

Linguistic Variation as a Function of Ritual Structure in the Afro-Baptist Church

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Linguistic variation as a function of ritual structure  
 in the Afro-Baptist church  
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Several recent studies in the use of oral poetics have drawn attention to the sermonic speech of American black preachers in the fundamentalist church. Vaughn-Cooke accounts for this attention, stating that "the preaching style is considered one of the most important speaking styles used by blacks, and . . . it is considered one of the most unique styles in the United States."<sup>1</sup> Because of this focus on the climactic speech of black sermons, however, the use of poetic language outside of the sermon, viz., in the prayers, has gone almost unreported, leaving the impression that "prayer speech" is inconsequential, or that it is the same as ordinary conversation. This paper proposes that prayer speech, too, is poetic and worthy of attention and that the interplay of linguistic and musical variation defines the parameters of the Afro-Baptist ritual structure, which is not written but orally preserved. In this paper the term "Afro-Baptist" applies to the church founded at the close of the 18th century when American slavery was at its peak and West Africans were still arriving in North America; the church which has remained in the political and economic control of black Americans; that church whose clergy and members are predominantly working-class and whose preacher is not seminary-trained; and, finally, the church whose doctrine is fundamentalist, i.e., literally interpreting Biblical Scripture.

In order to appreciate prayer speech a review of studies in sermonic speech is helpful. Rosenberg studied the use of formulaic repetition and syntactic parallels as metrical devices that create the rhythm in the sermons necessary for the climax. Using Lord's and Perry's analysis of the metrical formula in Yugoslavian guslar oral texts as his model, he found that black preachers increase the number of metrical formulas and parallels in order to create an emotional buildup leading to climax. The climax is sustained through the repetition of these devices, leading Rosenberg to conclude that "rousing the spirit of God is a principle aim of these sermons and rhythm achieves that end."<sup>2</sup> Vaughn-Cooke studied vowel lengthening and intonational changes occurring during the sermonic climax, reporting that during the climax all vowels within sentences receive fourth degree stress with no vowel being "more exaggerated in length than the other vowels."<sup>3</sup> She also states that the terminal-falling intonational contours of normal speech in American English change to non-falling during sermonic climax. Like Rosenberg, she mentions the rhythmic quality of the sermons adding to mention the "chanted" aspect

of black sermons, suggesting that such chanted speech has its origin in West African styles of recitation. In view of this paper her most interesting statement is that Black Vernacular English (BVE) lexicon increases during the build-up to the climax because "black preaching requires the use of Black language, and . . . trained Blacks who speak the language of their congregation."<sup>4</sup>

In line with Vaughn-Cooke's idea of establishing rapport through the use of the vernacular is Wright's study that found that black preachers use the vernacular as a communicative tool during the sermon for enhancing not only rapport but also esteem as accomplished performers before an audience. Wright found that effective preachers manipulated BVE features so that these were far more frequent during the sermon's climax than in their normal speech. The reason for this phenomenon of the inflated vernacular is to draw the identities of preacher and congregation closer by "putting in the mouth of God the language of the people."<sup>5</sup>

Gumperz has also studied the preaching style from a communicative perspective, unveiling the performance strategies that black preachers use for effective delivery. While he reports that linguistic and prosodic changes occur over the course of the sermon, his most insightful contributions to this study are his delineations of the sermon's structure based on linguistic and prosodic variation and his assertion that the Afro-American religious ritual originated in West Africa. The structure Gumperz assigns to the sermons is a division into three sequential segments: invocation, transition, and climax. He goes on to suggest that the ritual, itself, of which the sermon is but a part, is also structured linguistically: "each stage in the development of the rite is signalled through an artful interplay of rhythm, vocal style, and content."<sup>6</sup> Although Gumperz does not stipulate a ritual structure, he nevertheless states that

Ultimately these performance styles have their origin in West African possession rites, such as can be found among the Yoruba or the Akan.<sup>7</sup>

The Afro-Baptist ritual centers around the moment of possession trance in which congregants become overwhelmed by the "Holy Ghost." Although possession trance is not constitutive of all African religions, it is an integral element in the West African religions. Therefore, that trance is present in the Afro-Baptist worship should not be surprising. Because of this focus on trance, the Afro-Baptist ritual structure centers around this important event, having the stages: pre-trance, trance, and post-trance. As in West Africa, the ability to experience trance for Afro-Baptists in this country is a gift. "It is a mark of distinction to be possessed by a spirit."<sup>8</sup>

The linguistic variation that occurs with each stage, in conjunction with the variation of musical style, operates to denote these ritual parameters.

