

## 6

# Liturgical Language in a Sociolinguistic Perspective

David Crystal

## THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC REVOLUTION

In recent years there has been something of a revolution in the field of linguistic study. The established tradition, which can be traced back to the grammarians and philosophers of ancient Greece, Rome and India, and which continues in the present century in the work of De Saussure, Bloomfield and Chomsky, focuses on the most tangible and manifest aspects of language – its formal structure, and the meaning which this structure encapsulates. Thus we find an emphasis on the description and analysis of such domains as syntax (sentence structure), morphology (word structure, with particular reference to word-endings, or accidence), the lexicon, phonology (the pronunciation system of a language) and graphology (the writing system of a language). In different periods and countries this focus has varied: for example, the early Sanskrit linguists (notably Panini) placed particular stress on accurate and detailed phonological analysis; the Stoic philosophers were much concerned with the investigation of word classes (the 'parts of speech'); the Arabic linguists of the early Middle Ages provided early and excellent examples of lexicography; and the nineteenth-century comparative philologists meticulously plotted changes in sounds and words. But the shared concentration is on matters of formal description – a concentration which could also be seen, in due course, in the predilection for parsing and clause analysis in the study of the mother tongue in schools, and in the so-called 'grammar-translation' method in foreign language teaching.

In the 1960s, however, things changed. Formal grammar virtually disappeared from schools and examinations in Britain, the USA and several other countries, and was replaced by the investigation of the way language was being *used* in the various contexts

of daily life – the English of advertising, of science, of radio commentaries, of the press or indeed of the classroom itself. New 'communicative' approaches to foreign language teaching were devised, which drew attention to the kind of situations likely to be most relevant and useful to the language learner, such as requesting, thanking, complaining and instructing. And throughout the various domains of linguistic enquiry there developed a concern to see language not solely in terms of sounds, words and structures, but in terms of the *social situations* in which language was used. The focus switched from the forms of language to the functions language performed in society – and thus to the characteristics of those who used language and of the setting in which linguistic activity took place. 'What kind of people use what kind of language on what kind of occasion?' Such questions drew attention to the fact that language was not a monolithic, homogeneous entity used identically by all, but was dynamic, flexible and diverse. Observe language in society, it was pointed out, and the variety of expression is the most striking feature of all, and the one which attracts most public interest and comment – regional and social accents and dialects, occupational slang and jargon, upper- and lower-class pronunciations, formal and informal standards, male and female differences, and much more. Only by focusing on this variety, it was argued, is it possible to provide a convincing, coherent account of language.

This change in direction is often summarised by the term 'sociolinguistics'. Sociolinguistics is that branch of linguistics which studies the relationship between language and society. It observes the range of language varieties which exist, and relates these to patterns of social structure and behaviour – such as age, sex, caste, social class, regional origin and formality of setting. No sociolinguist is content simply to identify a pattern in phonology, grammar or lexicon; rather, this pattern must be seen in the light of who uses it, when, where and why. The range of the subject is vast, from large-scale decisions about language planning (such as which language should be used as a standard in an emerging nation) to the way language is used as a marker of dominance or solidarity in small group debates and discussions.<sup>1</sup>

## LITURGICAL LANGUAGE

The changes which have taken place in religious language since

the 1960s require a similar broadening of perspective if the distinctiveness of contemporary liturgical language is to be appreciated. Here too there has been a revolution – indeed, no imposed linguistic change has ever affected so many people at once as when Latin was replaced by the vernacular in Roman Catholic Christianity. A similar impact, but on a smaller scale, was felt when the Series III texts were introduced into the liturgy of the Church of England. The main result of these changes was to alter the perceived distinctiveness of liturgical language. Regardless of whether one welcomed or objected to the new genres, there was a widespread claim – which is still to be heard – that there was no longer any distinctiveness about liturgical language. The language of the new liturgy was called ‘everyday’, ‘mundane’ and ‘lacking in variety’ (to take just three comments made by various correspondents to a religious newspaper). For some, this was a good thing. For others, it was a disaster. But how far are the arguments founded on fact? Is there anything distinctive still about liturgical language? If so, how can this distinctiveness be defined, and what implications does a sociolinguistic perspective have for contemporary participants in liturgical events?

Any answer to the question of whether linguistic distinctiveness still exists depends on which frame of reference one adopts. From a narrow, formal linguistic point of view, the answer probably has to be ‘no’, or perhaps ‘very little’, as can be seen by drawing a contrast between English-language extracts from the two periods. A generation ago, the liturgical linguistic norms in much of the English-speaking world involved a large number of low-level lexical and grammatical usages that were very plainly idiosyncratic to this genre, such as the following:<sup>2</sup>

- special grammatical words and inflections: *thou, thee, ye, art, wilt, unto, -(e)th, -(e)st, spake, brethren, etc.*
- special lexical words: *thrice, behold, vouchsafe, whence, henceforth, thence, etc.*
- vocative (naming) syntactic structures with *O*: *O God, who . . .*
- vocative structures without *O*, especially adjective plus noun in direct address (*eternal Father, . . ., dear Lord*) or noun with a postmodifying relative clause (*God who in thine infinite goodness . . ., Lamb of God, who takest away . . .*)
- imperative or subjunctive verbs with subject expressed: *go thou . . ., do we sit . . ., glory be to the Father, praise be . . .*
- unusual word order, often following an archaic or Latin con-

- struction: *he, having eaten, went . . ., whom, when he saw, he walked . . ., Father Almighty, a treacherous foe and cruel*
- distinctive idioms: *who livest and reignest, through the same Jesus Christ . . .*

Many of these words and constructions were formally restricted to the domain of religious language, or were extremely rare outside that domain. For example, the use of an adjective with a noun used vocatively is hardly ever found elsewhere, apart from such restricted settings as letter openings (*Dear Sir*) and stereotyped greetings among certain professions (for example, the actor’s *dear boy*).

