A liturgical language in a linguistic perspective by David Crystal

It may seem strange, now that the hierarchies of the world have begun to put the Council's recommendations into practice, to see an introductory article on a linguistic framework for discussing liturgical language. But there are several good reasons why such a perspective is necessary. First, any decisions licensing the use of certain forms and withholding others must always be kept under review, as language is in a continual state of change. In a hundred years time, the language of today may well seem as archaic as the (never-defined) 'Victorian English' which biblical translations are frequently accused of being in. One must beware of complacency. There is bound to be further modification, and much future discussion. Secondly, the perspective would be valuable as a therapy for much recent popular discussion, whose utility is lessened by using undefined or irrelevant critical terminology, when words are condemned for being 'ugly', 'un-English', 'incorrect', 'debased', and so on – all highly subjective and misleading criteria. Thirdly, a linguistically-orientated basis for discussion would provide a means whereby the public's suggestions and views could be of use to any committee working on the liturgy. At the moment, sporadic opinions sent to the Catholic press about the kind of language vernacularization should bring make interesting reading, but because of the haphazard, occasional origins of this information and the variety of critical principles on which views are based (everything from a vague impressionism to a precise logic), the resultant mass of data is unco-ordinated, of little generality, and hence of little assistance. But it is just this knowledge about popular attitudes to language which a committee needs.

Fourthly, without a more adequate and realistic framework for discussion, many important points to do with the type of language to be used are being missed. The prime need of the liturgist in this field is to know as much as possible about the organization and resources of the contemporary English language, so that when he builds a liturgical language he does not contravene important structural contrasts, bring unwanted stylistic overtones, lose essential traditional connotations or jar people's sensitivity too greatly. Linguistic realism is crucial; but to obtain this (which involves considering the suitability of language to context, i.e., the essential, accompanying non-linguistic activity and the liturgy's ultimate purpose) one first needs a fairly detailed knowledge of the character of liturgical language (seen within the framework of all religious language) in relation to other, non-liturgical styles of language. On the basis of this information, one could then begin to suggest realistic principles for constructive thinking.

But such information does not come easily; one requires a thorough, descriptive survey of the facts. This, then, is where the professional linguist can help. The student or professor of (say) English Literature, classics or common-sense has not the time or experience to make the painstaking collection and analysis of data required. The

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academic discipline of linguistics, on the other hand, has developed a terminology and methodology for describing languages and discussing such variables as alternative grammatical forms, popular attitudes to language and stylistic overtones. Already, surveys of usage have produced many facts about English, and are continuing to amass more that the liturgical scholar would find very relevant. So far, of course, the discipline has not been sufficiently well known for its potential assistance to be realized; nor have there been many Catholic linguists. This article is simply a first attempt to suggest some lines along which the linguist could help by indicating what distinctions would need to be drawn in a description of liturgical language.

This is no place to survey the many-branching discipline of linguistics[1] but two points of terminology do need to be introduced. Language, being the product of the interaction of members of society, must ultimately be studied in relation to the social context in which it is found. One then finds that within a language – in our case, English – there are variations in *style* and *register* which differentiate and formally characterize distinct social situations. Style refers to the degree of formality attached to particular inter-personal social situations, which is reflected by differences in language – for example, the kind of language I use while talking to a friend will differ noticeably from that used in addressing a superior, in otherwise the same situation. Register refers to a kind of language whose forms are characteristic of a definable social situation, regardless of the status of the participants – thus one finds the register of legal language, liturgical language, and so on. While the many styles and registers of English have all got more in common than they have different (being English), the formal distinctions are sufficient to produce important divergencies in the organization of each which must be understood before one can begin to make descriptive statements about any one of them – or recommendations for further usage, which is the issue facing the liturgist. Impressionism, or using the yardstick of the language one normally speaks, will produce distorted results. Again, a comprehensive linguistic description is called for.

First, some general remarks about the status and purpose of a liturgical language. Basically, the language of a liturgy is a set of distinctive verbal forms used in official public worship on behalf of a religion (i.e., a register). This may be either a completely different language from the one normally used by the speech-community (e.g., Latin), or it may be a relatively abnormal kind of the same language, as with the vernacular. What, then, are the main features which characterize the forms of English when they function in a liturgical context?