Considering each stage in reverse order, the post-trance ends the ritual after the sermon. Congregants call this stage the "Benediction," which consists of a final congregational song and prayer by the preacher. The Benediction usually lasts no longer than five minutes. The trance stage, known as the "Service," is the most thoroughly reported, being that stage that encompasses the sermon. In addition to containing the sermon, the Service begins with reading of a Scriptural verse, followed by choir singing, the sermon, and a final solo or choir song. Just as sermonic speech has been noted for its rhythmicity, the trance songs are enjoyed for their prominent rhythms, having a moderate to fast tempo. Another musical parallel to the preaching style is the performative nature of the choir or soloist: just as the preacher is expected to arouse the Spirit, the performers of trance songs are judged by their virtuosity in inducing trance, which church members call "shouting" or "getting happy." Equally important as the singers' ability is that of the musicians who, together with choir, soloist, and preacher conspire to bring about the trance: the moment of possession lies in the hands of accomplished performers. The songs of this stage, because of their performative and aesthetic qualities, are the recorded music that has entered the American gospel idiom to become a force in shaping that musical genre while also being a form of popular entertainment. These are the songs that Mahalia Jackson and other noted black gospel singers have popularized outside of the black church by means of the media. Nearly all of these songs are of modern composition, having been written since the 1920's by blacks. If earlier hymns or spirituals appear in the Service, they must be rearranged according to current musical styles.

The pre-trance stage is less known in the literature. It is the stage preceding the Service, which congregants call "Devotion," that contrasts so sharply with the Service. In their paper the Wileys criticize studies of the black church for ignoring the plaintive sound in black worship while favoring to report the more ecstatic features. For instance, the Wileys encounter melancholic music which they explain as a product of "the Black experience in this country" and that "appears to be a meaningful form of expression for much of Black America."<sup>9</sup> Although this "melancholy" is not the expression of despair, their paper is significant for mentioning another aspect of the Afro-Baptist ritual. Whereas the sermon is the focal point of the Service, the speech event of pre-trance is the Devotion prayer. Unlike the Service where the preacher is the main speaker, the Devotion has a number of speakers who are mainly deacons.



inflated.

Prayer speech is not only distinct from normal and sermonic language in the usage of the vernacular, but prayer texts, which are transmitted orally, are resilient to rapid change, as two prayer texts from around 1930 attest: 1930's

Once more and agin, your weak servant is  
knee-bent and body-bowed, my heart beneath  
my knees and my knees in some lonesome valley  
crying for mercy 11

1984:

Heavenly Father, it is once more and again,  
your weak servant has been allowed in your house

The Jordan River continues to be a symbol of death:  
1930's:

Then Lord, Lord, make that crossin' over Jordan  
an easy one for me. 12

1984:

Tell Jordan to be calm, Heavenly Father,  
Cross my soul on over

Since some of the archaic, formulaic expressions found in prayer speech are directly from the Scriptures virtually intact as written, Jones-Jackson states that accomplished prayers have "heard and stored" in memory these formulas around which an effective prayer is created. Another text-source were the verses of 18th and 19th century hymns and the refrains of white plain-folk spirituals that slaves heard during the Great Revivals of the frontier, these camp-meetings taking place during the 18th and 19th centuries. The white clergy, however, was responsible for instilling both standard and Biblical forms in 18th and 19th century slave speech as an attempt to teach blacks how to communicate with the slave owner. Blassingame writes that

Because of the lessons they learned in  
the churches, Biblical language would re-  
sonate in nineteenth century black speech  
and writing. This was, perhaps, the Southern  
churches greatest legacy to the slave.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, the folk source from black people themselves created new formulas by combining or infusing American verse with West African maxims. The composite of all of these text-sources, along with spontaneous speech, accounts for the anomalous speech variety of the Devotion. Although the sermons may contain Scripturally-derived formulas, these are not phrased in a deflated vernacular.

The Devotion is not only a storehouse of archaic speech, it is also a repository of antiquated musical forms. Unlike the more contemporary songs of the Service, pre-trance music has 18th and 19th century origins. One source of these songs is Isaac Watts, whose hymns dominated early American hymnody. Afro-Baptists today perform these hymns, which they call "Dr. Watts hymns," somewhat

like white Protestants did nearly two centuries ago: a capella, in long-meter, and "lined," a practice of having a song leader speak/read the line of verse so that the congregation can sing/chant it. Long since that time, however, most white denominations have instituted musical instruments, choirs, hymnbooks, and varied meters to improve their music. The Afro-Baptist way of singing these hymns, however, is quite unlike that of earlier white Americans. While the verses are sung as written in the hymnal, the original melodies have been discarded for a pentatonic chant with the characteristic diminished III and VII intervals of Afro-American music. An identical melodic line concatenates the lined verses, sung in slow, long-meter, thus having a dirge-like effect. Full of plaintiveness, the Devotion songs can only be heard during pre-trance; they are not recorded for public consumption.