Today many of the most distinctive features have gone, in the revised formal Christian liturgies. There is no doubt that modern liturgical styles use far fewer distinctive grammatical features, as the following extracts from the new Roman Catholic rite show:

Be faithful to your people, Lord, we pray, and do not cease to protect us. Guard us always and defend us, for we have no hope apart from your grace.

(Collect, 5th Sunday of the Year, Nat. Lit. Comm. Text)

Deliver us, Lord, from every evil, and grant us peace in our day. In your mercy keep us free from sin and protect us from all anxiety, as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

(Order of Mass)

Only the religious vocabulary and theme mark this language as distinctively ‘religious’: the grammatical constructions used could be found in many other domains of formal English language use. Individual prayers and prayer-openings and -endings do of course sometimes retain elements of archaic syntax (as in the Lord’s Prayer or the Hail Mary), but the bulk of the language we encounter in a liturgical celebration nowadays is not of this kind. Only the vocative constructions remain as a testimonial to the previous linguistic liturgical age.

Is there, then, any basis for the notion of ‘liturgical language’ in contemporary society? Only if we replace the traditional focus on forms by a focus on functions – in other words, by moving from a

narrowly linguistic to a sociolinguistic perspective. From this point of view the liturgical setting provides a number of highly distinctive features, for which there is no parallel elsewhere in linguistic behaviour. Taken together, these constitute the genre's continuing linguistic identity.

## A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

A basic feature of any sociolinguistic approach would be to determine the range of functions that liturgical language can be said to perform. Classifications vary, but it is common to find an initial analysis of language functions, or purposes, into eight main types.

### 1 Informative

The communication of ideas is the normal use of language, in everyday settings. We use language in order to give others information that is new or unfamiliar to them. This is sometimes called the 'ideational' or 'referential' use of language. Many people think of it as the *only* role that language performs, but this is to ignore several other important functions (see 2–8 below).

Example: Three people were seriously injured in an accident on the M4 this afternoon . . .

### 2 Identifying

Our choice of language will always signal to others our personal, ethnic, regional or social identity – who we are and where we are from, and the social role we are currently adopting. To be a policeman (doctor, priest, believer . . .) is to *speak* like a policeman (doctor, priest, believer . . .). To some theorists, indeed, this is the primary function of language.

Example: I was walking along Seton Road in a westerly direction when I observed the accused . . .

### 3 Expressive

The language we might use when standing alone in front of a painting, or haranguing the elements, or after banging our thumb with a hammer, is plainly expressive of our emotions rather than

being communicative in any strict sense. It often uses utterances that are strictly non-sensical (as in the use of interjections that are little more than noises, such as *ah*, *yukkk*) or that rely on the prosodic aspects of language (intonation, loudness, tone of voice). Example: Oh, what a shot! Brilliant!

### 4 Performative

When someone names a ship or makes a promise, the use of the words is taken to express a deeper reality: the ship is not named until the appropriate words are spoken, nor is a promise made without the use of the word *promise* or its equivalent. There are hundreds of 'performative speech acts' (as they were called by the philosopher J.L. Austin) and their analysis is a major theme in contemporary research into language use.

Example: I now pronounce you man and wife . . .

### 5 Historical

In all cases of record-keeping (in law, history, business, science) language is being used to summarise the past and preserve it. It therefore requires a degree of explicitness and organisation which tries to anticipate the unforeseen demands that will one day be made of it.

Example: The compound was tested under three conditions . . .

### 6 Aesthetic

Spoken or written language can be enjoyed purely as a formal display, as in the use of poetic rhythms, calligraphy or the nonsense verse used by children in street ball-games. This is the nearest we get to language being used purely for its own sake – for fun.

Example: (*children skipping*) I like coffee, I like tea, I like radio, and TV . . .

### 7 Heuristic

We often find ourselves speaking aloud while we are thinking out a problem, or jotting notes down in order to organise our ideas. Language can help our thought processes, it seems; and, according to some, rational thinking is impossible without language.

Example: Now, if I multiply it by six, and add four, and take the total away from the figure in that column . . .

## 8 Social

When we pass a comment on the weather or inquire routinely after someone's health, just to be polite, we are engaging in a purely social use of language – what the anthropologist Malinowski called 'phatic communion'.

Example: Lovely day for ducks, Mrs Jones!

Classifications of this kind must be used cautiously. They are not necessarily exhaustive, and the interpretation of each notion is to some extent a matter of definition. Moreover, any *real* use of language will display elements of several functions in different degrees. A poem, for example, may be simultaneously informative, aesthetic and an expression of identity. Indeed, complex uses of language are complex precisely because they operate at several functional levels at once. But analytic schemes of this kind are nonetheless of value, despite these remarks. Above all, they draw attention to the functional complexity of linguistic behaviour and thus help us to avoid over-simple analyses of language, or analyses which focus on a single function (such as informativeness) to the exclusion of the others.

How does liturgical language fare when seen in the light of these criteria? It is immediately evident that no one of these functions will satisfactorily explain the range of linguistic behaviour which takes place during a liturgical event. Moreover, the functions often cited as central to liturgical language – informativeness and historicity – have only limited explanatory power. Such a focus is inevitable, given the concern to preserve the integrity of a religious tradition in the words of the liturgical celebration, but it is important not to let the importance of these factors blind us to the co-occurring existence of other linguistic functions that are also of considerable import in explaining the structure and impact of the liturgical event. We can see this if we examine each criterion separately, using the features of the Roman Catholic Mass as illustration. See Table 1 on pages 128–9.

## 1 Informative?

Only a tiny part of the Mass is genuinely informative, in the sense of providing information that would be totally new to the regular Mass-goer. Most of the components are to a greater or lesser extent items that are repeated in successive liturgical events. Those that vary, weekly or daily, include the Antiphon, Collect, Post-communion prayer, Biblical readings and Responsorial psalm. (In the larger time-scale of the annual liturgy, of course, these are repetitive too.) Small sections of the Preface and Canon vary according to the feast day, and the Blessing may alter on special occasions. The Canon itself, along with the response at the Consecration, appears in one of four versions, giving a limited 'surprise value'. There is rather more unpredictability in the Bidding prayers – though these vary enormously in character (in some churches the same ones are repeated weekly; in others they are varied and spontaneous). The components which provide the greatest potential exposure to novel language are the Homily and the Parish notices (items which are routine only in Sunday Masses) – though again there is always the possibility that the information value of these discourses is lessened through weekly repetitiveness.