It should be plain that in such a specialized and intense communicative activity as

[1] For which see D. Crystal, *Linguistics, Language and Religion* (Faith and Fact, forthcoming).

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talking to God in unison or individually, there are some kinds of language which will *not* do. It is obviously not going to be suitable to use types of language occurring at the less formal end of the stylistic spectrum. Colloquial language, slang, loosely-phrased expressions and contractions, vogue-words, and so on would certainly be out of place. A more formal style is required, i.e., the use of language forms which are *not* typical of what has been variously called 'everyday', 'conversational' or 'normal' speech – the kind of expression most of us use in most of our speaking day. This formality is not of course restricted to the liturgical register. There are many social situations in which we make a conscious effort to avoid the normal and mundane in language, because we are aware of the heightened purpose of our activity – such as in talking or writing to superiors or people in authority, addressing meetings or writing important essays. In general, the care we take over our language is in proportion to the importance we credit the situation – which usually means the person(s) whom we are addressing. The more careful our language, the more respected the recipient of it. And, to the believer, there will be no definable limit to the care he should take while communicating with a supreme recipient.[2]

The product of this extra care is thus a formally abnormal style which one does not expect to meet in ordinary situations, and which is valuable because its unfamiliarity signals the extra-ordinary purpose of the liturgical situation and demands added concentration. Again, many find it difficult to talk to God as they would to their friend in the street, for his position puts him on a very different plane. There is adoration as well as friendship required of us, and both must find a place in the language to be used. The same applies to the way we talk about God and report his words: flippancy, carelessness in speech and colloquialisms are not appropriate. 'Were not ten made clean?' is stylistically more apt than 'Weren't ten made clean?'. In areas of disputed grammatical usage, also, it is probably wise to retain the more conservative position; for example, 'the man *whom* you know' (not 'who', as is increasingly common in colloquial speech). In vocabulary, again for the sake of consistency in overall effect, a religious vernacular tends to use more 'learned' or conservative words where there is a choice, to add to the formality and avoid colloquial overtones: 'arise' rather than 'get up'. There are many clusters of Anglo-Saxon, Romance and/or Classical near-synonyms, but with stylistically different overtones, which allow this choice.

The most important stylistic feature of all, however, is sentence structure and length. In the liturgy one finds many one-sentence prayers, for example of the following schematized type:

O God,	who . . .	grant	that . . .	through . . .
Vocative	*relative clause*	*main verb*	*noun clause object begins*	*adverbial clause*

[2]There is also the point that the theist is usually only too pleased to be careful.

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we may . . . so that . . . through . . . who with thee . . . Amen.
noun clause ends *adverbial clause* *closing invocation* *relative clause*

Any element can of course be repeated indefinitely; the ordering of the string of structures may change; and the prayer may be shortened by leaving out any of the grammatically inessential expansions (e.g., the adverbial clauses). The important point is that while there are many single complex sentences of a similar kind in liturgical language – because one wants a prayer to approximate as nearly as possible to a 'complete thought'? – such syntactic complexity is only found in other similarly formal kinds of English, such as legal language, Civil Service prose, etc. It is a characterizing feature of the first order.

But while it is futile to make a liturgical language the same as everyday speech, it is even more futile to go to the other extreme, by adopting a style so formally esoteric that it cannot be understood. 'Learned' words or constructions which are beyond the comprehension of the majority of users must be replaced, at the cost of a loss in stylistic connotation. Denotative meanings take priority. A completely foreign tongue or an extremely archaic or learned diction is a mortal sin against the primary linguistic virtue of intelligibility. It is also an injustice to expect a society to worship in a language which it does not understand. Individuals may need to make an effort of will and concentration, but this is fair enough. It is the totally obscure which is wrong. These days the mystical effect which can surround deliberate obscurity (cf. the religious languages of many primitive societies) is largely lacking. People require more matter and less art. A liturgy should be as self-explanatory as possible, and, above all, readily intelligible: 'the rites . . . should be within the people's powers of comprehension, and normally should not require much explanation'.[3]

Thus from the point of view of style, a liturgical language needs to strike a balance between ostentatious intellectualism and a racy colloquialism. It must be both dignified and intelligible. It has to be formally characterized as God's, and not confusable with any other style, for a substantial overlap would only lead to profanity and carelessness in worship. The more pervasive part of this individuality, however, is not due to style (which is shared) but register. Here one can distinguish three kinds of distinctiveness that compose the whole effect: archaisms, specialized vocabulary and formulaic diction. We shall briefly consider each in turn.

