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

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Overview

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

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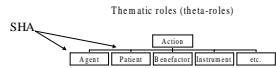

Prayer as communication (1)

- 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

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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:

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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: for McCauley and Lawson (2000) prayer is not a ritual.

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Constituents in syntax (1)

- Similar distribution → same category:

I	*loved*	*that girl.*
John	*loved*	*that girl.*
I	*kissed*	*that girl.*

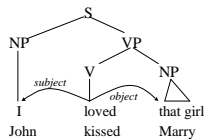- Movement:

  | | *I* | *loved* | *that girl.* |
  | *That girl* | *I* | *loved.* | |

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Constituents in syntax (2)

- Heads and complements

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Constituents in syntax (3)

- Movement

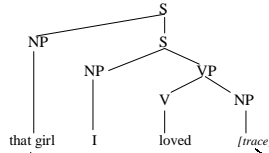*Origins of Religion, Cognition and Culture*
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Structure of Jewish liturgy (1)

Weekday: Shacharit	Pesukei de-zimra	Shma	Amida	Aleinu
Mincha	Ashrei	---	Amida	Aleinu
Maariv	Ve-hu rachum	Shma	Amida	Aleinu
Shabbat: Maariv	Kabbalat shabbat	Shma	Amida	Aleinu
Mincha	Ashrei, U-va le-Cion	Torah	Amida	Aleinu
Kiddush levanah	Psalm, blessing,	else		Aleinu

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Structure of Jewish liturgy (2)
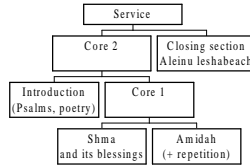
Four basic constituents:
- Introduction: psalms, poems, etc.
- Shma / nothing / Torah reading
  - → *lectio?*
- Amida (+ repetition)
  - + Sometimes additional stuff: Hallel, Torah reading, Musaf, etc.
- Closing section (always including Aleinu)

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Structure of Jewish liturgy (3)
- Proposed structure:

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                    Service
          Core 2              Closing section
                             Aleinu leshabeach
   Introduction    Core 1
   (Psalms, poetry)
              Shma              Amidah
          and its blessings   (+ repetition)
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Structure of Jewish liturgy (4)

- Head and complement:
  - Head (Verb): Amida
  - Complements (NP): Lectio (Shma, Torah reading, empty), Introduction, Closing section
- How to interpret this?
- In story grammars (Rubin, 1997):
  - Head (NP): episode, action
  - Complement (VP): setting

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Structure of Jewish liturgy (5)

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

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Blessings (1)

- Prayer, as the Temple service in the heart
  - (Avoda ba-lev:
  - Jer. Talmud *Berachot* 29ab, Bab. Talmud *Taanit* 2a)

- Temple sacrifice: feeding the SHA
  - Reversed parent-child relationship
  - Reversed agent-benefactor structure

- What means blessing God??

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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 Isaac blesses Jacob *(SH-instr.)*
  - 2nd phase: God blesses Abraham *(SH-agent)*
  - 3rd phase: David blesses God *(SH-beneficient)*

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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,…)

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Conclusion

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

- Where does this leads us?

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To do's

- Theory
  - Tests 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?

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