For the rest, the utterances are repeated without variation week by week, day by day. Being wholly predictable, they convey no information (in the strict, information-theoretic sense of the word). The practical problem this raises is all too common: linguistic familiarity breeds contempt, in the form of automatic listening and inattention, and it takes a considerable effort of will (as well as auspicious circumstances, such as the absence of extraneous noise like a crying child or a celebrant with an obscure regional accent) to maintain concentration and to motivate a renewed appraisal of the meaning of what is being said. The experience of realising that a significant part of the event has passed one by is common enough.

People often admit to failing in the fullness of their participation, therefore, but it should be noted that this is failure at only one functional level. And what has to be appreciated is that repeated language should not be judged solely in informative terms. Consider the following exchanges:

- |                        |                    |
|------------------------|--------------------|
| (1) A It's raining.    | (2) A Lovely day.  |
| B Yes, isn't it awful. | B Yes, lovely day. |
| A It's raining.        | A Lovely day, yes. |

Table 1. Functional linguistic units in the Roman Catholic Mass

| <i>Liturgical item</i>          | <i>Primary function *</i> | <i>Speech mode</i>                       | <i>Non-verbal activity</i> |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|--|----------------------------|
| Entry antiphon                  | 1                         | Unison                                   | Stand                      |
| Sign of the cross               | 2                         | Dialogue                                 | Stand                      |
| Introductory greeting           | 2                         | Dialogue (priest and people)             | Stand                      |
| Introduction to the Mass        | 1                         | Monologue (priest)                       | Stand                      |
| Penitential rite                | 3                         | Dialogue (priest and people)             | Stand                      |
| Absolution                      | 4                         | Dialogue (priest and people)             | Stand                      |
| Kyrie                           | 3                         | Dialogue (priest and people)             | Stand                      |
| Gloria                          | 3                         | Unison                                   | Stand                      |
| Collect                         | 1                         | Monologue (priest)                       | Stand                      |
| Bible reading                   | 1/5                       | Monologue (priest/lay reader)            | Sit                        |
| Responsorial psalm              | 1/5                       | Dialogue (priest/lay reader and people)  | Sit                        |
| Bible reading                   | 1/5                       | Monologue (priest/lay reader)            | Sit                        |
| Gospel acclamation              | 1                         | Unison                                   | Stand                      |
| Gospel opening                  | 5                         | Dialogue (priest and people)             | Stand                      |
| Gospel reading                  | 1/5                       | Monologue (priest)                       | Stand                      |
| Gospel closure                  | 2                         | Dialogue (priest and people)             | Stand                      |
| Homily                          | 1                         | Monologue (priest)                       | Sit                        |
| Creed                           | 2                         | Unison                                   | Stand                      |
| Bidding prayers                 | 1                         | Dialogue (priest/lay readers and people) | Stand                      |
| Liturgy of the Eucharist        | 3                         | Dialogue (priest and people)             | Sit                        |
| <i>Lord God we ask you. . .</i> | 3                         | Monologue (priest)                       | Sit                        |
| <hr/>                           |                           |  |                            |
| <i>Pray brethren. . .</i>       | 3                         | Dialogue (priest and people)             | Stand                      |
| Prayer over the gifts           | 1                         | Monologue (priest)                       | Stand                      |
| <i>Lift up your hearts. . .</i> | 3                         | Dialogue (priest and people)             | Stand                      |
| Preface                         | 5                         | Monologue (priest)                       | Stand                      |
| Sanctus                         | 3                         | Unison                                   | Stand                      |
| Canon                           | 5/3                       | Monologue (priest)                       | Kneel                      |
| Consecration                    | 4                         | Monologue (priest)                       | Kneel                      |
| Response at Consecration        | 2                         | Unison                                   | Kneel                      |
| Canon (continues)               | 5                         | Monologue (priest)                       | Kneel                      |
| Lord's Prayer                   | 2                         | Unison                                   | Stand                      |
| Prayer                          | 3                         | Monologue (priest)                       | Stand                      |
| Lord's Prayer (conclusion)      | 2                         | Unison                                   | Stand                      |
| Prayer                          | 3                         | Monologue (priest)                       | Stand                      |
| Sign of peace                   | 2                         | Dialogue (between individuals)           | Stand                      |
| Prayer                          | 3                         | Silent monologue (priest)                | Stand                      |
| Agnus Dei                       | 3                         | Unison                                   | Stand                      |
| <i>This is the Lamb of God</i>  | 2                         | Monologue (priest)                       | Kneel                      |
| <i>Lord I am not worthy</i>     | 3                         | Unison                                   | Kneel                      |
|                                 | 3                         | Silent monologue (priest)                | Kneel                      |
| <i>The body of Christ</i>       | 2                         | Dialogue (priest and individual)         | Move                       |
|                                 | 3                         | Silent prayer (individuals)              | Kneel/Sit                  |
| Prayer                          | 1                         | Monologue (priest)                       | Stand                      |
| Parish notices                  | 1                         | Monologue (priest)                       | Stand/Sit                  |
| Blessing                        | 4                         | Dialogue (priest and people)             | Stand                      |
| Dismissal                       | 2                         | Dialogue (priest and people)             | Stand                      |

\* See text for typology.

In (1), A's second utterance makes sense only if we read something in – for example, that A has left the washing on the line and wants B to go and get it. In this example the repetition has pragmatic force: it is a cue to action. In (2) the repetition has a phatic force: it promotes social rapport, maintaining good relations between the participants. Similarly, the weekly or daily recitation of a dialogue which is totally familiar can be fully understood only if we see it as operating on other levels than the informative. And at these levels the notion of participatory failure is really inappropriate.