The survival of anomolous speech and music, while appearing to be imitations of earlier Western custom, can only be explained as a function of a religious ritual that has been retained in the Americas from West African tradition. Cross-cultural comparison of Afro-American rituals in the New World reveals a pattern of two opposing paradigms: the esoteric and the vernacular. The esoteric category always precedes the vernacular in which trance is located. The Gullah "ring shout" ritual, for example, begins with a formal "prayer meeting" consisting of Scripture-reading, prayers, and long-meter hymns lined by an elder deacon. When this formal, solemn opening is concluded, participants push back their benches, form a circle and begin the shuffle in a ring as a band of singers off to the side sing fervently the spirituals while ring members become possessed. In the Jamaican Pukkumina Revivalist cult the esoteric consists of Bible-reading and a capella hymn-singing only to be followed by "ring shouting" as "Earth" and "Heaven" bound powers possess its participants to the accompaniment of drums. In the Jamaican Cumina cult, in which Yoruban orishas seize devotees, the esoteric consists of solemn prayers and bilah songs sung in Jamaican English. The following trance songs and invocations to the deities are rendered in myal, a mixed-speech of Jamaican Creole and Yoruban clichés. This dichotomous pattern also exists in Catholic-influenced areas of the Caribbean, suggesting that this pattern is not simply a result of Protestant/African syncretism. In the annual Trinidadian Shango ritual the esoteric consists of traditional Catholic prayers and verses of lesser known prayers to particular Catholic saints lined by a prayer leader for the audience. As in Cumina, there is no drumming until the vernacular, containing the trance and prayers in creole. In the annual Haitian Vodun ritual the esoteric paradigm contains recitations of Catholic prayers in an approximation of Standard Haitian French, while baptized

Catholics in attendance use their rosaries. The vernacular paradigm contains drumming and summons to the loa in Haitian Creole.

My data of linguistic variation, collected in Central Texas in 1984 from three Afro-Baptist laymen, and Wright's data, collected from five black preachers in Washington, D.C. in 1976 illustrate how the Afro-Baptist ritual fits the paradigmatic pattern of Afro-American ritual. Wright contrasts the frequency of the BVE variables in the preachers' normal, conversational speech with those variables in their sermonic speech during the climax. The variables he studied are: word-final in/iŋ; multiple negatives, the absence of third person singular verbal -z, and copula deletion. His findings are in Table 1:

Table 1

	normal speech	sermonic speech
-in/-iŋ	26%	73%
mult. neg.	11%	58%
abs. 3 <sup>o</sup> sg. -z	11%	60%
cop. deletion	13%	66%

From his data, one can see that the sermonic vernacular is clearly distinct from that of conversation, the former being approximately four times as non-standard as the latter. I compared these same four BVE features in addition to the absences of auxiliary 'have', possessive -z, and plural -z--all BVE features--and found the converse results of Wright's data, as Table 2 shows:

Table 2

	normal speech	prayer speech
-in/-iŋ	79%	58%
mult. neg.	50%	48%
abs. 3 <sup>o</sup> sg. -z	75%	50%
cop. deletion	32%	3%
abs./aux	40%	7%
abs./ poss.-z	50%	0%
abs/ plur.-z	7%	6%
TOTAL variation:	48%	25%

I found that prayer speech has nearly one-half the vernacular features of normal speech, illustrating the disparity between it, on one hand, and normal and sermonic varieties on the other. The two paradigms, then, for Afro-American ritual can be said to contain these features. In the esoteric we find: an approximation of European/American speech forms; a capella singing; long-metered or slow songs of European/American origin; lined songs sung in unison. In the vernacular we have: an inflation of the vernacular, or creole forms; instrumental accompaniment; moderate to fast tempo songs of black folk origin; solo, band, or choir singing.

Basing his analysis on rites of passage in Ndembu society, Victor Turner concluded that the initiation ritual

is the principle cultural vehicle for transmitting traditional knowledge while "cleansing" the initiate psychologically in preparation of his future status. The traditional knowledge of any society, states Turner, is "absolutely sacrosanct. . .the ultimate mysteries." The code used for this transmission is secretive language, usually in the form of riddles, at least for the Ndembu. The cleansing process involves depersonalizing the initiate of his former social identity before bestowing on him a new one. In order to accomplish this task, the initiate is suspended in an ambiguous limbo during which former knowledge is gradually supplanted by esoteric wisdom. Anomalous speech and music act as catalysts in this transformation process.