Letters to the Catholic press have a peculiar tendency to seize on archaisms, condemning them without even a definition, and without asking such pertinent questions as whether there are different kinds of archaicness in language, and what factors must be considered in assessing attitudes to them. What then is an archaism? Not just an old word, for most words have been in existence for centuries. Nor is it a word or

[3] *Liturgical Constitution*, trans. by C. Howell, 34.

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phrase which has dropped out of use but been reincarnated for the liturgy, for many obvious archaisms have had an unbroken history of usage. A better definition is: a form (not necessarily a single word) with a particular morphological and/or syntactic structure[4] that is excluded from any other natural English style or register (i.e., not in non-religious current usage) and which therefore has no systematic function in the language as a whole. Thus, 'transubstantiation', which is only used in a religious context, is not an archaism because its structure conforms to a normal morphological pattern of noun formation. 'Goeth', on the other hand, is archaic, because the *-th* inflection is no longer in systematic use in any part of the language outside of a religious context. An archaism is a fossil of past linguistic usage, and the commonest can be divided into the following types:

1 grammatical (or 'form') words, and inflections: 'thou', 'thee', 'thy', 'thine', 'ye', 'art', 'wilt' (and other anomalous verbs), 'unto', 'O' (in vocatives); '-(e)st', '-(e)th' (verbal inflections); internal verb inflection (*ablaut*), e.g., 'spake'; plural formation, 'brethren'.

2 lexical words: 'vouchsafe', 'thrice', 'behold', 'whence', 'henceforth', 'thence'.

3 syntactic structures:

a vocative with 'O', e.g., 'O God . . . '.

b vocative without 'O': adjective plus noun in direct address, e.g., 'dear God', 'eternal God' (cf. 'dear sir'), 'dearly beloved'; noun with postmodification, e.g., 'God, who in thine . . . ', 'lamb of God, who . . . '; simple noun, e.g., 'God, give me . . . ', 'Soul, why art thou downcast', 'Lord, I cry out . . . '.

c imperative plus subject, e.g., 'do thou go . . . ', 'Go thou . . . ', 'do we sit . . . '; imperative plus vocative, e.g., 'accept, most Holy Trinity . . . ', 'Grant, O Lord . . . ', 'Pray, brethren . . . '; constructions with 'be', e.g., 'glory be . . . ', 'praise be . . . '.

d Unusual word order (often following Latin construction), e.g., accusative and infinitive constructions; participial phrases, e.g., 'he, going . . . ', 'he, having eaten, went . . . '; discontinuous relative constructions, e.g., 'whom, when he saw, he walked . . . '.

e Structures seen (less frequently) in other registers of English: 'subjunctives', e.g., 'may God . . . ', 'The Lord be with you'; noun plus adjective, e.g., 'Father Almighty' (cf. 'things peculiar', etc.); postposed co-ordinated adjective, e.g., 'a treacherous foe and cruel'.

Idioms (cf. below): 'who livest and reignest', 'in like manner', 'through the same . . . ', etc.

The total number is relatively low, but the archaism's important contribution to the

[4]Morphology refers to the internal structure of linguistic forms; syntax to the external relationships of forms in sequence.

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character of a liturgical language must not be underestimated, for most of the above items have a high-frequency occurrence. Also, it is going to be very difficult to generalize about them in discussing liturgical matters, for two reasons: they are of many different formal types – for example, one cannot use the same criteria for assessing the relevance of single lexical items and compound grammatical structures; secondly, one finds various degrees of acceptability in their use depending on whether there is formulaicness in the verbal context in which the archaism is embedded.