## 2 Identifying?

A great deal of liturgical language is an expression of the religious identity of the participants. The language which seems to manifest this function most clearly includes: the sign of the cross, the introductory greeting (*The Lord be with you/And also with you*) and subsequent uses of this formula, the Creed, the responses at the Gospel and the Consecration, the Lord's Prayer (given the context of its institution), the Sign of peace, the Prayers said while presenting and giving the Communion host, and the Dismissal. In each case the use of the language expresses the participant's willingness to be part of the event, and provides an affirmation of identity with the body of the Church as a whole. Simply to be physically present, and to utter the language, is enough to satisfy this criterion, even though one's mind might wander during the performance – in much the same way as the carrying of banners in a public march about the situation in, say, South Africa identifies the motivation of the participants, even though, while walking, the participants may at times be talking to each other about the price of soap-flakes.

From the point of view of this criterion the predictability of liturgical language is a strength, not a weakness. Union speech provides an ideal mode for the expression of solidarity, as does the coincidence of verbal and non-verbal activity (see below). Any departure from the expected dialogue norms is psychologically disturbing – as when a visiting priest inadvertently introduces a different form of words from the one the congregation is used to, and is given an uncertain or absent response.

It should also be noted that, to express identity, the language does not even have to be meaningful, in the accepted sense. The

use of meaningless language (meaningless, that is, to some or all of the lay participants) is in fact common to many forms of religious behaviour around the world. It can be illustrated in Christianity in such varied forms as the use of Latin in twentieth-century services, the choice of an old biblical translation where parts of the language no longer make sense, or the use of glossolalic utterance in neopentecostal meetings, where the primary function of the language is to act as an index of the strength and sincerity of the speaker's conviction.

## 3 Expressive?

In a sense, the whole of liturgical language is expressive of the emotions. It could hardly be otherwise, with God as the deeper-level interactant. To see the liturgy as a drama in which all actively participate – in the case of the Mass, as a re-enactment of the sacrifice which is at the centre of Christianity – motivates a heightened awareness and excitement which can imbue everything that is said with an emotive force. But there are several utterances in the Mass where the *primary* force seems to be to express depth of personal feeling and commitment, with reference to deep-rooted motives such as sorrow, praise, love and petition. These are the penitential rite (*I confess . . .*), the Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus and Agnus Dei, the liturgy of the Eucharist up to the opening part of the Preface (*Blessed are you, Lord God . . . , Lift up your hearts . . .*), part of the Canon (see below), the Prayers for peace, and the sequence during the giving of Communion. It is no coincidence that among these are the pieces most commonly set to music.

Not only are these items repetitive in the sense of weekly or daily recurrence, they are the items which also contain the most internal repetition. This is most noticeable in the Kyrie, where the repetition of *Lord have mercy* raises exactly the same functional question as that posed by examples (1) and (2) above. The repetition cannot carry a straightforward information value, but must be judged in other terms – here, in terms of expressive force. Exactly the same are the repetitions in the Sanctus (*Holy, holy, holy . . . , Hosanna in the highest*) and the Agnus Dei (*Lamb of God . . .*). Rather more subtle are the lexical, grammatical and phonological (primarily rhythmical) repetitions in the Gloria and (less overtly) in the Confiteor:

we worship you,  
 we give you thanks,  
 we praise you . . .  
 For you alone are the Holy One,  
 you alone are the Lord, you  
 alone . . .  
 in my thoughts and in my words,  
 in what I have done and in  
 what . . .

No other parts of the Mass present such a degree of internal parallelism.

#### 4 Performative?

There are three places in the Mass where the function of the language is purely performative (given the theological context of Catholic Christianity): the giving of absolution in the Penitential rite, the act of Consecration and the final Blessing. In other theological contexts, of course, there could be debate over whether a performative interpretation is permissible, involving such long-standing questions as the nature of forgiveness and the real presence. It would also be possible to argue that several other realities are brought into being through the language, such as a strengthening of belief through saying the Creed, or an increase in sorrow for having offended God through saying the *I confess* . . ., but these effects are less certain, being dependent on the volition of the participants rather than on the formal powers invested in the priest.

#### 5 Historical?

There are no cases in the Mass where the language is being used primarily for purposes of record-keeping, with future users in mind. Liturgical language, as religious language generally, typically looks backwards, not forwards, in its concern to display continuity with a doctrinal or devotional tradition. It is different from most other varieties of language in this respect: the meaning of the language used forms part of a religious frame of reference which, in certain cases, reaches back over many centuries. The careful attention paid to the translation of standard liturgical texts is the clearest evidence of this. The only other domain which shares

this concentration on the past – a diachronic frame of reference for the interpretation of synchronic events – is that of the law.

There are therefore several utterances in the liturgy whose purpose is to identify with the historical tradition – which is hardly surprising, given the need to affirm the identity of Christ within the scheme of salvation. The Biblical readings must be seen in this light, as must the Preface and most of the Canon. For example, apart from the pronouns of direct address, the language of the Preface for Pentecost is primarily historical:

Today you sent the Holy Spirit on those marked out to be your children by sharing the life of your only Son, and so you brought the paschal mystery to its completion. Today we celebrate the great beginning of your Church when the Holy Spirit made known to all peoples the one true God, and created from the many languages of man one voice to profess one faith . . .

Throughout the Canon the historical orientation is a major theme, preserved in a clear-cut frame of reference where there is recurrent emphasis on people, places and times – the three dominating themes of history (see Table 2). This long prayer (here shown in the version known as the Roman Canon) systematically and explicitly covers those people and issues to be borne in mind during this part of the Mass, and relates them to the central performative act. The language is persistently spatio-temporal:

remember . . ., in union with . . ., the day before . . ., when supper was ended . . ., celebrate the memory . . ., as once you accepted . . ., remember . . .

and historico-personal:

N. our pope . . ., your people . . ., all of us gathered here . . ., Mary . . ., Joseph . . ., the apostles and martyrs, Peter and Paul, Andrew, and all the saints . . ., your people and your ministers . . ., your servant Abel . . ., Abraham . . ., Melchisidech . . ., those who have died . . ., John the Baptist, Stephen, Matthias, Barnabas, and all the saints . . .

