

## **A Comparative Linguistic Analysis of Christian and Muslim Sermons in Dagbani**

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### a) Problem statement

An ever-increasing interest in Muslim-Christian relations throughout the world in such fields as sociology, anthropology, and political science, has not been fully met with substantial research from a linguistic perspective. As a contribution to filling this gap, this study presents a linguistic comparison of the phonetic, morphosyntactic, discursive, and rhetorical features of Christian and Muslim sermons in Dagbani, the predominant language of Ghana's northern region in a community typical of the Sudanic belt of Africa where Christian and Muslim populations mix or border on one another.

### b) Review of current literature

Linguistic analysis in the area of religious communication remains largely overrepresented by English language data and/or Western settings (Wharry 2003). To the extent research in this area is represented by non-Western cultures and religions, the focus tends to be on religious texts or major world languages as vehicles of communication. Similarly, while a majority of public sermons in Africa are conducted in whole or in part in indigenous languages (see, e.g., Mkilifi 1978 cited in Fasold 2009), the limited number of works on religious communication in African settings also tend to focus on English language data (Dzameshie 1997, Babatunde 2007) or sacred texts (Oladosu 2003). Furthermore, these studies generally involve one particular religious setting—e.g., Christian sermons, Muslim sermons, Biblical or Qur'anic verses—and such individual works do not necessarily lend themselves to implicit comparison due to incompatible focus of interest or methodological framework—e.g., pronoun reference in Christian sermons in Ghana (Dzameshie 1997) versus speech act analysis of Christian speeches in Nigeria (Babatunde) versus a mixture of thematic topics in Muslim sermons in Nigeria (Olaniyan & Oyekola).

### c) Methodology

Recordings of two Muslim sermons (Sufi) and three Christian sermons (Assemblies of God and Presbyterian churches), have been transcribed and coded for a number of morphosyntactic (e.g. frequency of occurrence of specific pronominal forms, nominal and verbal morphological forms), discursive (e.g. frequency of certain discourse markers, use of left dislocation), and lexical features (e.g. distinctive speech act verbs, code-mixing and lexical borrowing, token-type ratio of major parts of speech). These recordings and their transcripts are divided into 10 excerpts of roughly equal length for quantitative comparison of co-occurrence patterns for linguistic features. The digital recordings will be processed for additional prosodic or phonetic variables (intensity, pause, and speech rhythm). These exemplary sermonic texts are compared against one another in terms of frequency of occurrence of targeted linguistic variables.

### d) Results: partial or full

In terms of the patterning of 62 salient morphological, lexical, and discursive features—i.e., non-phonetic features that are more readily tagged and comparable across spoken and written media—these excerpts from Muslim and Christian sermons have been compared across a broader corpus of Dagbani texts representing a range of written and spoken genres. In this initial study based on statistical analysis, clusters of co-occurring linguistics features (referred to as "dimensions of variation") are evaluated in terms of the shared rhetorical function

represented by the group of variables. To some degree, the excerpts from Muslim and Christian sermons pattern in similar ways as a broader genre of sermonic discourse; however there are also clear patterns in which the two religious contexts are distinct:

(1) Both Christian and Muslim sermons cluster near zero on a dimension of variation identified as representing unplanned versus planned discourse, thus exemplifying a balance of planning and spontaneity that might be expected of this genre of sermonic discourse, though excerpts from Muslim sermons consistently reflect a somewhat higher degree of planning;

(2) On a dimension loosely associated with a persuasive rhetorical function—i.e. a feature typically hypothesized to be characteristic of sermonic discourse—only Christian sermons rank consistently above zero; whereas excerpts from Muslim sermons exhibit patterns ranging across the positive and negative scales of this dimension, highlighting an area of variation within this subgenre that may be attributed to other contextual factors;

(3) Muslim sermons cluster around the zero mark on a dimension having to do with informational versus narrative expository styles; whereas Christian sermons fall more consistently towards the narrative end;

(4) Christian sermons collectively rank relatively higher on a dimension of interactive and interpersonal discourse than Muslim sermons; whereas the excerpts from Muslim sermons tend towards zero on this dimension with one exception, again highlighting what may be a relatively greater degree of stylistic variation within this subgenre.

(5) Muslim sermons pattern more like oral history on a dimension that is representative of oral traditions.

Building upon these initial observations, this study compares phonetic and prosodic patterns measured in these recordings, supporting the discussion with qualitative examples of the prosodic and rhetoric structure observed in the two subgenres.

## References

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