Formulaicness is a common feature of language. It is the tendency of language users to make closely-knit formal units out of a string of normally independent items, which, by dint of repetition, come to be seen as single, complex and largely unalterable units. A formulaic unit is characterized by restricted internal modification: its structure is fairly stereotyped, unchangeable, whether this be archaic or not. Thus in the formulaic phrase 'too many cooks spoil the broth', it is not possible (unless one is being deliberately funny) to alter the internal structure and say, for example, 'too few cooks spoiled my broth' in the same context. Similarly, the statement that it is raining 'cats and dogs' (which in this context cannot be singularized), the phrase 'at sixes and sevens' – the range of English idioms, in other words – are on the whole also unalterable. There are similar phrases which can vary, but they still retain the basic pattern: 'to give as good as you get' alongside 'he gave as good as he got', and so on.

Such formulaic units, then, are the idioms, proverbs, familiar metaphors and similes, clichés, commonly-known quotations and catch-phrases of language, currently in use, all composed of any number of words, but nonetheless taken as single lexical units. They are frequently used by everyone, and the forms which people tend to accept more readily in any debate about usage. They are hallowed by tradition, popular appeal and continuous use; and if there is anything exceptional in either phraseology or vocabulary, then this is tolerated. Thus archaisms will be much more readily accepted if they appear as part of a formulaic phrase than if they appear in a relatively unfamiliar context. 'Thy' in 'hallowed by thy name, thy kingdom come' will hardly be noticed as odd, even by those who write the stormiest letters to the press about its use elsewhere; and it is not difficult to find many other examples which require one to look again before condemning archaic usage in general: 'my soul doth magnify the Lord' ('my soul magnifies . . . '?), 'by the sweat of thy brow', 'of thine' (in most contexts, 'of yours' sounds very colloquial). A religion as old and tradition-based as Catholicism is naturally going to embody much formulaicness, largely unalterable because of the privileged, accepted position it holds in the eyes of most of the Catholic speech-community. The reiteration of certain themes would ensure that many phrases were in constant use, either because they had a central role in the expression of the religion or because they had a simplicity and vividness in

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phraseology, which gave them a central place in oral tradition. Certain parts of the liturgical language have consequently amassed powerful connotations which bringing up to date or modifying would lose. This is the major argument for retaining the traditionally used formulae of prayer-openings and conclusions: 'vouchsafe, O God . . . ', 'O God, who in thine infinite . . . ', etc., which over the years have taken on the association of being the normal, accepted way, blessed by the Church, of opening a public conversation with God. Modernization, it could be argued, would not bring naturalness, for it is *not* natural for a Catholic to use 'your' in relation to God in a liturgical context. To lose all such archaisms in reform, then, would be dangerous, partly because of the break with the past, partly because it would take a very great time for suitable replacements to become fully accepted. It could be temporarily fatal for confident, ready, public prayer.

The third characteristic of liturgical language (and religious language in general) is the use of a specialized vocabulary, words referring to religious things, which is rarely found outside the context of religion. Again, it is possible to suggest a rough distinction of types – not by any means purporting to be complete – on the following lines:

1 Vocabulary requiring explicit historical elucidation,[5] usually with considerable emotional overtones, depending on the intensity of the user's belief, e.g., 'Calvary',[6] 'Bethlehem', 'the Passion', 'crucifix', 'martyr', 'disciple', 'Our Lady', 'the Jews' (in the context of the Passion), 'the Apostles', etc.

2 Vocabulary again requiring explicit historical elucidation, but with no definable emotional overtones, e.g., 'centurion', 'synagogue', 'cubit', 'a talent', and relatively insignificant place- and personal-names. In a particular context, such words can take on extra meaning as types or symbols. They will also, of course, occur in non-religious discussion of the subjects involved (in archaeology, history, etc.).

3 Vocabulary of personal qualities and activities with no explicit correlation with the past, but which needs to be interpreted in the light of Christ's own usage and example: 'pity', 'mercy', 'charity', 'love', 'purity', 'prayer', 'contrition', etc. Also the frequent 'adore', 'glorify', 'praise', etc., and the morphologically foreign words 'Amen' and 'Alleluia'. These are words which cannot be criticized in isolation, for their meaning requires consideration of the semantic cornerstone, God. What meaning they have for an individual depends on the amount of meaning the term 'God' has for him, i.e., allowing a potentially infinite number of attitudes and intensities. The value of such terms as 'adore' is that they can cope with many different degrees of intensity and feeling. They can be used by all and mean as much as each can make them mean. The

[5]Cf. the 'datum in the past' discussed by J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford, 1961), Introduction.
[6]Often, such words can be symbolically identified in the popular mind wholly with the religion, e.g., advertisements such as 'Christianity means Calvary'.