Half the sentences function in this way. The remainder are mainly expressive – in particular the opening and concluding sequences (the latter with marked internal parallelism: *Through him, with him, in him* . . .). At the very centre of the Canon is a combination of

Table 2. Functional linguistic analysis of the Canon of the Roman Catholic Mass

|   |              |
|---|--------------|
| We come to you Father with praise . . .                     | Expressive   |
| Through him we ask you to accept and bless . . .            | Expressive   |
| We offer them for your holy catholic Church . . .           | Historical   |
| We offer them for N. our Pope . . .                         | Historical   |
| Remember, Lord, your people . . .                           | Historical   |
| Remember all of us gathered here . . .                      | Historical   |
| You know how firmly we believe . . .                        | Expressive   |
| We offer you this sacrifice . . . for ourselves and . . .   | Historical   |
| We pray to you . . . for our wellbeing . . .                | Expressive   |
| In union with the whole Church, we honour Mary . . .        | Historical   |
| We honour Joseph . . . the apostles and martyrs . . .       | Historical   |
| May their merits and prayers gain us . . .                  | Expressive   |
| Father, accept this offering from your whole family . . .   | Historical   |
| Grant us your peace . . .                                   | Expressive   |
| Bless and approve our offering . . .                        | Expressive   |
| Let it become for us the body and blood . . .               | Expressive   |
| The day before he suffered . . .                            | Historical   |
| He broke the bread . . .                                    | Historical   |
| Take this, all of you, . . .                                | Performative |
| When supper was ended . . .                                 | Historical   |
| Again he gave you thanks . . .                              | Historical   |
| Take this all of you, . . .                                 | Performative |
| Let us proclaim the mystery of faith                        | Identifying  |
| <i>Unison response</i>                                      | Identifying  |
| Father we celebrate the memory . . .                        | Historical   |
| We, your people and your ministers, recall . . .            | Historical   |
| Look with favour . . . as once you accepted the gifts . . . | Historical   |
| Almighty God, we pray that your angel . . .                 | Expressive   |
| Then, as we receive from this altar the sacred body . . .   | Expressive   |
| Remember, Lord, those who have died . . .                   | Historical   |
| May these, and all who sleep . . .                          | Historical   |
| For ourselves, too, we ask some share . . . with John . . . | Historical   |
| Though we are sinners . . .                                 | Expressive   |
| Do not consider what we truly deserve . . .                 | Expressive   |
| Through Christ our Lord . . .                               | Expressive   |
| You fill them with life . . .                               | Expressive   |
| Through him, with him . . .                                 | Expressive   |

NOTE: Paragraph divisions are as printed in the ICEL<sup>3</sup> text. Sentences within paragraphs are indented.

performative and identifying functions, in the form of the act of Consecration and the immediately following unison Response.

## 6 Aesthetic?

There are no examples of language with a purely aesthetic function in the basic structure of the Mass – though it must be appreciated that this example does not include the use of musical settings (plain chant, hymns and so on), where such a function would be clear. As far as spoken language is concerned, it could be argued that the meaning of liturgical language is always paramount (at least potentially), so that this criterion would hardly ever apply. A possible exception is the unison recitation of a litany of saints' names, where ignorance of the identity of some of the saints invoked would not affect the dramatic impact conveyed by the prayer's pace and rhythm. There may be others.

However, although liturgical utterances are not primarily designed for their aesthetic appeal, the importance of this consideration has always loomed large in work on liturgical language – notably in the attention committees pay to considerations of rhythm and euphony in their choice of words and grammar. And when people are critical of liturgical translations they invariably comment on them from an aesthetic point of view, stressing the importance of the 'poetry' of language. The problem, of course, is that no one has ever been able to agree on what features of language count as euphonious or poetic, and arguments based on these supposed criteria tend to degenerate into confrontations of personal taste.

## 7, 8 Heuristic? Social?

There seem to be no examples of these functions of language in the Mass. Doubtless language as an instrument of thought is primary within the category of silent prayer – though many great spiritual thinkers have stressed the importance of trying to empty the mind of everything, including language, in order to find God. Doubtless, also, much of the Sign of peace is purely phatic in character. Indeed, the risk of having meaningful language degenerate into phatic noise is ever present. But these are matters of performance: no part of the Mass has been designed with these criteria in mind.

This analysis helps to identify one of the most significant features of liturgical language, as encountered in specific religious settings: no other domain of language displays such a juxtaposition of distinct linguistic functions. Of the eight main functions of language, no fewer than five are to be found represented in the illustration of the Mass, with a sixth (the aesthetic) extremely relevant. Apart from the language of literature (which is always an exception, because of its function as a commentary on the whole of human experience), there is no other variety of language which displays such functional diversity.

This point also emerges when we analyse the various categories of speech activity in greater detail. As many as four major types of activity are represented: unison, monologue (usually by the priest; sometimes by a lay reader), dialogue (usually between priest and people, but sometimes between lay reader and people, priest and individual, individual and individual, and also between individual and God). (Most other speech events involve only one of these activities; for example, conversation is dialogue, news-reading is monologue.) Moreover, the priest's monologues vary in terms of their status as spoken or written language (reading aloud, prepared speech, speech from notes, and so on), and also in terms of formality (such as informal sermon versus formal prayer). (Again, there is a contrast with most other speech events, where the mode and formality are constant throughout; for example, conversation is informal and spontaneous, radio news is formal and scripted.) The changes in pace, mood and rhythm form part of the dramatic structure of the liturgical event and underscore the conceptual differences which the event is designed to convey. Even the reading of extracts from the parish bulletin, with its 'what's on?' character, has its place, reminding participants of the place of the Church in the world and of the need to maintain an ongoing relationship with God outside the liturgical setting.