In Bahian candomblé, a Yoruban-derived cult in Brazil, riddles and chanted prayers transmit sacred knowledge while disorienting initiates. Twice daily the spiritual leader, or "petite mère," lines out the esoteric ingolosi prayer to novices who chant the responses in unison. In Nigerian Yoruba and Dahomean Vodun religions riddles and chants are also the communicative and mood-inducing devices. In all three cultures the chants are lined, a capella, long-metered, and melodically concatenated, thus exhuming a plaintive quality that distinguishes these chants from the popular musical genres. The Dahomean initiation chants are so untypically Dahomean that, upon hearing them performed, Verger remarked that "rien n'est aussi peu «nègre» que cette musique-là"--nothing is so less black than that music.<sup>14</sup>

Rouget explains the dichotomous use and non-use of musical instrumentation in African and African-derived possession rituals as a product of necessity: the drummer, if possessed by a power, can no longer play--he must behave as the deity commands. Therefore, specific duties are assigned to musicians and devotees. The latter become mediums for possessing powers, while the former, who cannot perform both tasks simultaneously, provide the music needed to invoke the spirits. But during the initiation period initiates chant their own songs as a means of sustaining the ambience of listlessness. Because most drummers are not themselves devotees, they do not know the secret music; thus they play the more popularly known rhythms.

Now that parallels of anomalous language and music use become apparent between West African and Afro-American ritual, the question remains as to how the esoteric paradigm, essential to transforming an ordinary citizen into a vessel of the gods, is transferred to the New World. The conditions of mixing tribes and outlawing lengthy gatherings of slaves on plantations would seem to preclude rites of passage, which usually span months or years in West Africa. The studies of the Herskovitses in New

World Negro societies led them to conclude that when focal cultural values are endangered and "resistance is futile, the psychological resilience . . . of reinterpretation comes into play."<sup>15</sup> Blacks in the Americas selected those features of the initiation that resembled features in the religious practices of their captors. They infused these European/American forms, however, with African meaning. The Herskovitses explain this exchange thusly:

For with the stripping of the ancestral traditions in the New World, those facets of religious organization that in Africa pertained to the tribal dieties . . . have . . . been transferred to the domain of the established denominations. 16

Blacks assumed the practices of a new, strange religion as their basis for a new esoteric paradigm.

While this exchange of West African anomolous language and music for Christian forms accounts for the strange retentions in the Afro-Baptist Devotion, the problem still remains of depositing the paradigm in ritual form. The Rev. Charles C. Jones, an influential and major advocate of plantation missions for Christianizing the slave, stipulated the religious ritual outline that should be followed for plantation prayer meetings:

- i. Opening (hymn & prayer)
- ii. Scripture
- iii Singing (hymn)
- iv Sermon or Lesson
- v Close (prayer & hymn)

Slaves imbedded the rites of initiation quite neatly into the Opening of the ritual structure already provided by a slave-owning clergy. Segments ii through iv became the Service with the Sermon as the focal point of trance. The Close and Benediction remained identical. The newly placed initiation rites could now be reënacted as often as the plantation meeting was called, or, more significantly, as the clandestine religious gatherings took place. If only as a drastically abbreviated reinterpretation, the West African initiation rite survived.

Whereas sociolinguists, heretofore, have considered region, history, and socio-economic differences as major factors in linguistic variation, ritualized affect is also a factor of that variation. Within the Central Texas Afro-Baptist church, where members have shared a homogenous community since Emancipation and where almost all members belong to the working class, the change of mood--as regulated by the ritual--determines their stylistic shifts of the vernacular.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 A.F. Vaughn-Cooke, Black preaching style, p. 28
- 2 B. Rosenberg, Art of the American Folk Preacher, p.33
- 3 A.F. Vaughn-Cooke, *ibid.*, p.35
- 4 *ibid.*, p.37
- 5 R.L. Wright, Language standards and communicative style in the black church, p.142
- 6 J.J. Gumperz, Ethnic style in political rhetoric, p.189
- 7 *ibid.*, loc. cit.
- 8 G.E. Simpson, Black Religions in the New World, p.131
- 9 E.C. & R.L. Wiley, The plaintive sound, p.5
- 10 P. Jones-Jackson, The oral prayer tradition in Gullah, p.26
- 11 Z.N. Hurston, The fiery chariot, p.6
- 12 C.S. Carmer, Stars Fell On Alabama, p.25
- 13 J.W. Blassingame, The Slave Community, p.98
- 14 G. Rouget, La Musique et la Transe, p.99
- 15 M.J. & F.S. Herskovits, Life in a Trinidad Village, intro.
- 16 *ibid.*, p.304
- 17 C.C. Jones, The Religious Instruction of Negroes in the United States, p.28
- 18 I am greatly indebted to Rev. Leroy Davis, Deacons Michael Butler, Simon Sims, and Matthew Sims for their cooperation in the collection of data.

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