Liturgical linguistics: The syntax of communicating with the super-human agent in Judaism

Tamás Bíró

Prayer as communication (1)

• A line in the Cognitive Science of Religion:
  – Religious phenomena are related to their non-religious counterparts
  – But also involving super-human agents (SHA)

• Methodology:
  – Make also use of the methodology describing their non-religious counterparts

Overview

• Prayer as communication with SHA
• Constituents in syntax
• Structure of Jewish liturgy – a generative linguistic approach
• Blessings – why?
• Conclusion

Prayer as communication (2)

• Prayer:
  – Communication with super-human agents (SHA)
  – Hence: employ results and models from linguistics
• Compare to McCauley and Lawson (2000)’s model of rituals:

Prayer as communication (3)

• I claim that prayer is:
  – A form of language / communication
  – Organized along the (cognitive, mental and social) principles used by language in general
  – Has an overall structure known from language
  – Can be analysed using linguistic methodology
  – otherwise, it could not be evolutionarily stable

• NB: (McCady and Lawson 2000) prayer is not a ritual.

Constituents in syntax (1)

• Similar distribution → same category:
  I loved that girl.
  John loved that girl.
  I kissed that girl.

• Movement:
  That girl I loved.

Constituents in syntax (2)

• Heads and complements

Constituents in syntax (3)

• Movement

Structure of Jewish liturgy (1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weekday</th>
<th>Shanah</th>
<th>Amidah</th>
<th>Amidah</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Shachris</td>
<td>Amidah</td>
<td>Amidah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>Shachris</td>
<td>Amidah</td>
<td>Amidah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Kabbalat Shalosh</td>
<td>Shachris</td>
<td>Amidah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>Shachris</td>
<td>Amidah</td>
<td>Amidah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>Shachris</td>
<td>Amidah</td>
<td>Amidah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabbath</td>
<td>Shachris</td>
<td>Shachris</td>
<td>Amidah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shabbat</td>
<td>Shirah</td>
<td>Amidah</td>
<td>Amidah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mincha</td>
<td>Amidah</td>
<td>Amidah</td>
<td>Amidah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaddish Levana</td>
<td>Amen</td>
<td>Amen</td>
<td>Amen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Structure of Jewish liturgy (2)

Four basic constituents:
- Introduction: psalms, poems, etc.
- Shema / nothing / Torah reading
  - Leviticus
- Amida (+ repetition)
  - Sometimes additional stuff: Hallel, Torah reading, Musaf, etc.
- Closing section (always including Aleinu)

Structure of Jewish liturgy (3)

- Proposed structure:
  - Head
  - In Jewish liturgy: Lexio, Intro, Closing section
  - Content: elaboration, religious-social context, religious-historical context
  - Head
  - In story grammars: episodic actions
  - In Jewish liturgy: Amida (a series of blessings)
  - Speech act performed in J. liturgy is blessing!

Structure of Jewish liturgy (4)

- Head and complement:
  - Head (Verb): Amida
  - Complements (NP): Lexio (Shema, Torah reading, empty, Intro, Closing section)
- How to interpret this?
  - In story grammars: (1977)
    - Head (NP): episodic action
    - Complement (VP) setting

Structure of Jewish liturgy (5)

- Complements:
  - In story grammars: setting
  - In Jewish liturgy: Lexio, Intro, Closing section
  - Content: elaboration, religious-social context, religious-historical context
- Head
  - In story grammars: episodic actions
  - In Jewish liturgy: Amida (a series of blessings)
  - Speech act performed in J. liturgy is blessing!

Blessings (1)

- Prayer, as the Temple service in the heart
  - (Avmida haLevi)
  - Temple sacrifice: feeding the SHA
    - Reversed parent-child relationship
    - Reversed agent-benefactor structure
- What means blessing God?

Blessings (2)

- X blesses Y:
  - X helps Y, but beyond the human capacity of X
  - Blessing is helping,
    - But involving superhuman agency
- Blessing:
  - 1st phase: the old israel blesses Jacob
  - 2nd phase: God blesses Abraham
  - 3rd phase: David blesses God

Blessings (4)

- In short:
  - Amida / blessings: the core of the prayer, a speech act:
    - Action: a special form of helping
    - Agent = human
    - Benefactor = God
    - Instrument = speech
    - As in story grammars: action becomes head
    - Hence: Amida must be the head in liturgy
    - Complements (context, setting, ...)

Conclusion

- Structuralist analysis of Jewish liturgy
  - Parallels with natural language syntax
    - In methodology
    - In results
    - Hence: in underlying cognitive structures?
- Where does this lead us?

To do's

- Theory
  - Text to identify constituents
    - Relationship between constituents
- Practice
  - Details of the structure of the Jewish liturgy
  - Apply to the liturgy of different religions
  - What is universal, where are differences?
  - How can these observations be explained using general cognitive principles?