The analysis in Table 1 also draws attention to several other identifying characteristics of liturgical language. In particular, there is the formal correlation which takes place between verbal and non-verbal activity. Thus certain utterances are said (or listened to) while standing, sitting, kneeling, with arms outstretched, holding certain objects and so on. The verbal and non-verbal events are simultaneous and are mutually defining (in the sense that it is necessary, while saying X, to do Y and not Z). It is worth pointing out that such formalised combinations of lan-

guage and body-movement are highly restricted in other domains. Examples would include shaking hands while expressing a greeting or leave-taking, or providing acquiescent performance while undergoing a medical investigation (*Say ah . . .*). Only liturgy requires a ritual pattern of participation using complementary verbal and non-verbal behaviour which (a) persists over an extended period, and (b) involves such a wide range of body-movements and orientations.

The use of unison speech is itself a highly distinctive linguistic activity. There are no other social occasions where this activity is so carefully structured, and where a written text can be followed. Football crowds chant fragments in unison, as do supporters at political conventions (*Four more years!*), but these occasions lack the structure which is present in the liturgical setting. The highly conventionalised speed, rhythm, volume level and intonation are the main formal features of unison speech, and these provide the vocal complement to the distinctive prosody of the celebrant. Taken together, in fact, the prosodic features of liturgical events constitute their primary formal identity and provide a continuity between old and new liturgical style.

The use of silence becomes meaningful and distinctive in liturgical events, in a way that is not found elsewhere. Periods of silence are encountered during the act of Consecration, following communion and at other climactic points. Here the limitations of the verbal mode are intuitively felt, and the only alternative to silence is to underline the significance of the moment by other means, such as the sounding of a bell, the use of incense or the playing of music. In conversation, by contrast, lapsing into silence is inadvertent and discomfiting (in our own culture, at least);<sup>4</sup> on the radio it is a state of affairs to be avoided at all costs; in a court of law silence from a witness may be interpreted as contempt. But in liturgy silence is positive and creative.

A further difference from other linguistic domains is the importance of the time-frame within which the liturgical language takes place. We have already seen the importance of a diachronic perspective in the long term; but there are constraints which operate in the short term too. Normally the time-frame of an utterance is of only indirect relevance to what we say. If we wish to discuss a film, talk about holidays or complain about an ache, we can use the same language whether it is Monday or Tuesday, January or February, 1989 or 1990. But these changes in temporal perspective

are highly significant in the liturgical domain. The choice of the readings and certain prayers depends on which day it is (such as prayers for a certain feast-day), which part of the year it is (such as the sequence of readings over several weeks in Advent), or even which year it is (such as the three-year cycle of biblical readings in the liturgy of the Mass). No other domain imposes such temporal constraints on its utterances.

### THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE CHANGE

It should be clear that liturgical language preserves a high level of distinctiveness when examined from a sociolinguistic point of view. Although many of the low-level formal features of this variety have disappeared (the distinctive word-endings, grammatical words and so on), the major functional choices and contrasts in the language have been preserved and remain as distinctive as ever. In addition, there has been no change in the reliance on prosody as a means of signalling the special nature of the occasion and the shared purpose of the participants. Unison speech, and the special intonation, rhythm and tone of voice adopted by individual speakers, combine to act as the main linguistic features that formally distinguish liturgical from other kinds of speech event.

This perspective needs to be borne in mind whenever liturgical committees face up to the task of revision, in the context of linguistic change. Language change is ongoing and inevitable. It refers to any developments which cause the forms or functions of a language to alter over time, and it is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon. Under the heading of changes in form we find the following types:

- *phonological change* affects the pronunciation of vowels and consonants, or aspects of the prosody; a clear example (of the latter) is the alteration in the way some words are stressed, such as the move from *balCONy* in the early nineteenth century to modern *BALcony*, or the current change from *CONtroversy* to *conTROversy*
- *graphological change* affects the conventions of the writing system; a current example is the gradual replacement of certain verbs

ending in *-ise* by *-ize* (*summarize, realize, etc.*)

- *grammatical change* affects the processes of word or sentence construction; this is less noticeable in current English, but can be sensed in areas of controversy, such as the disputes over split infinitives or the placing of *hopefully* in a sentence
- *lexical change* affects the selection of vocabulary and is always the most noticeable area of language change; the development of a set of words ending in *-friendly* during the 1980s provides a current example (*user-friendly, customer-friendly, etc.*).

Under the heading of functional change would be found the development of new varieties of the language, alterations in the pattern of use we associate with a variety, and the emergence of new attitudes to the way in which language is used. In relation to the first of these the most important development in the present century has been the growth of varieties of media language, such as sports commentary, news-reading and advertising language. In relation to the second we find the development of informal styles of programme presentation on the BBC or the changes in government publications as a result of pressure from the Plain English campaign. And in relation to the third we find increasing sensitivity to the use of any language felt to be sexist, racist or misleading – areas which have each been the target of government legislation in Britain.

Liturgical language is inevitably affected by all of these changes, both formal and functional. Religious language is in the world, and of the world, and any changes in linguistic form or function which take place in the language in general will have consequences for the kind of language adopted in the liturgical domain. This can be seen most clearly at present in the pressure on liturgical committees for changes in language that is widely perceived to be sexist – for example, replacing *came to save all men* by *came to save everyone*. These questions cannot – or at least should not – be discussed with reference to a single functional level only. All too often, liturgical language changes are debated with reference only to the first of the factors listed above (the informative) or to the fifth (the historical) or the sixth (the aesthetic) – the extent to which a change alters the meaning of the text or renders it aesthetically unacceptable. The question of sexist language cannot be satisfactorily addressed solely in these terms, however: the issue is primarily one of sexual

identity (the second factor in the list). Many women feel excluded from full involvement in the liturgical service by the use of such language. It is true, at the *informative* level, that (to quote one newspaper correspondent) 'it doesn't make any difference' to alter *all men to everyone* in the above example; but at the *identifying* level it makes all the difference in the world.

