

Hybridity in the Communicative Genre of the Funeral Sermon

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Abstract. With focus on local-level discursive practices (Gumperz 1982), the present study investigates the verbal and non-verbal devices used in the funeral sermon performed shortly before burial. Based on cosmologies underlying the Christian understanding of death, the funeral sermon is situated within the Bukusu funeral event that is characterized by a number of performances based on cosmologies underlying the traditional Bukusu understanding of death. With principles from communicative genre analysis (Günthner and Knoblauch 1995), interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1982) and ritual analysis (Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1967) the study examines how and why during the performance discursive heteroglossia invoked in the funeral sermon.

The study falls within the studies in communicative practices (Günthner and Knoblauch 1995; Hanks 1998; Gumperz 2003). The study is also part of the discussions on how and why discursive heteroglossia is drawn into discourse (Bakhtin 1981; Leppänen 2012) and particularly the funeral sermon. The assumption I make is that as ‘semiotic devices’ verbal and non-verbal devices reveal two belief systems that are either ‘juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another [or], contradict one another’ (Bakhtin 1981).

Five video and audio recordings of the performances of the funeral sermon collected from Bungoma district of western Kenya in 2011 and 2012 constitute our data which is supplemented by 4 two-hour interviews with the priests. Being attentive to the verbal and non-verbal devices, we examine the data to ‘isolate sequentially bounded units’ (Gumperz 2003:223) that reveal discursive heteroglossia.

Preliminary investigations reveal that with verbal and non-verbal devices such as reported speech and gestures, the communicative genre of the funeral sermon incorporates, illuminates and then criticizes aspects of traditional Bukusu religion with the aim of urging participants (mostly members of the Bukusu tribe) to discontinue practicing traditional Bukusu religion. This study adds to discussions on firstly, the determinative features of communicative genres and secondly, hybridisation in Bukusu funeral performances.