be persuasive – are equally generated by and generating a particular sociolect. In a certain language, speakers have favourable feelings for certain generally well-known expressions which can be used by the preacher to trigger emotional reactions and so they react positively when these expressions are heard.

One may speak about a preexistent ethos that interacts with the discursive ethos. This interaction, when known and observed by the orator, may be of use, or, when disregarded, it may become a disadvantage, impeding efficient communication.

### **3. Collocations as manifestations of idiolect and sociolect in religious discourse. A translation-oriented approach**

Collocations represent embodiments of both idiolect and sociolect in religious discourse. In the former case, they carry the mark of the user's originality and may become elements that help in identifying a certain idiolect as belonging to a certain language user; in the latter case, they indicate that somebody's discourse may be classified as representative of a certain mainstream genre, in our case – religious discourse, as it circulates in a particular society/ community. In both cases, however, difficulties may arise when collocations are transferred from one language into another. This is mainly because, even if, as Baker (2006: 50) states, "there is no such thing as an impossible collocation", word associations in religious discourse is not as free as it is in the case of other types of discourse.

One of the most difficult things in translation practice is finding the right equivalents for certain collocations in order to attain target text fluency and thus gain a high degree of acceptability of the target text for the target readers. "As no two languages are perfectly alike, translation above word level may sometimes prove to be no easy task" (Pârlog, Pungă 2017: 255). The main difficult aspects are related to "(...) lexical-semantic, grammatical and cultural differences between two languages, as potential sources of these difficulties" (Pârlog, Pungă 2017: 255).

Being an association within a phrase of two or more words, a sequence regularly used in a language by its native speakers, collocations are also defined as privileged semantic relations between words (Lungu Badea 2003: 32). We may add that, in religious discourse, collocations may be regarded to be part of what is the

strength of this kind of discourse and, at the same time, of what may be looked at as its weakness. The danger occurs when they are overused, widely spread, and become a commonplace in the religious discourse; everybody thinks they know their meaning very well, but when asked about it, they cannot provide an acceptable answer.

In religious discourse, collocations are usually combinations of words fully loaded with dogmatic meanings, which makes them so the more difficult to translate. Regarding collocations, one can “break rules [to some extent, our note], *but cannot break regulations*” (Pârlog, Pungă 2017: 255; italics ours).

When we speak about breaking rules, we may think of, for example, Father Dumitru Stăniloae (1997), one of the most illustrious representatives of Romanian theology, whose ideolect acceded to a superior level of suggesting apophatic content. His theological considerations cannot be considered dogmatic innovations; rather, they are an excellent example of *kerugma* (theologoumena), respectively, of those “Christian teachings with revelatory content which have not obtained yet the consent of the Church, despite having a wide circulation amongst theologians” (*Dicționar de teologie ortodoxă* 2019: 919). They are complex and profound, while the words used for expressing them are, almost all of the time, simple words; but they collocate in such a way that they are able to express infinitely profound meanings. As they are used, including in collocations, they represent examples of how an idiolect may manifest itself in religious discourse.

To exemplify, consider the following collocations that seem to carry Father Stăniloae’s (1948, 1976, 1997, 2005) own linguistic imprint: *atot-felurit* (approx. ‘very different’), *unitate co-personală* (approx. ‘co-personal unity’), the archaic *a plăți gloaba* (approx. ‘to pay the fine’), *birnici simțirii* (approx. ‘slaves of feelings’), *neatârnată de patimi* (approx. ‘not depending on passion’), *pustii de orice înțelepciune* (approx. ‘deserted of any kind of wisdom’), *fiare încuibate* (approx. ‘nested beasts’).

In all the cases mentioned above, though it is possible to render the meaning of the Romanian collocations into English, the flavor of the archaic originals and their ideolectal touch are lost.

As far as collocations as manifestations of sociolect are concerned, these are not as surprising and unexpected as idiolect ones are, as a sociolect has a wider coverage (they are shared between the members of a same language speaking community at least), is rather standardized and therefore better known to the public. What follows from these characteristics is that sociolect collocations are, at least theoretically, easier to translate. Widely established and accepted equivalents are usually available in their case.

In the peculiar case of Christian religious discourse (and outside everyday language), some words tend to be reserved to occur in specific collocations. For instance, in religious discourse, the word *ascent* is reserved to refer to the Ascent of Jesus to heavens; likewise, *embodiment*, *crucifixion*, and *resurrection* are supposed to be used in collocations referring to Jesus Christ. The Trinity is referred to as *Holy*, the Church as *holy* as well, while people who had or have a holy life are called *saints*.

These few examples are illustrative of what Mona Baker (2006: 14) calls “collocational restrictions”. Using the wrong collocations, unfortunate word associations when translating religious discourse may cause a deformed perception of the religious aspects referred to or even strong rejection of them, not to mention the danger of generating heretic content, which is, however, much less serious in the case of ideolects than it may prove to be in the case of a sociolect. For the words mentioned above as being part of well-established and generally used collocations, the Romanian equivalents may be chosen without hesitation: *ascent* – *înălțare*, *embodiment* – *întrupare*, *crucifixion* – *răstignire*, *resurrection* – *înviere*.

However, even though collocations in the religious discourse sociolect are considered to be quite similar in the whole Christian area, or at least in the areas of people speaking Indo-European languages, there are differences between the theological meanings of similar expressions, as they are embraced in different cultures. To exemplify this, while the English language has the collocation *Mary, the wife of Joseph* (Matthew 1: 16, 18, 19, 20, etc.), this is considered inappropriate by Orthodox believers, for Orthodoxy spends a lot of effort to stress out that *Mary, The Mother of God, the Lord’s Mother*, was Joseph’s fiancée only, as they were not in fact wed and so, a marriage could not have been consummated. Therefore, *Joseph* was only betrothed to Her and did not actually wed Her. That is why the Christians call the Lord’s Mother *Virgin Mary*; the dogma regarding Her has it that She remained a virgin while carrying Jesus, and She also remained a virgin after giving birth to Him.

#### 4. Conclusion

Religious discourse is the place where both ideolects and sociolects find a place to manifest themselves. The former are present in less formalized forms of this type of discourse, and are therefore freer from the rigors of a pretty rigid genre, while the latter tend to occur in more standardized ones and thus hold a tighter relationship with the genre they represent, their “register membership”, as defined by Hatim and Mason (1997), being quite evident:

Register membership is defined in terms of a number of parameters which constrain the communicative transaction. These include field (or subject matter), tenor (or level of formality), and mode (of the distinction between spoken and written). It is by recognition of such factors that registers are defined. (Hatim, Mason 1997: 20)

Collocations are lexical items that reflect the more creative or, on the contrary, the rather rigid character of religious idiolect and, respectively, sociolect.

One may think that creativity brings about lack of difficulties in translation, as, since there are no well-established equivalents for ideolectal collocations, the translator is not constrained to resort to such equivalents. This is, however, not the case, as we briefly indicated by providing a number of examples of pretty novel collocations used by Father Stăniloae. On the other hand, neither are sociolect collocations always easy to translate, since, even if they are more solidly anchored

into the rather rigid genre that religious discourse represents, they often prove to be culture-bound, as we indicated by providing the example of *Mary, Joseph's wife* as compared to *Mary, Jesus' Mother*.

It follows then that, even if religious discourse may seem not to place a translator who is acquainted with its specific terminology in great difficulty, there are nuances that certainly require greater care on his/ her part.

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