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denotative meanings are stable, and simply affirm the type of activity which the individual is pursuing, without comprehending any specific emotional element. This is added as sense-association by the user, and the meaning of 'adore' in any one context thus depends on individual experience.

4 Vocabulary referring to commonly used, specifically religious concepts (other than the above) which can be given a Catholic definition; any historical basis is normally subordinate to their doctrinal definition. Again, fullness of meaning depends on the intensity of the user's convictions, e.g., 'heaven', 'hell', 'heresy', 'the creed', 'the sacraments', 'the saints', 'purgatory', 'the Faith', 'sacrilege', 'commandment', 'damnation', 'salvation', 'the trinity', etc.

5 Technical terms: 'collect', 'sermon', 'cardinal', 'cruet', 'amice', 'missal', 'Asperges', etc.

6 Theological terms: any of (3) and (4) when used in this context, usually with precise definition. Also, e.g., 'consubstantial', 'only-begotten', 'transubstantiation'.[7]

7 Vocabulary that occurs frequently in liturgical language, but which could be used in certain other styles or registers, e.g., 'trespasses' (as a noun), 'deliverance', 'transgression', 'the multitude', 'partake', 'admonish', 'lest', 'deign', 'bondage'; and many formulae, e.g., 'have mercy on us', 'forgive sins', 'to come nigh', 'exact vengeance'.[8] In such cases, one needs to assess possible inter-relationships between registers which could influence acceptability.

Thus a liturgical language, if synchronically described, would show the following major components:

1 formal stylistic features.

2 characteristic features of register:

a archaisms, grammatical and lexical;

b specifiable formulaicness, archaic and non-archaic;

c specialized vocabulary, non-archaic.

It is important to emphasize the venerable history behind most of the words and constructions that characterize Christianity; their long association makes them readily suggestive of permanence, respect and mystery. This is intensified by their general absence outside of a religious context. Thus, the main conclusion one would draw for the attention of any reformer would be – beware of the nature of the linguistic building one pulls down! It might leave a crater too deep to fill.[9] It is essential to have an adequate understanding of the full scope and function of a term in religious

[7] Needless to say, there is nothing wrong with theological jargon in its own context, where it is not expected that untrained people should understand and where a high degree of precision is necessary. To condemn 'jargon' as such, is ridiculous.
[8] Cf. the syntactic patterns already mentioned in archaisms.
[9] A similar result comes from disallowing popular and (similarly traditional) images for talking about God; one is left with no replacements (cf. *Honest to God*).

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language before one suggests leaving it out of future usage; conversely, one needs an equally adequate understanding of all popular as well as technical meanings of any term one tries to introduce, to avoid misunderstandings and unwanted overtones.

Finally, there is the humble point that not all liturgical problems will be solved by recourse to language. The introductory barrier in approaching the liturgy should be much lessened, but the more important matter of understanding *why* the new language is being used remains, and the answer to this only partially resides in language. The greatest problem will always be individual, trying to join sound to vision in the liturgy as a whole, and cultivating a desire to reach *through* the human means to the divine end. Linguistic reform can take a person a reasonable distance along the road but no further; it can never bridge a gap created by doctrinal ignorance and intellectual laziness.

Word and words

'Just as the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things, "without sin", so the words of God, expressed in human language, became in all things like to human speech, except error.'

Pope Pius XII: *Divino Afflante, 41.*

'The Incarnate Word is like a word of speech. For as sensible sounds express what we think, so Christ's body manifests the Eternal Word.'

St Thomas Aquinas: *IV de Veritate, 1.*

'A word of mouth, heard by our ears, is more readily taken in than the inward word of mind. Etymologically *word* stands first for what we say, not for what we think. Yet the word of mind really comes first, guiding and shaping our lips.'

ibid.

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