The same issues arise as we broaden our perspective to consider the identity of individual liturgies within Christianity and their underlying theologies. The tradition of debate here has been to focus, once again, on the points of substance as identified in informational and historical terms. However, for some time now there have been signs of change in this respect, with these factors being supplemented (not, of course, replaced) by a recognition of the important role of the identifying function of language. We can see it when people remember to take the social and emotional aspects of language into account, as when liturgical texts are examined to determine whether there are words and phrases which would damage the growth of relationships between religious groups (such as the elimination of the phrase *perfidious Jews* in the Easter liturgy). But we can see it above all in relation to the ecumenical movement.

A typical statement is that of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission, which envisages 'full organic unity', with the two Churches living in communion as sister Churches, each with its own 'theological, liturgical and other traditions', and each thus retaining its identity.<sup>5</sup> The critical question, as always, is how to operationalise this 'unity within diversity'? As far as language is concerned, the approach of this paper suggests that unity could be interpreted in relation to the underlying structure of the two liturgies as defined in functional terms. Such unity is not at all obvious if we look only at the surface level of formal linguistic features. Here, the different formulations of grammar and vocabulary, and to some extent the different subject matter, cause us to see the two liturgies as being far apart. A functional approach draws them together, while allowing for differences as features of the desired diversity.

The existence of low-level differences is immediately apparent as soon as texts are placed in parallel. There are over thirty points of lexical, grammatical or graphological difference in the opening of the Gloria, for example:

#### Roman Catholic and Anglican (new)

Glory to God in the highest  
and peace to his people on earth.  
Lord God, heavenly King,  
almighty God and Father,  
we worship you, we give you thanks,  
we praise you for your glory.

#### Anglican (Book of Common Prayer)

Glory be to God on high,  
and in earth peace, goodwill towards men.  
We praise thee, we bless thee, we worship thee,  
we glorify thee,  
we give thanks to thee for thy great glory,  
O Lord God, heavenly King, God the Father Almighty.

On the other hand, when the two orders of service are compared from a functional point of view using standard published formats (see Table 3),<sup>6</sup> the parallelism is remarkable. The differences are few, and can be grouped into three types:

- 1 Differences of sequence (shown by the lines between the columns), none of which have any major structural effect; the only item which moves considerably is the Notices (and even this is more apparent than real, as many RC priests position them before or after the Creed anyway).
- 2 Items which have no equivalent (shown by blank lines).
- 3 Items which have a functional difference, of which there seem to be only three instances:
  - (a) The RC Entry antiphon is obligatory, and varies with the Mass; it thus has to be considered informative. By contrast, the CE Opening is optional, and partly sung; it would thus seem to be more expressive. (The differences between the two services in respect of their singing traditions have not been considered in Table 3.)
  - (b) The RC Introduction to the Mass is clearly informative, being provided in the priest's own words; the CE Introductory Invocation is an expressive request: *Almighty God . . . cleanse the thoughts of our hearts . . .*

Table 3. Roman Catholic and Anglican services: functional analysis

| <i>Roman Catholic<br/>Order of Mass</i> |                             | <i>Church of England<br/>Order of Holy Eucharist (New)</i> |                             |
|---|-----------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| <i>Liturgical item</i>                  | <i>Primary<br/>function</i> | <i>Liturgical item</i>                                     | <i>Primary<br/>function</i> |
| Entry antiphon                          | 1                           | Entry sentence and hymn                                    | 1/3                         |
| Sign of the cross                       | 2                           |  |                             |
| Introductory greeting                   | 2                           | Introductory greeting                                      | 2                           |
| Introduction to the Mass                | 1                           | Introductory prayer  | 3                           |
| Penitential rite                        | 3                           | Penitential rite   | 3                           |
| Absolution                              | 4                           | Absolution   | 4                           |
| Kyrie                                   | 3                           | Kyrie  | 3                           |
| Gloria                                  | 3                           | Gloria   | 3                           |
| Collect                                 | 1                           | Collect  | 1                           |
| Bible reading (Old Testament)           | 1/5                         | Bible reading (Old Testament)                              | 1/5                         |
| Responsorial psalm                      | 1                           | Psalm  | 1                           |
| Bible reading (New Testament)           | 1/5                         | Bible reading (New Testament)                              | 1/5                         |
| Gospel acclamation                      | 1                           | Gradual  | 1                           |
| Gospel opening                          | 5                           | Gospel opening   | 5                           |
| Gospel reading                          | 1/5                         | Gospel reading   | 1/5                         |
| Gospel closure                          | 2                           | Gospel closure   | 2                           |
| Homily                                  | 1                           | Homily   | 1                           |
| Creed                                   | 2                           | Creed  | 2                           |

|                                  |     |  |     |
|----------------------------------|-----|--|-----|
|                                  |     | Notices                                  | 1   |
| Bidding prayers                  | 1   | Intercessions                            | 1   |
| Offertory                        | 3   | Penitential rite                         | 3   |
| <i>Lord God we ask you . . .</i> | 3   | Peace                                    | 1   |
| <i>Pray brethren . . .</i>       | 3   | Offertory                                | 3   |
| Prayer over the gifts            | 1   | <i>Yours Lord is the greatness . . .</i> | 1   |
| <i>Lift up your hearts . . .</i> | 3   | <i>Lift up your hearts . . .</i>         | 3   |
| Preface                          | 5   | Preface                                  | 5   |
| <i>Holy, holy, holy . . .</i>    | 3   | <i>Holy, holy, holy . . .</i>            | 3   |
| Canon                            | 5/3 | Canon                                    | 5/3 |
| Consecration                     | 4   | Consecration                             | 4/5 |
| Response at Consecration         | 2   | Acclamation                              | 2   |
| Canon (continues)                | 5   | Canon (continues)                        | 5   |
| Lord's Prayer                    | 2   | Lord's Prayer                            | 2   |
| Prayer                           | 3   | Fraction                                 | 2   |
| Lord's Prayer                    | 2   |  |     |
| Prayer                           | 3   |  |     |
| Sign of peace                    | 2   |  |     |
| <i>May this Mingling . . .</i>   | 3   |  |     |
| Agnus Dei                        | 3   | Agnus Dei                                | 3   |
| <i>This is the Lamb of God</i>   | 2   | <i>Draw near and receive . . .</i>       | 2   |
| <i>Lord I am not worthy</i>      | 3   |  |     |
| Silent monologue (priest)        | 3   |  |     |
| <i>The body of Christ</i>        | 2   | <i>The body of Christ . . .</i>          | 2   |
|                                  | 3   | <i>The blood of Christ</i>               | 2   |
| Communion prayer                 | 1   | Sentence                                 | 1   |
|                                  |     | Post-communion prayer                    | 1   |
| Parish notices                   | 1   | Notices                                  | 1   |
| Blessing                         | 4   | Blessing                                 | 4   |
| Dismissal                        | 2   | Dismissal                                | 2   |

- (c) Whether the act of Consecration should be given the status of performative or historical utterance raises, in a novel guise, the classical issue of transubstantiation.

It would, I imagine, be agreed that points (a) and (b) in this list are minor; and we are therefore faced with a most striking functional correspondence underlying the utterances of the two services – a correspondence which markedly contrasts with the diversity of formal features referred to above.

An analysis of this kind suggests the importance of a functional perspective. Without it, liturgical development will remain bogged down in the kind of disputes over points of detail which bedevilled discussions of liturgical reform in the 1960s. I recall the questionnaire studies of the time, when people were presented with parallel texts and asked to indicate their preferences, in order to determine whether there was a 'majority style'. In an examination of several hundred such documents which I carried out in 1967 on behalf of the Roman Catholic International Committee on English in the Liturgy, the responses were *never* identical. Innumerable individual differences precluded any clear generalisations about preference. At the time, given the climate of linguistic opinion with its emphasis on formal analysis, this kind of exercise seemed the sensible thing to do. In retrospect the attention to large numbers of linguistic minutiae seems misplaced. Given the diversity of linguistic functions, and the inevitability of language change, there is no likelihood of devising a liturgical language which is equally acceptable to everyone, or even to a majority. There are too many factors involved: age, sex, regional background, social background, temperament (such as whether one is radical or conservative in linguistic taste) and a range of random personal factors (such as whether one has a preference for a particular translation). Agreement is likely only at a deeper, functional level.

Questions of linguistic choice are never straightforward, when couched purely in formal terms. Should we use *thou* or *you*? syntactic construction A or B? rhythmical structure C or D? There are no simple generalisations to be found at this level. A personal decision about *thou*-forms, for example, will relate to such factors as age, regional background (*thou* being still being in use in some dialects) and temperament, as well as to the linguistic context in which it appears. To take just one example of this last point: replacing *thy* in a highly conventionalised context such as *Hallowed*

*be thy name* is much more problematic than replacing it in the context of a less familiar prayer such as *We ask for thy blessing*. . . . There are many people who would not object to *We ask for your blessing*. . . , but they would balk at *Hallowed be your name*.

The sociolinguistic approach emphasises that surface-level differences of this kind are not the be-all and end-all of liturgical language. The linguistic distinctiveness of the liturgy is best defined at a deeper level, in terms of an aggregate of functions, and it is these which provide the variety with its identity. At this level it is possible to demonstrate a continuity between the different stages of liturgical development, and it may also be possible to show an underlying unity beneath the superficial diversity of different liturgical traditions. The level of sounds, words and sentence patterns should no longer be seen as the only level at which issues of language change can be debated. To restrict the arguments to this level is to fail to see the (functional) wood for the (formal) trees.

One of the merits of the sociolinguistic model, therefore, is that it pays proper attention to the complex range of factors involved in language change, and in particular to the factor of social identity. Language rarely changes of its own volition (though it used to be thought that this was so). Language changes because society changes – not only in the obvious sense that new concepts give rise to new vocabulary, but more fundamentally, in that new social structures generate new linguistic identities. All aspects of linguistic form are affected: phonology, graphology, grammar and lexicon. We subconsciously alter our speech in subtle ways to sound more like those we admire, and to distance ourselves from those we dislike. The principle can be summed up in an old rhyme: 'The chief use of slang is to show that you're one of the gang'. It isn't just slang, of course: pronunciation, grammar and other aspects of vocabulary are also affected. But the important point to appreciate is that 'gang' here refers to far more than a crowd of street urchins. It subsumes any social group: footballers, Liverpoolians, scientists, lawyers . . . or Christians.

## Notes

1. Recent introductions to sociolinguistics include: P. Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics: an introduction*, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth, 1983) and R. Wardhaugh, *An introduction to sociolinguistics* (Oxford, 1986), the latter including a discussion of performatives and related notions (chapter 12). Functional classifications of language are discussed in several works, especially those which stress the ethnography of communication, such as D. Hymes, *Foundations in sociolinguistics: an ethnographic approach* (London, 1977). Matters of analysis are well illustrated in M. Stubbs, *Discourse analysis: the sociolinguistic analysis of natural language* (Oxford, 1983) and also in K.R. Scherer and H. Giles (eds), *Social markers in speech* (Cambridge, 1979).
2. This is part of a classification used in my 'A liturgical language in a linguistic perspective', in *New Blackfriars* (December, 1964) 148-56, whose title I have modified for the present chapter. For a more general statement of the role of language in relation to religion, in the context of the 1960s, see my *Linguistics, language and religion* (London, 1965).
3. ICEL: Roman Catholic International Committee on English in the Liturgy.
4. The cultural differences in the value of silence are well illustrated in D. Tannen and M. Saville-Troike (eds), *Perspectives on silence* (Norwood, 1985).
5. ARCIC, *The Final Report* (1982) p. 91.
6. I have not been able to take account here of local differences in liturgical practice; nor has it been possible to ascertain preferences regarding optional elements (i.e. those where the rubric states that a certain element 'may' be said).